

Shelter

Blood Haze: Book One

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Chapter One – New Beginnings

Vampires. We are the subject of thousands of stories and legends, yet few have ever come close to telling the truth about what we really are. Most people seem to believe we are dead, or rather undead – that we do not breathe or have beating hearts. This is untrue. We are not undead, nor are we immortal. We breathe, we live, we love, and we die. Some of us even believe we have eternal souls that can go to Heaven or Hell. We are simply a different species of living creature.

I think people tend to believe we are immortal because we are stronger, healthier, and much longer-lived than our human counterparts. To them, it must seem we are immortal. To us, our lives are all too short.

We grow at approximately the same rate as humans for the first thirty years of our lives. In other words, a vampire child of three looks like a human child of the same age. A teenaged vampire is still a teenager in appearance.

After the age of thirty, our aging rapidly decelerates. It may take 200 years for us to look thirty-five, and another 500 years before we look forty. By the time we are 1,000 years old, many of us barely look in our fifties. The oldest known living vampire is over 4,000 years old, and he barely looks seventy.

This does make us harder to kill. The stake through the heart does work, because it cuts off life before we have a chance to heal. However, it does not have to be a stake. A bullet works just as well, as long as the heart is destroyed immediately. A large caliber bullet to the head or decapitation would also suffice. To kill us, one must extinguish all life in an instant. We do not die slow, painful deaths. We may live in agony for a short time until our rapid healing takes effect, or we may at most live a few seconds before death, but there is little in between.

Of course, to kill us, one would have to get close enough. We have heightened senses. We are stronger, faster, and generally smarter than humans.

Thus, it is difficult to destroy a vampire. It is not often that a human has the ability to use the element of surprise on a vampire. Some of us even have special gifts, but this is not common.

We are not killed by sunlight. Our skin is pale, so we do burn easily. And our eyes are better adjusted to the dark than the light. Some of us are more sensitive to light than others, but it is not especially harmful.

Garlic has no effect on us, though most vampire lore seems to infer it does. Many of us enjoy garlic in our food, and it gives a pleasant taste to blood when our victims consume it in the hours before we feed upon them.

Contrary to popular belief, we do not consume blood exclusively. We can also eat human food – though some develop a distaste for it over many years. Some of us only feed on human blood occasionally – just to keep up our strength.

My own family loves human food. We consume blood only occasionally – an unfortunate necessity. Our bodies cannot process nutrients the same way human bodies do, and we must ingest blood to strengthen ourselves. The few vampires who choose to live solely on human food for the sake of “morality” become frail and tired.

My family consumes blood a few times per month. We never drain our victims completely, leaving them enough blood to survive. Fortunately, our venom paralyzes them so they feel no pain. They cannot run away or scream. The venom also erases memory of the incident completely in most cases, and the few people who remember are generally thought to be crazy when they try to tell their story. The venom heals the wounds from our fangs very quickly, so there is no evidence to corroborate their story.

Some vampires *do* kill their victims. My own family wishes no harm to come to humans, and we have coexisted peacefully with them for decades. However, other vampires do not hold human life in the same esteem, and they kill

mercilessly. Those individuals are responsible for much of the intense fear and hatred humans have for our kind. It is fortunate that those individuals are not in the majority.

We definitely do *not* sleep in coffins. That myth is most likely perpetuated by authors in an attempt to instill fear in their readers. We sleep in beds just like humans – only most of us prefer much softer mattresses than the average human. We do prefer to sleep during the day, but we are not necessarily nocturnal. Some vampires have day jobs, and others live by robbing their victims. Some are business owners. My family has been wealthy for many generations, but I don't know how we came across that wealth initially. I never thought to ask.

Another popular misconception is that we are affected by holy water. That stems from the perception that we are evil incarnate, no doubt. However many of us believe in God, and some of us even attend human churches of various denominations.

Most of us are virtually indistinguishable from humans. We generally have paler skin, and our eyes are often striking in some way – much darker or much lighter than human eyes, or sometimes more intense in color. Our fangs contract when we aren't feeding or emotionally distraught, so they aren't visible most of the time.

