

## Chapter One

What started out as a routine task to find blood turned into an onslaught of pain. I rubbed my eyes, allowing the darkness that filled my head to fizzle away. My hands, tender from scraping against the gravel, grasped at the cold metal fence. I flinched as my cuts burned against the steel. I'd done this to myself. The thumping under my skin and my lack of balance were all a result of ignoring my need to feed.

Now here I sat, watching my blood as it dripped down my leg and pooled onto the sidewalk. A tingling sensation ran through me as I flicked out the tiny shards that had embedded themselves in my skin. My body helped to push them out in an effort to heal itself. This was not part of tonight's plan. I stared back up at the fence—my nemesis. Razor-sharp wire wrapped itself around the top of the rusty, twelve-foot-high chain-link barricade.

*Take the shortcut, Tasi. It'll be quicker and safer, Tasi. What a stupid idea.*

Under normal circumstances, I could dart up the fence, hop over the barbed wire, and gracefully land on my feet. My overall dexterity might have won me a gold medal in gymnastics, but that was so not happening in my current condition.

An ache thundered through my body as I reached for the fence again. I hoisted myself up for the first time since tumbling off. With one last labored breath, I ran my hands down my pants, dislodging the remaining rocks from my newly healed skin. Nearby, a rustling sound echoed through the alley. My breath caught. The metal garbage cans clanked together as if they were being tossed around. If I were human, I wouldn't think twice about the commotion. Lucky for me, I knew better. It was probably setting up to kill its next victim. There were a few shady-

looking dive bars and run-down nightclubs in this area. The repetitive pounding of music stemming from different directions would drown out all screams. This was a perfect feeding ground.

Over the past few months, these creatures had become my reality. Since I was thirteen, I'd known of their existence, but only recently had I been in the same vicinity as them. And when they were around, you didn't want to be, so it was time to go.

With a quick pivot in the opposite direction, I ran. I didn't get farther than a few feet before my shoelace caught in the grate and my chin scraped against the ground. More blood dripped from my body.

*Tasi, seriously—what else can go wrong?*

Wrapping the shoelace around my fingers, I yanked until it released itself. By the time I tucked it into my shoe, it was too late. *It* had heard me. The pounding in my ears was no longer from the nightclubs but the pavement, and it was getting louder. I'd piqued its interest. Rather, my blood had piqued its interest.

I'd run away enough times in the past that I knew I'd be able to shake the monster. I mustered up as much energy as I could and took off running, snaking through run-down buildings, dodging cars, and running across baseball fields until I thought I had gone far enough. I listened for feet thumping steadily on the sidewalk, but I couldn't hear my pursuer anymore—good for me; bad for someone else. My weakened state was taking a toll on my body, and I needed to get back to the hole I currently called home. I was just glad I didn't have to fight for my life tonight. I'm not sure I would have won this round.

When I turned the corner, I saw safety within my reach. The gaudy lights of the motel shone brighter than ever. As I approached the building, a low hum electrified the surrounding air,

and the mildewed smells burned in my nose. The grunts and noises that came from each room crawled over my skin. This was not at all a place we should be staying.

When I reached the room, I looked around before opening the door. The glow of the soda machine lit up the silhouette of a couple arguing nearby. On the opposite side, a man wearing boxers and a dirty white tee stood in the doorway, a cigarette hung from his mouth. When our eyes met, he forced a grin, showing his stained teeth. I fumbled with the keys. This week, I had not been careful. Instead, I'd been lazy and hadn't made smart decisions. This trip could've killed me. More importantly, it could've killed Emily.

As I passed by her bed, I glanced over to make sure she was still sleeping. If she had woken up and seen I wasn't there, I don't know what she would've done. There was so much I still needed to tell her. I placed my backpack on the bed before going into the bathroom to clean up.

There was nothing in the world that made me feel more at home than a hot shower, and this was a good one. Warmth wrapped itself around me, giving me a much-needed hug. I watched my feet as the water took all the horrid parts of the night and pulled them down the drain. Reluctant to end such a perfect shower, I shut off the water and stepped out of the tub. A shiver at the quick temperature change made me think getting out was the wrong decision, and I pulled the towel tighter around myself.

I wiped away the thick steam covering the mirror, and there the truth stared back at me. The shower had cleaned up the blood and dirt, but what remained was still unrecognizable. My eyes were bloodshot, and the shadows building underneath them made me appear sick. I looked deeper, hoping to find a glimmer of my old self, maybe a speck of my greenish-blue eyes or just a shimmer of my dark silky hair. Even my freckles, which had been scattered across my face, no

longer existed. Nothing was there that reassured me I was still Tasi. I ran my fingers along my pale skin, pulling at it, hoping it would fall off and reveal what used to be. Instead, dark gray eyes stared back at me.

I studied the rest of my face, looking for familiarity—something I did often. I looked well beyond eighteen and seemed to have aged years in only a few months. I braced my hands on the edge of the sink, dropping my head as if it suddenly weighed a hundred pounds.

How in the world was I ever going to get myself together the way I should for Emily? She was counting on me, and I kept making stupid mistakes.

I took one last deep breath, threw on some sweatpants and a long-sleeved T-shirt, then flipped off the light switch in the bathroom. Making my way into the main room, I sat on the edge of the bed. I knew it was time to move on from this seedy motel that had become our home for the past few weeks. The real world scared me, and I was afraid of making the wrong choices.