Some vampires don't adapt well to modern lifestyles. A few persist in living in dark old manor houses, and to an outsider they would seem rather eccentric. We try to blend in with human society as much as possible; obviously, humans would want to do us harm if they knew what we are.

Most of us wear modern clothing and drive modern cars. However, some still cling to the old-fashioned, proper speech of old days, and a few insist on wearing “period clothing” like cloaks and robes. They do stand out in human society, but most people just think they are unusual or perhaps crazy. Humans are

naturally skeptical, which makes it a little easier to conform. Most humans don't really believe vampires exist.

Because of our long lives, we cannot stay in the same location for very long. Every twenty years or so, we have relocate to a new area. Otherwise, the local humans would suspect something was wrong. Once every human that may have known us has died, we can return to an area, if we choose.

Younger generations of vampires are leaving in droves. It is considered "romantic" to run away with a human, get married, and try to live a "normal" life. I do not know when this tragedy began, but it is slowly weakening our bloodlines. We can interbreed with humans, but our children are often sickly and even weaker than the average human. Often, their fangs are underdeveloped and cannot properly feed. The lack of blood makes them tired and listless.

Sadly, we cannot "turn" humans. The legends that say we can bite a human and they will transform into a vampire are false. A human can never become a vampire, just like a poodle can never become a Rottweiler. I say sadly, because this means that those of us who fall in love with humans are doomed to lose those we love while we are still in the prime of our life.

Our human partners die while we are still quite "young". For this reason, many vampires have dozens of children with many different human partners throughout their lives – a practice traditionalists find unsettling, especially in the face of the poor, weak children conceived of such relationships.

My own family is somewhat unusual – even by vampire standards. My mother is known by everyone in the town – vampires and humans alike – as a little strange. Some even call her crazy. No one is sure what drove her to be so eccentric, but rumors say she developed her quirks after my father died. I was only a baby when it happened, and my brother was three.

My mother would never tell us exactly what happened, and every time we tried to bring the subject up with other vampires they would quickly change the topic. We soon learned the subject was taboo – not open for discussion. Eventually, we virtually forgot he'd ever even existed.

We lived in a large, old house on the outskirts of town down a long, dark road. Our nearest neighbors were a mile away, and no one lived on that road but my family. However, several other vampire families live in similar houses in the same area.

When I was seventeen years old, my mother finally decided she wanted me to start attending a human school. My brother and I had been tutored at home our entire lives. He had already finished school and declined to go to college. I also had no interest in further schooling, but my mother insisted we both have the equivalent of a high school education.

I do not know why my mother suddenly decided to send me to a human school. I was only a few months away from graduation. I was ambivalent. Part of me was skeptical that I would be able to fit in with the humans – or even tolerate being around them. Another part of me was intrigued. I'd never met a human in a social setting. I'd fed on them, and I regularly did business with them when I went shopping or saw a movie in the theater. I'd just never spent more than a fleeting moment in the presence of a human that wasn't dinner.

The other vampires in our town were also quite skeptical. None of the other families we knew sent their children to school with the humans for fear they would fall in love and produce more half-breed children – further weakening the bloodlines.

As I said, my mother was eccentric. She never did things the way other families did, and they learned to stay out of her business. They all had deep respect for her, and few would even question her odd decisions. I was never quite sure if

this was out of pure respect or some kind of fear, but it was clear that few wanted to tangle with her for whatever reason.

On my first day of school, I was numb. I had no idea what to expect. I'd seen some old episodes of *Beverly Hills: 90210* – a human show which my mother was strangely obsessed with in the 1990s. I'd also seen plenty of movies and read many books that dealt with the lives of human teenagers. I had a soft spot for teen dramas from the 80s. I was especially partial to movies like *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo's Fire*.

Still, I felt grossly underprepared to actually integrate myself into human culture. I figured I'd just stick to myself and ride out the year. I only had to make it through that one year and I would never have to deal with it again.

My brother drove me to school. He was just as skeptical as everyone else. He saw no reason I should be subjected to a human school when I was so close to graduation. If I stayed home, I could finish my tutoring in just four or five months. If I went to the human school, I'd be stuck there for almost a year before I could graduate. Still, my brother was no more willing to cross my mother than anyone else. It wasn't that she was unkind or scary. We just respected her.

"Well, good luck," my brother said as I got out of the car.

"Please, Will. Don't patronize me," I said, rolling my eyes.

"What?" Will said. "I can't wish my lovely sister good luck on her first day of school?"

I sighed. Will and I were very close, but he wasn't very good at making me feel better during awkward situations like this. Most of the time, it just felt patronizing and contrived.

I slammed the car door and tossed my backpack over my shoulder. I stared at the front of the huge brick building for several minutes before I summoned the

courage to move my feet. It may seem strange, but I was in many ways just as afraid of humans as they would have been of me.

I already had my class schedule. My mother had made special arrangements with the school principal. She told her I'd been homeschooled and I was especially anxious about attending school for the first time, and the principal assured my mother I would be fine. She even promised to walk me to my first class.

As she promised, the principal was waiting for me by the front door, and her face lit up when she saw me. Apparently, she felt some big duty to make me feel at home.

"Hello, Alice," she said, smiling. "I'm so glad you could come to school this year! You're going to have a wonderful time."

I managed a half-hearted smile and thanked her, but I wasn't so sure. I was already uncomfortable, and I'd only been in the building for a few seconds. I wanted to turn and leave. The others might be afraid of my mother, but I wasn't. Not much, anyway.

The principal walked me to my first class. Actually, it was homeroom. Apparently, humans had this strange habit of having everyone gather in one classroom for a few moments in the morning before leaving to go to their real classes. I didn't understand the purpose. It seemed so inefficient.

When I got there, no one else was in the room. I was relieved. I chose a desk in the far back corner of the room, assuming no one else would want to sit in the back. I had this strange notion in my head that all humans liked other humans, and I did not realize that some were just as anti-social as I was. A few moments later, two guys walked into the room and sat down right beside me. There were 25 other desks in the room, but they picked the two right beside me. Great.

After they sat down, the guy in the desk furthest from me slapped the other one on the shoulder and then motioned toward me, grinning. I saw this unfold out

of the corner of my eye. Much to my chagrin, the one sitting in the desk right beside me turned my way.

“Hey, you’re new here, aren’t you?” he asked.

I sighed. Did I even have to respond?

“Um, yeah,” I heard myself saying, despite the intense desire to remain silent.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Alice,” I replied.

Why did I keep talking? Surely no major disaster would befall me if I just ignored him, would it?

“Hi, Alice,” he said. “I’m Van and this is Zach.”

What should I say next? Having never interacted with humans this way, I wasn’t sure. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself on the first day. My instinct was to jump up and leave, but then they’d *really* think I was a kook.

“Nice to meet you,” I said quickly.

Van smiled. He seemed pleased for some reason. Zach sat on the other side of Van grinning at me like an idiot. Was this what humans were like? They seemed like drooling fools to me. I was shocked they could walk and breathe at the same time.

“There’s a party tonight,” Van said. “Do you want to come?”

A party. I said it over in my head a couple of times. I remembered seeing human parties on television. Vampires had social gatherings, but we didn’t have wild music and drinking and crazy party games the way humans did. Ours were more... civilized.

“Umm. No, thank you,” I replied. “I have to get home after school.”

Oh, crap. Now I was really going to look like a spaz. I knew from television and books that human teenagers looked down on other teens who went home early and didn't go to parties.

"Oh," said Van, looking disappointed. "It's cool."

Clearly, he had seen my rejection as personal rather than my own reluctance to throw myself into the midst of human culture so thoroughly on my first day. I hadn't meant to offend anyone – especially when I was just getting used to interacting with the humans.

"Wait," I said. "I'll go."

Instantly, I regretted my decision. It was one of those times when you hear yourself saying something, and it seems like a good idea at the time, but once you blurt it out you can hardly believe it was really you speaking. What was I thinking?

Van perked up. "Awesome!" he said. "Let me give you the address."

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a spiral-bound notebook and a pen. He scribbled an address on the paper, and he wrote the time – 8:00 P.M. Then he ripped the page out and handed it to me.