Sometimes I couldn't help getting mad at having been raised in such a sheltered environment. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if I had given up a normal life by choice, but that wasn't the case. I'd had to give up friends, parties, and all the other things that come with being a regular teenager, all for the people I loved—the same people who had ended up lying to me. Now look at what my life had become: I was on the run with my thirteen-year-old sister from someone or something that wanted us dead.

A lump formed in my throat. I crept over to the small table and turned on the lamp. Emily fussed, but her breathing steadied. Turning back to the desk, I stared at the drink I'd made with my newly acquired supplies. It was okay when I put the blood in coffee, but today I'd diluted it with juice. The thought made my skin prickle. I plugged my nose and downed the vile

concoction, knowing I had to build my strength again. I couldn't have any more nights like tonight.

Our aunt, Eva, used to make my drinks. Not knowing what was in my special shakes—as she called them—or how she got the supplies had made drinking it much simpler. I rubbed my forehead to alleviate some of the throbs that appeared whenever I thought of Eva.

She'd raised us because our parents died when Emily was one. Sometimes, I think Emily was lucky not to remember them. There were times we would be in the supermarket or taking a walk, and I'd see someone with long tousled blonde hair. In that instant, I always hoped it would be my mother. But it was always a stranger's face.

One memory stood out among the rest. My father and our long night walks. I would hold his hand and always ask him why his were so cold. He would laugh and say, "My heart holds all the warmth in the world, leaving the rest of me hard and cold." I never knew what that meant until I was older.

Reaching into my backpack, I pulled out a beat-up manila envelope. Emily stirred as I searched for a specific paper. It was a letter that had frayed at the edges. A single tear fell onto the page. I wiped it away, smearing the ink. It wasn't the first smudge, and it wouldn't be the last.

*My Dearest Antanasia,*

*If you are reading this, we aren't alive anymore, and you have to take Emily and go. I'm sorry we lied about being dead all these years, but please understand it was safer this way. If Eva doesn't make it, you must leave Maine. You need to take the money I left you and seek Sonya Bourne in New York City. She will be able to help. Again, I'm sorry, and I love you both very much. Believe me when I say I thought you were safe.*

*Love always,*

*Mom*

I stared at the paper, running my fingers across my lips. *Who are you, Sonya Bourne?* How was I supposed to trust someone else after everything that had happened? My parents and Eva had lied to us. They said it was to keep us safe, but even if that was true, my parents had been alive all these years.

I had to remind myself to stop judging what they did because I was doing something very similar to Emily. Since their deaths, Emily and I had moved from motel to motel. At night, I kept Emily in the room for two reasons. First, that's when the bloodsucking creatures came out to play, and I wouldn't let them find her. Second, she didn't know what we were. So I snuck out when I needed to only after she fell asleep. I could imagine the look on her face if I said, "Sorry, Em, I have to stop off at the hospital and pick up blood for lunch."

Luckily, we were currently in Portland, Maine, and it wasn't a big enough city to house a large population of monsters, like Boston or New York City. It was just big enough to keep me busy. Tonight was a prime example of why I needed to take care of myself.

I folded the letter back up, shoved everything back into the envelope, and bound it before placing it into the bottom of my backpack once again. I tiptoed over to my bed and pulled back the sheets, and the musty scent filled my nose. I hoped sleep would come instantly, but that was never the case. My nights were often filled with tossing and turning, reliving what used to be. When I was younger, all I'd wanted was adventure, and to see the world. If this was the world and my future, all I wanted now was to go back to being locked up in a house where it was safe.

## Chapter Two

“Run, Tasi—don’t just sit there!” Eva yelled. “Did you hear me? Get Emily and the backpacks. Now!”

The day had started like any other. That was, until Eva’s phone rang while we were making dinner. Two seconds and a shattered plate later, Eva was shouting for me to move.

I backed up against the table, waiting for my aunt to tell me this was a joke. When that didn’t happen, I ran up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. I’d had a theory this day was a fairy tale created in Eva’s head. It wasn’t, though, because when my throat tightened and the tingling in my body became urgent, the story flipped from fantasy to reality.

As I reached Emily’s door, my hand crashed against it, swinging it open with more force than I’d intended. She flinched. My aunt would have killed me if I’d knocked my sister out.

“Tasi! What are you doing?”

“We have to go. Now.”

She pulled her earbuds out. Her aqua eyes thinned as they burned into me. “What are you grumbling about? Stop being stupid, and shut the door on your way out.” I snatched the phone out of her hand and took off to Eva’s room.

“What the heck, Tasi? I was listening to that.”

Emily followed. She stood in the doorway, arms crossed, while I rummaged through the closet.

Her arms fell to her side. “You aren’t kidding.”

“No, now throw on some shoes before Eva comes up here and drags us both away.”

I tossed her pink phone back to her and watched as her eyes widened. She bolted out the door.

With backpacks in hand, I ran past Emily's room.

"We have to go, Em—move faster."

Leaping down the stairs in a couple swift movements, I saw Eva standing at the bottom. I swerved so I didn't collide with her. She grabbed one of the packs from me and threw in some snacks and a couple of my special shakes.

"Where is Emily? We have to go."

"I'm right here. Will someone tell me what is going on?" Emily asked. Strapped to her back was a pink duffel bag, bulging at the seams.

"Emily, you have too much stuff." There was a rumble in Eva's voice that was unfamiliar to us.

"What. Why?" Emily asked.

Eva wasted no time. She grabbed Emily's bag off her back and tossed it across the room. "You are only taking what I give you in these backpacks. Also, you cannot take your phones. The last thing you need is to be tracked."