I took the paper and glanced at it. The address was familiar to me for some reason. 725 Sycamore Street. Where did I know that address from? I couldn't remember. It probably didn't matter, anyway.

"It's at my cousin's house. It's going to be mostly seniors like us, but there might be some underclassmen there," Van said.

I didn't know what to say. I thought back to the books and movies I'd seen, but nothing came immediately to mind. Oh, yeah. Seniors don't generally like to hang out with younger students, I remembered.

"Bummer," I said.

"My cousin's nineteen, so he's not in school anymore," Van said. "But he doesn't really care who shows up."

“Oh,” I said.

I couldn’t really think of anything else to say.

By then, other students were coming into the room and sitting down. A pretty blonde sat in front of me, and an overweight brunette girl with acne sat down at the desk in front of Van. The blonde looked at the heavier girl in disgust and stood up, choosing a desk across the room. If the brunette noticed, she didn’t let on. She had her head bent, and she gnawed her fingernails nervously.

Pretty soon, the classroom was full and the bell rang. Seconds later, a good looking man about forty years old walked in. He sat down at the teacher’s desk and cleared his throat, waiting for everyone to be quiet. The cacophony of voices slowly died down, and the man introduced himself as Mr. Raines. He began calling out names from a list.

“Jamie Adams,” called Mr. Raines.

“Here,” replied the brunette quietly.

“Amanda Brit,” called Mr. Raines.

“Here,” answered the pretty blonde.

He went through the list name by name. By the time he called my name, I knew what to do. Thank heavens my name didn’t come before “Adams”, or I’d have looked like a complete moron.

“Alice Wright” he called.

“Here,” I called back.

Whew! At least I hadn’t made an ass of myself in homeroom. I finally realized that must be the purpose of homeroom – to ascertain whether all students were all present and accounted for.

The rest of homeroom was uneventful. Everyone chatted amongst themselves, but thankfully Van and Zach were having their own conversation and they left me alone. Jamie was the only one besides me who wasn’t prattling away. I

wondered if she was purposely isolating herself, or if she was being ostracized because of her appearance.

When the bell rang, everyone got up to leave the room. I noticed something fall off Jamie's backpack when she stood up, and instinctively I picked it up and ran after her.

"Hey!" I called.

A few people glanced at me to see who I was referring to, but Jamie did not. I caught up with her and tapped her on the shoulder. She stopped and turned around to face me, looking a bit startled.

"Hey, you dropped this," I said, extending my hand, which held the item in question.

I looked down at it, noticing it was a keychain. Several keys dangled from the end of a weird pink wiggly thing. It looked kind of like a sea urchin, but the spikes were all made of some squishy, stretchy material. It was one of the strangest things I'd ever seen.

"Oh, thank you," Jamie said, taking it from me. "My mother would kill me if I lost my keys again."

Jamie turned and walked away, staring straight down at the floor as she went. She soon disappeared in the crowd of students. I felt bad for her. I had some kind of strange kinship with her. Whether she exiled herself intentionally or was shunned by her peers – she must have felt as out of place as I did.

Most of my classes were really boring and uneventful. Van was in my English class, and I had gym class with Jamie, Amanda, Zach, and Van. Jamie brought a note from her mother that said she must be excused from gym class because she had a bad knee. I overheard Amanda and her friend Ashley Patterson saying that maybe Jamie wouldn't be so fat if she didn't sit out gym class. I thought that was really rude.

At lunchtime, I looked around for a table where I could be alone. Unfortunately, someone was sitting at every single table in the room. I scanned the lunchroom looking for a span of chairs where I could at least sit without someone elbowing me while I was trying to eat.

I noticed Jamie sitting by herself. As usual, her head was down. I didn't spot any other empty spots, but no one was sitting within 3 chairs of Jamie on either side of the table.

"Can I sit with you?" I asked, holding my tray and peering down at her.

She barely looked up long enough to notice it was me before saying, "I guess so."

I sat down directly across from her and placed my tray in front of me.

"Thanks," I said to her. "I don't know anyone, and I really didn't want to sit with strangers."