Emily looked at our aunt, opened her mouth, and quickly shut it. She swallowed hard as a visible lump moved down her throat.

"It'll be okay," I said, sliding my hand into hers.

Eva grabbed her keys, ushering us out of the house. "We can talk in the car."

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There was a knock at the door, which shook me out of my sleep. One of these days, I would like to wake up refreshed; maybe give the black circles a break.



I rubbed my eyes, trying to focus. Emily sat up, stretched, and let out a silent yawn. I flipped the lamp on next to my bed. The doorknob wriggled as someone—or rather, something—tried to open the door. I was hoping it would find the door locked and move on to another room to find an easier kill. I held my breath. The doorknob twisted again, this time more fiercely. I slid off my bed and slipped on my high-tops. I grabbed Emily’s shoes and placed them on her bed.

“Housekeeping.” The voice was grimy and melodious all at the same time. He was toying with us.

Emily straightened up. She pulled her knees into her chest as the handle jiggled once again. Nails scraped along the door, and that was our cue.

“Housekeeping.” He dropped the pleasantries. There was a grumble in his tone.

Emily was now kicking back her sheets.

“Time to go,” I whispered.

Pins and needles traveled along my skin, and my mouth went dry, knowing what lurked at the door. Emily slipped into the bathroom, making her way to the window. I locked the door behind us.

“Little girl, I know you’re in there. I’ve been looking for you, and now I smell your blood. I’m coming to get you.” The monster’s voice was sweet and taunting. The pins and needles deepened in my skin. He wasn’t going to stop until he had us for dinner.

“It’s stuck,” Emily said.

The palm of my hand pressed against the window’s edge. Why hadn’t I tried to open this window before? Such a rookie mistake. Emily tried to shake the window loose, gripping the pane. The rattle of the knob stopped. It was replaced by a battering ram.

“Watch out,” I said.

Gripping the edge of the sink and pressing my hand against the wall, I leaped, smashing my foot through the glass. The only thing I wanted to do at the moment was run away. If we made it out the window, the approaching sunrise might keep the monster in. If not, we would hide until the sun peeked its glorious head out. Then, by the time nightfall came along, we'd be far, far away.

Emily pulled herself through as the motel room door slammed against the wall. I threw our belongings out and heaved myself through the window, but not quickly enough. The bathroom door swung open, and before I could get out, it grabbed my leg, yanking me back in. My elbow slammed into the side of the window, causing a rippling pain through my arm.

“Tasi!”

Not letting her distract me was essential for my survival. Focusing on my attacker, I used my free leg to kick him right in the stomach. It was like hitting a stone wall, but he stumbled back, and we both landed on the floor. Pain surged through my leg. I ignored it. My strength wasn't the issue here, but my coordination was still off.

He regained his stance faster than I had hoped, and moved toward me again in one swift movement. This time he grabbed my arm, digging his nails deep enough to draw blood. I cried out in surprise as a crazed look filled his features. His eyes shifted from brown to a shimmery black. He was trying to compel me. If I were a human, he'd have me offering my neck to him by now. That was the thing with vampires—they looked human. Their skin was pale, and they had a glamour to them that drew humans to them willingly. This one was tall with sandy-colored short hair and chiseled cheekbones.

He leaned down to lick the blood off his finger and cocked his head toward me. “Yes, you are her—the girl near the nightclub. The girl with the blood that smells so good.” He took in

a deep breath as if he were getting high. “You taste delicious. Better than anyone I have ever taken pleasure in. Don’t worry, little girl, once my fangs drip the venom into you, you will want to give me your blood.”

There was a sourness to his voice, and his breath chilled my skin as he moved in closer. My body trembled. My pulse quickened. He looked back at my arm, which he still held, and raised it closer to his lips. Icy needles raced down my spine as I watched his mouth get closer. His tongue lashed out like a serpent and ran across my wound, leaving a tingle running under my skin. Then, licking his lips, he looked at me one last time.

“I’m going to enjoy this.”

Feeling his grip loosen as he took in that last bit of blood, I knew I had my chance. The shiver turned to heat, boiling my blood beneath my skin. Using all my strength, I kicked him, catching him off guard. He must really have believed me to be as weak as a human. That moment of disbelief gave me just enough time to lift my pant leg, grab the wooden stake strapped to my body, and stab him in his chest. Again, I had stunned him. With one more push, using all my muscle, I rammed it in farther. His eyes rolled back, and he turned into white ash before hitting the ground, leaving the stench of sulfur in the air. The floating dust particles and smells made me cough.

With the stake still in my hand, I fell against the wall. My breath labored and pain pulsed through me. I remembered Emily and raced to the window.

“I’m okay, Em.”

She was sitting against the adjacent building, arms wrapped around her knees, tears streaming down her face. But when she saw I was all right, she jumped to her feet, wiping the wetness from her eyes.

“I’ll be right there,” I told her. “Just gimme a sec.”

I turned back to my assailant, and the reality of the situation hit me. My legs grew weak, and nausea churned in my stomach. A few more seconds and I would have been dead. My aunt had told me I should feed every two days to keep me strong enough to fight. *I guess I now know what happens when I don’t listen.*

I found nothing that led me to believe he was deliberately hunting us as I checked through his tattered clothes. It was just a filthy bloodsucker who’d caught me off guard. I wiped the ash off my stake, then concealed the weapon once again.

Thinking through the series of events, I thought I’d been clever in my escape but realized he must not have stopped searching for me. Maybe I should have burned my clothes and the towels that had my dried-up blood on them. I’d been incredibly stupid, and had put Emily’s life in danger by leading him back to her.

I headed over to the sink to assess the damage and clean myself up, then ripped the towel and tied it around my wound to keep the blood from dripping. The black long-sleeved shirt I had on hid my new makeshift bandage. Waiting a few seconds more, I checked to see if the bleeding would push through the towel, but it didn’t. My body should heal the cut before anyone noticed. With my hands on the edge of the sink, I tightened my hold, staring at my reflection. It was time to stop hiding and start finding answers.

Pulling myself through the window was hard to do, and I decided to go feetfirst this time. Even though my assailant had left me aching and bruised, I landed as gracefully as I knew Emily had.

Emily closed the gap between us, burying her face in my neck. “I thought I had lost you. Who was that?”

“That, Em, is what we’re running from. I think now that you’re thirteen, we need to talk about a few things.” I avoided eye contact and straightened my ponytail. “First, though, let’s get breakfast and go shopping. It’s time we head for New York City, like Eva wanted us to. We can chat about all this on the way.”

“Okay.” Emily smiled back at me. “Can I buy some new shampoo? That motel soap was ruining my hair.”

This made me giggle, albeit a shaky one. “Of course—we’ll get a small bottle of the one you like.”

She clapped her hands and her smile grew. She was so patient. Had someone told me they had a secret regarding my weird life, I would have bitched until they told me. Emily trusted me to do what was right—but at this point, did I even deserve that trust? This wasn’t a small lie. This was big. There was an ache in my stomach that wouldn’t go away. I could only hope she would understand and this secret wouldn’t break our trust once I told her everything.

## Chapter Three

Despite the eventful morning, the day turned out to be pleasant. The warm air wrapped itself around me. Every few minutes, a cool breeze brushed against my face, jolting me and reminding me autumn was upon us. I thought about how much I was going to miss Maine. A pang built within my gut, twisting my insides and filling me with more guilt.

With our backpacks strapped on, we each picked up our one shopping bag and headed off to buy some train tickets. On our shopping trip, I'd picked out a fresh pair of blue jeans and a black zip-up sweatshirt. Emily bought two new sweaters, one pink and the other aqua blue. I preferred dark colors, and she was the queen of pastels, kind of like our personalities. She was always so positive, especially for a thirteen-year-old. Eva always said she was the same as our mother—filled with patience, love, and empathy. I was told I was like our father—strong-willed and with a lot of fight. That was her nice way of telling me I was stubborn.

We started toward the platform, spotting the bench farthest away from other people. Emily gazed out into the crowd. Her forehead wrinkled, and her eyes dulled the harder she fell into her thoughts.

“What’s on your mind, mini-me?”

She looked down at her shoes. “Will we ever stop running? Like, have a chance to settle down somewhere I can have friends and a normal life? I hate not knowing where we’re going to sleep next, and I’m tired of carrying my life around in this backpack.”

Putting my arm around her shoulder relaxed her a bit, and she leaned her head on me. “I know,” I told her. “I’ll make it right. I’m not sure how yet, but I promise you, we’ll figure something out.” It hurt me knowing she longed for something I hadn’t been able to give her.

“I wish Eva was here.”

A tear rolled down her freckled face and plopped onto my hand.

“Me too, Em. I wish none of this was happening to us.” I pulled her into me, wrapping my arms around her. Her body trembled as she held back the sobs only I could hear. “Once we are safely on the train, I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“Thanks, Tasi.” She intertwined her fingers with mine while we waited. Knots twisted in my stomach, tightening. I was about to change everything in her life.

Boarding the train was quick and easy. We headed toward the back so we could be alone. Emily slid into the seat first, so she was near the window. Any threats that may come would more than likely come from the aisle, allowing me to keep her behind me while taking care of the problem.

Emily had been told very little about us because she was so much younger. She was never part of the long conversations between Eva and me. She didn’t know about my training sessions or that I drank blood. The only information she was privy to was what Eva had told her in the car ride during our quick departure. Basically, the short, short version: our parents had been alive when we thought they were dead, and they’d pretended to be dead because some people wanted to kill us because we were different. My parents thought it was safer for us to live with Eva in Maine than with them in Washington.

When Eva got the phone call that changed everything, it was my mother telling Eva my father was dead. In Washington, he’d had a woodshop, where he’d spent most of his nights

making furniture. That night, he had been working on some new ideas. The security cameras failed, and by the time he realized it, those monsters had overrun the property. He called my mother, who was at the main house, and told her to move us and make the necessary preparations, which included him taking his own life. My father—a man who'd survived almost two thousand years—took his own life to protect us. To ensure no one could use him to find and hurt his children. The thought of him putting us first always sucked the air out of my chest. Whoever those monsters were wanted to end our entire family line, and they were getting closer to making that happen.

Now, without Eva, it was my duty to break the news to my little sister. When Eva told me, I was Emily's age. Eva was so strong and easy to talk to that I'd known it'd be okay even as I cried. Now I had to pull it together so I could be Emily's strength. We huddled close so no one around us could hear me speak.

*Here goes nothing.*

“Em, you remember everything Eva told us in the car when she dropped us off at the bus station in Bangor?”

“Yes. When she told us to meet her at the Lincoln Park fountain the next day but never showed.”

Eva never showed because she was dead, just like my parents. There was no other explanation.

“Well, the thing is . . . the thing is . . . well, Mom and Dad were . . .” How could Eva do this so well, while I sounded like a bumbling idiot? “We are different.”

“Tasi?”



Emily's face turned pink as she picked at the tips of her nails, the way she did when she was guilty of something or when she knew something she wasn't supposed to.

"Oh, come on. You were going to make me go through the entire story, and somehow you already know."

Her eyes caught mine, and her complexion changed from pink to white within seconds. "Sorry—I overheard you and Eva talking last year. It was more like eavesdropping. I was so pissed that you didn't tell me at first, but then I thought, how does a person tell somebody they're only half-human? So I waited until you were ready to tell me. That's all I really know about us. I swear." The color came back into her face. "And I'm going to be really honest. You suck at delivering news—like, majorly suck."

My body, which had been tense all morning and was still swimming in a dull pain from the earlier attack, finally relaxed. Knowing she had the basic idea of what we were made me feel less stressed. Eva had told me over and over at first, because who would believe someone when they say things like, by the way, you're only half of a human? I slouched back in my seat.

"You're handling this pretty well. I guess I should trust you can manage more than I give you credit for. I just wanted to protect you from all this craziness."

"I get it, Tasi, and that's why you are the best big sister ever, but maybe it's time to treat me more like your equal than your kid sister. We're both having to grow up pretty quickly, and we're in this together, remember?"

She was right. I'd tried to shelter her from this, and she'd patiently waited for the truth, knowing only that she was half-human. She was more mature for her age than I was at thirteen.

"I'll try my hardest to treat you as an equal. I can't guarantee I'll let the big-sister role drop right away, but I promise I'll try."

“That’s a start. So, now that you know that I know, do you mind telling me what the heck we are?”

“We’re dhampyrs. Our mother was human, and our father, well, he was a vampire. Although, I prefer the term half-breed, since it makes it sound way less formal.”

“Dhampyrs? That seems like I should live in a forest with elves and fairies and goblins.” This made me laugh, a little louder than expected. She continued, “So, we’re half-vampire? I thought they only existed in stories. I mean, really half-vampire? If anyone other than you told me this, I’d think it was a total prank.” She wrinkled her nose at me.

“It’s a lot of information. It took time for it all to sink in when Eva told me, and you’re taking it way better than I did. That thing that attacked us back at the motel was a vampire. I’m not sure if it was hunting us or we just had horrible luck, though I think it was the latter.”

“Hunting? But why?” She furrowed her brow.

“I think it is because of what we are—we’re considered a threat to the vampire world.” I shifted my body toward her, and our knees touched. “Eva told me folklore states dhampyrs were once vampire hunters, and excellent ones. We have all the vampire abilities—powerful senses and quick reflexes—but none of their weaknesses. Well, except one.”

She leaned into me, eager for the knowledge, and I knew no matter what I said, she’d have to learn to accept it.

“At thirteen, we go through a change, which is why I wanted to talk to you.”

“Tickets,” a gruff voice called out, startling us.

I handed over our tickets to the conductor, hoping he hadn’t heard our conversation. It was highly doubtful, but I waited to continue until he was far enough away. Once Emily went through the change, we wouldn’t have to worry about people overhearing us. Putting the stubs in

my jacket pocket, I watched as the conductor strolled down the aisle collecting tickets before turning back to Emily.

“So, is it a change? Like an appearance change? Is that why you look so tired all the time?”

Ouch. That stung a little. I knew I needed to take better care of myself, but hearing it from her was confirmation.

“Appearance is part of the change in who we are. You’ll get really sick one day, and to cure it, you’ll need . . .” I scratched at my jeans and breathed in a big gulp of air. “Blood, Em. You’ll . . . crave it.”

Her eyelids flickered. “No way, that’s nasty. Wait. Do you crave blood? Do you drink it? Oh my God. That’s why you leave at night sometimes, isn’t it?” She flinched away from me.

“Em, it’s not like that, I swear. I don’t go seeking people to bite. I keep a supply of blood that I take from the nearest hospital. I promise I’ve hurt no one.”

Emily shuddered. “I believe you. I just don’t want to go through all that.”

“I know this won’t sound very good, but when I mix it with coffee, it actually tastes okay, and gives me a little more pep.”

“You’re right. That’s extremely disgusting.” She nestled back into me until her body calmed itself back down. “When will this happen to me?”

“Sometime this year. You just have to let me know when you feel so sick that you think you’ll die. Almost like a nasty flu, but more painful.”

“Sounds wonderful.”

“It’s uncomfortable, but it passes.”

This was a lie. When I went through the change, *uncomfortable* was an understatement. Eva had kept Emily out of my room for a few days as my body changed. Most noticeable was my height—I grew four inches overnight. Remembering my bones cracking, breaking, and growing made me nauseous. Other than that, all my senses became really clear. They were better than normal before, but after, it took time to get used to them. When Eva and Emily were talking in the kitchen, if I concentrated, I could hear them from my bedroom, even just a whisper. The smell of flowers from the neighbor’s garden would tickle my nose when they weren’t even in full bloom yet. It was incredible and strange all at the same time. Saying it was all effortless was a blatant lie.

“Wait, hold on—is that why Eva always made you a special shake every few days? You aren’t anemic, are you?”

“No, I’m not anemic.”

“And if you don’t get this *nourishment*, what happens?” She scrunched her face and stuck her tongue out.

“I’ll eventually grow weak and die.” This I refused to sugarcoat. If I had died this morning, Emily would’ve gone through her change not knowing what needed to be done or how to take care of herself. I’d had Eva and the safety of my home to aide me through the change. Emily only had me and, right now, the unknown. My keeping any of this from her continued to put her at risk.

“Okay, I think I need a break. This is a lot to take in, and my brain feels exhausted.” She pulled her knees up onto the seat.

“I’ll wake you up when we reach Boston. We’ll connect to New York once we get there. You should definitely try to get some rest.”

Emily buried her head and shut her eyes. I stayed up to keep an eye out for anything strange, just in case the attack at the motel this morning wasn't an isolated incident.

## Chapter Four

When we pulled into Boston's South Station, it was late afternoon. People were hustling through the crowd, pushing their way off the train, so we took our time gathering our belongings before stepping onto the platform. A man with a briefcase came barreling out the train's exit from behind, shoving his way through and slamming into me as he rushed across the crowded platform. My bag slipped from my hands as my shoulder knocked into some stranger.

"Excuse me," the stranger said. His voice caused a knot to form in my stomach. "I believe this belongs to you." Our fingers brushed, making me flinch. My eyes met his, and the world around me stopped. There was no air to breathe. The deep chocolate color of his eyes bore into me, inviting me to sink deeper into him.

I was no longer in a train station. An image of this boy flooded my head. It was like trying to watch a drive-in movie on a foggy night. Were we friends, enemies, lovers? I couldn't make out the scene that danced through my head.

It took a few moments before I came back from wherever I had gone. He ran his hand through his brown, windswept hair, giving it a little tug. His eyebrows furrowed as he watched me watching him. And those full, heart-shaped lips . . . Snapping out of it, I reached for Emily's hand and headed away from the train platform, straight into the daylight, without looking back. I didn't know what trick he'd played in my head, but if our eyes reconnected, I couldn't guarantee that I'd be able to pull myself out of them again.

"What the heck was that about, Tasi?"

“I don’t know. His touch was icy cold, but warm at the same time. It felt distantly familiar, and like no one existed at that moment except him.” There was no way I would tell *anyone* about what I had seen in my head. That couldn’t be real.

“Was he like the thing at the motel?”

“Maybe, but I’m not sure. Something about him was different, though. Either way, we aren’t sticking around to find out what it is.”

As we increased the distance between the train station and us, I thought about how his hand felt when it touched mine. Thinking of the electric pulse that wrapped around the chill of his hand made my heart stop all over again. The way he’d looked at me, it was like my presence didn’t shock him. It seemed more like he was in awe of me. I was obsessing, and I needed to stop, so I shook the thought out of my head and focused back on the task at hand: New York.

It would be two hours before the next train came, but since it was already late afternoon, we decided it was best to stay in Boston for the night and pick up another train in the morning. Neither of us wanted to show up in New York City late at night. It would be the ultimate breeding ground for bloodsuckers, I was sure of it.

We stopped for a bite to eat and asked the waiter if he knew of a place to stay that didn’t require a credit card. Luckily, he did, giving us detailed directions.

When we rounded the corner to the place he’d described, before us stood a timeless red-brick building with a cherry-red door and black awnings. Each step on the cobblestone path brought more excitement as we approached the entrance. The boutique hotel was inviting.

Upon entering the building, the first thing I noticed was the cream-colored walls, dark wood furniture, and warm lighting that made my muscles ease. The cozy fireplace was surrounded by other travelers, jovial and conversing with one another over cocktails. It reminded

me of home, something I hadn't experienced in a long time. I certainly hadn't expected to feel it in a big city like Boston. Just as the waiter had said, the girl at the front desk took care of us, and checking in was a breeze. A two-hundred-dollars-extra-a-night breeze, but hey, at least we weren't sleeping on the street. We made our way to the fifth floor.

This was my first time using a key card, and I wasn't any good at it. After five sets of blinking red lights screaming at my inability to open the door, Emily giggling all the while, I finally figured it out. The door clicked open, and serenity overcame me. The walls were trimmed with gray-and-white striped wallpaper. There were white fluffy pillows and a lilac comforter on the bed. The scent of lavender tickled my nose. We dropped our stuff and plopped onto the bed at the same time. This was a room fit for a queen.

"This is how I want the rest of our room experiences to be," Emily said, pulling the pillow into her face. "It smells so clean."

"Don't get used to it."

"Party pooper."

I stuck my tongue out at her the way she always did to me. She pressed her hands to her heart, which made me laugh.

"That's not very adultlike, Tasi."

"Whoever said I was an adult needs their head examined." I flung her backpack over to her. "Let's condense our stuff while we're here."

I ended up throwing a ratty shirt with a few pin-size holes in it into the trash. Emily did the same with some of her clothes. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I lifted my pants and took off the stake strapped to my right leg. I reached down to my left and pulled one from that leg as well before placing both stakes on the bed. When I went through my change,



Eva had given the stakes to me. At first, I'd thought it was a joke, but when training started, I soon understood they would be part of my everyday life.

Emily's eyes went wide as she looked at the wooden weapons. She inched her way over to me, never taking her eyes off the stakes. I studied her face. Biting her bottom lip, she ran her fingers along one edge of the wood. When she reached the tip, a small breath left her lips.

"I never knew you had such an interest in stakes." I gave her a crooked smile. She jumped at the sound of my voice, pulling herself out of the daze she'd fallen into.

"That's because I was pretending I didn't know you had them." She continued to touch the edge of one. "I told you I was patient."

She looked like she had been waiting forever to touch them. There was a hunger in her eyes I'd never seen before.

"Go ahead, pick it up."

"Really?" she asked, eyes sparkling.

"Yeah, you'll have to learn how to use one eventually." There it was again, like a glow radiating through her. She rested it delicately in her hands, almost as if she were offering it to me on a platter. I snatched the stake, surprising her, and put it tightly into her palm, closing her fingers around it. "Tight, Em, hold it tight. Remember, if you have a stake in your hand, then your life depends on it. So that's the way you hold it."

She tightened her grip, not taking her eyes off it, almost as if it held the secrets to the universe.

These stakes were handmade by my father from *lignum vitae*, a hardwood found in South America, and were rather attractive to look at. Toward the top of each stake was a four-inch notch where manila rope had been wrapped flush against the wood. This helped with gripping

the stake. Unfortunately, it also left room for ash to become embedded in the crevices. The rope had been impossible to clean, and the ash left the rope black around the edges. It was sculpted with intricate designs from the rope leading down to the point. There was a letter branded into the wood at the top of the stake: *V* for Vasile, our family name. Whittled into the side of the stake were also the words, *One who will be reborn, immortal*. It was the meaning of my first name, Antanasia.

“Do you think our father was an evil vampire?”

Flashes of a tall thin man with ebony hair and dark eyes filled my memory. I could still feel his loving touch as he pretended to be my horse, galloping around the house while my mother cooked dinner. He would often take me for long walks in the woods, and carried me on his shoulders whenever I asked.

Emily and I never talked about our parents when we were living in Maine. I had brought them up many times to Eva, and she always changed the topic—probably because she was hiding the fact that they were still alive and was scared she would slip. Bile rose in my throat. I pushed it back down. Now, nothing was holding me back from talking about what I remembered.

“Em, the father I knew wasn’t a monster. He was kind and loving.” I told her stories about things I remembered, like how he was always there when I fell and scraped my knee, and how he would play Candy Land with me over and over because I asked him to. Or how he would always hold Emily and sing her to sleep.

Tears welled in Emily’s eyes. The surrounding skin grew pinkish as she continued to hold back the river from streaming down her face. Her back straightened, and she looked down at the stake she held in her hand.

“I’ll be strong, Tasi. I promise.” There was such conviction in her voice. She meant every word.

I lifted her chin until our eyes met. “You’re already strong. I see it every day. Now we need to get you trained, like Eva did for me.”

The tears trying to escape evaporated. “When do we start?”

“As soon as we get settled in New York, I promise. First, we need to recharge my stakes.”

Emily cocked her head to the side. She may not be training physically yet, but there were still a few things I could teach her. “Let’s take a walk.” Strapping the stakes back to my legs came naturally. It was a part of who I was. I pulled my bag over and rustled through it, pulling a second set of stakes out, crisp and new, along with two leather holders.

“For me?” She took in a deep breath and put out her hands, wiggling her fingers.

“Yes. You’ll need to get a feel for them. I remember how much the stakes annoyed me the first time I put them on. No better time than the present to figure out where you want them. You have two sheaths, one for each stake, and they can be combined to wear on one leg or split to wear them separately, as I do. And, Em, these stakes were made for you by our father when you were born.” Emily’s full name was Daciana Emily Vasile. Pointing to the words etched into the side, I continued, “Daciana means ‘full of strength.’ Father knew you were strong from the day you were born. Now you need to believe it.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh my God.”

“Yeah, pretty cool, right?”

“Yes, extremely cool.” She fastened both of them to her right leg but grimaced as the leather holder slid to the floor. Kneeling, I lifted her pants and showed her how to strap the top part securely, then the bottom. With one more pull against her calf, everything settled into place.

“Do I have to leave them there? It’s very uncomfortable.” She scrunched her freckled nose.

“No, as long as they’re accessible and concealed when you’re in public, then wherever you like is fine. This is what works for me.”

“I’ll try it out.” She wiggled her leg, making sure they wouldn’t come loose.

At the front desk was the same young woman who had checked us in earlier. Her bright smile, peach-colored lips, and warm hazel eyes made her very approachable. I asked the woman if she knew of any churches nearby, and she gave us directions.

The sky was still blue, but I saw the sun pulling in orange hues in the far distance as it set, which meant soon enough it would be sundown. The streetlights had yet to come on, and since we only had to walk a few blocks, I figured we would be back before darkness blanketed the city.

We headed toward the church. The walkway was narrow and lined with red-brick townhouses. There were black wrought-iron embellishments and entry gates throughout. The path itself was made of gray cobblestone. Trees umbrellaed the passageway, giving it permanent shade. Green moss coated the bricks, making some of them slippery. I felt as if I was in a fairy tale.

“What do I need to know, Tasi?” Emily was taking this a lot more seriously than I had at her age. It made me proud.

“Straight down to business. I like it.” I shoved her shoulder. “Okay. Stakes kill vampires. A blessed stake makes cleanup much easier, because the vamp will turn to ash. Otherwise, you are left with a body.”

“Oh, wow.” She paused. “Wait—does that mean we can scare them off with crosses, like in the movies?”

“No, crosses don’t bother them, despite what the stories say. Well, I take that back. Maybe if the cross was wooden and soaked in holy water. Huh, never thought about that scenario.”

Emily giggled. “Is that something you’re going to try now?”

“Nope. If I have one piece of advice, it’s find a weapon you are good at and don’t ever deviate from what works. Don’t play with your life. Vamps are crazy-hard to kill as is.”

“What if I don’t like stakes?”

“Once you start training, you may find something else you like. But give the stakes a try first. I think you’ll find them to be effective.” Emily and I kicked some stones back and forth as we headed down the path. “Now, a vampire can’t go into a church or onto any sacred ground. They ignite, just like if they went out in full sun. A cloudy afternoon won’t fry them, but it tires and weakens them. They will regain their strength in a few hours. But if you catch a vampire out in the day, they’re probably trying to die, or just stupid,” I explained.

“I don’t get it. Why would a vampire walk outside, then, if it wasn’t nightfall?”

“I don’t really know, but they do.” I gave her a side-glance to check in on her. Her posture was relaxed, so I carried on. “Last item is garlic—I’m not sure where that rumor started, but it won’t help you.”

“Got it, I think.”

“It’s a lot to take in, but you’ll catch on.” I wrapped my arm around her shoulder. “Come on, there’s the church.”

Before us stood a large Gothic-style church. As we entered, I knelt respectfully in the foyer. In my periphery, I watched as Emily followed my lead. The church was grand and full of grace. The statues filled the room with a holy presence that made me feel protected. I took a few moments to bask in the tranquility. There was no one in the church, so we headed toward the holy water. The marble bowl was large enough to submerge our stakes, which was always a plus. I pulled out my stakes and dipped them into the water while whispering a prayer. After a few minutes, I removed the stakes, which now glimmered.

“Rinse and repeat,” I said to Emily.

She took out her stakes and looked at me. “What do you say?”

We weren’t religious, but I had been taught to respect all religions. “I ask for the stakes to be blessed and for us to be protected against evil and all it brings to this world.”

Her eyes looked me over, and she mimicked what I’d done. She slipped the wet stakes back into place after allowing the water to saturate them, and then we headed back outside. I knew we’d been in the church longer than planned, and stepping outside confirmed it. Dusk had already come and gone. The blackness of night was upon us. Streetlights lit the area around the church with a soft glow. But the route back to the hotel was short, and I was confident we could make it. My eyes darted around the perimeter, and I spotted a young man nearby.

The familiarity was instant as our eyes met. His eyes were deep brown and almond-shaped with beautiful lashes. His dark brown hair was disheveled, yet stylish. He was tall and . . . well, just perfect. He was leaning against a streetlamp, and my heart beat a little faster. He ran

his fingers through his hair, and out of nowhere, anger flitted through his eyes. He bared his teeth as he stepped off the curb and began walking toward us. My eyes remained locked on his.

There was a faint voice in the back of my head calling my name, and then a tug at my arm, and another. Finally, I broke free of his gaze when a stinging sensation coursed through my leg and into my back—Emily had kicked me.

“What the hell was that about?” I asked.

She snatched my arm and tried dragging me back into the church. When I looked back to where the guy had been, he was gone. Emily dropped her hand from my arm in clear defeat. I snapped back into protective mode and pushed her behind me as we retreated into the church. Leaning against the wall, I put my hands on my knees and caught my breath. It was all I could do to keep my body from falling over as I shook uncontrollably. My body was betraying me, as if I were fighting a sickness. Why had I lost my mind that way?

“Can you tell me what just happened? That was the same guy from the train station. Do you think he is following us? Why, though?”

It was obvious some of those questions weren't directed to me, but to herself. Not knowing why he had such a hold on me, I straightened up, becoming furious with myself. I'd been weak. This guy made me vulnerable. Now I was positive he was a vampire, but what did he want? In my life, I had met four vampires. My father was the only one who had a grip on his humanity, allowing him to act human. All my other encounters prior to today had been savage creatures out to drink my blood. We were food to them, and I'd been forced to put them down like the foul creatures they were.

This mysterious guy was different. Not quite like my father, but it also didn't seem like he was here to feed on us. But why did my presence make him look so angry?

“Earth to Tasi? Can we go back now before we’re stuck here until morning? I don’t want to sleep in the church . . . unless you think it’s the only way.” There was a tremor in Emily’s voice.

If we headed back to the hotel, we risked running into him. Could I take him in a fight, or would my feet become cement boots? If I couldn’t move, I’d put Emily’s life in danger. The right thing to do would be to camp out and sleep in the church until morning. But, to be honest, I wasn’t looking to do the right thing now. My gut told me he wouldn’t hurt me. Not that my gut had always been a reliable source in the past, but part of me wondered if I *wanted* to run into him again, which sounded stupid in my head. Either way, we had to hurry if we were going back.

Emily was watching me with a tortured look in her eyes. She saw the fight I was having within and was understanding enough to let me figure it out.

“Let’s go back, but we’ll run the entire way. The faster we get back, the better.” I searched the church for the best way out before pointing to the door on the left. “That way.”

Emily nodded before we took off. It was a ten-minute walk. Running cut the time down tremendously. Emily wasn’t used to running this fast, and I could hear her struggling to keep up. If I hadn’t been holding her hand, she might not have made it. We reached the room unscathed, even though I was still tangled up in my thoughts. This vampire was distracting me as no one ever had before. I dropped onto the bed and stared at the ceiling.

“I’m sorry, Em.” It was all I could say.

“You did nothing wrong, Tasi. Whatever happened, happened, and now we move on from it. We’re both alive.”

She placed a hand on my shoulder before heading off to take a shower, allowing me to work through what had happened alone. What had happened? I knew I hadn’t had a lot of



experience outside of my sheltered life, but no one had ever made me feel so stupefied by their presence. All I knew was the faster we got out of Boston, and away from this mysterious vamp, the better.