Jamie poked at her hamburger with her fork, but she did not eat. She seemed to be looking longingly at the food on her tray, but she refused to take a bite. My curiosity got the better of me.

"Something wrong with your food?" I asked.

Jamie looked up at me and sighed. Instantly, I regretted saying anything. She looked hurt, and there was a loneliness behind her eyes that was startling. I cleared my throat uneasily.

"I'm not hungry," she said, turning her eyes back toward her food.

"Oh," I answered, accepting the obvious lie. "I'm starving."

I picked up my hamburger and took a bite. It was dried out and hard, but I was so hungry I probably would have eaten a hockey puck if I didn't think my teeth would all break and fall out onto my tray like a cartoon character.

I noticed Jamie looking around out of the corners of her eyes. It seemed as though she was trying to see if anyone was watching her. When she was confident

no one was looking, she grabbed a French fry and shoved it into her mouth. She tried to chew as inconspicuously as possible.

I couldn't understand this. Jamie was clearly overweight. She was hardly the only overweight girl in school, nor even the largest. It was obvious she didn't often turn down food. So why would she not just eat?

Suddenly, I heard snorting noises coming from behind Jamie. I peered over her shoulder and Amanda and Ashley were sitting with several other girls staring at Jamie's back. They giggled uproariously as they snorted, and the whole thing was almost surreal. It felt like a scene straight out of one of those pre-teen novels I'd read when I was a little kid.

Jamie sat quietly for a moment, then she stood up so quickly her chair turned over. She fled from the lunchroom, leaving her tray sitting on the table. I watched her go, then I turned toward Amanda and Ashley and watched them exchange knowing looks. They'd gotten to Jamie, and they thought it was riotous. The whole table exploded in laughter.

Suddenly, I didn't feel hungry anymore. This was exactly why I had been so ambivalent about attending a human school. I thought this kind of thing was more of a caricature of human behavior made up to sell tickets to sappy teenage movies. Seeing it with my own eyes made it real, and it was horrifying.

I picked up my tray and Jamie's, and I took them to the window where other students were dumping their finished lunches, and I handed both trays to the woman wearing plastic gloves. She took both trays and slammed them against the side of a huge black trash can and then shoved them into a black crate, which she picked up and sent through a curtain made of strips of clear plastic. She looked completely defeated. I guessed her job wasn't the most fulfilling.

I managed to make it through the rest of the day, but I was more than ready to go home by the time the final bell rang. Thankfully, Will was already waiting for me when I got outside.

“So, how was your first day?” he asked.

“It was okay,” I said.

It wasn’t exactly a lie. Part of it hadn’t been completely horrible.

“You don’t sound so sure,” he observed.

“No, it was fine,” I said. “I just don’t understand humans.”

“Well, join the club!” he said, chuckling.

Will had never been much for human contact, either. In fact, talking to humans was downright distracting, and sometimes humorous in a creepy way. They were food, not friends. I imagined it would be a bit like a human having a polite conversation with a cow – all the while imagining the cow as a thick, juicy steak.

Truthfully, conversing with humans hadn’t been quite as creepy as I thought it would be. I managed to make it through an entire day without once picturing any of my classmates or teachers as dinner. Their behavior was disturbing, nonetheless.

It occurred to me that I had to figure out a way to explain to Will why I was going to a human party that night. I had to go to school. Mother had insisted. He got that. But he would never understand why I would willingly accept an invitation to interact with humans, I was sure of it.

“Um, Will?” I blurted out. “I’m going to a party tonight.”

For a moment, he was silent, as if he were trying to decide if he’d heard me clearly.

“You’re what?” he asked.

“Going to a party,” I repeated. “This guy asked me, and I didn’t know what to say, so I said I would go.”

“Oh,” he said. “Um... okay.”

“It’s no big deal,” I said.

“I didn’t say it was,” Will said.

He sounded sincere.

“What do you think Mother will say?” I asked.

“Who knows?” he commented, and the conversation ended.

When I got home, Mother was waiting in the parlor. She lounged on the sofa – a fire roaring in the fireplace though it was 80 degrees outdoors. She smiled at me when I walked in.

“Alice, darling,” she cooed, standing up and walking over to me. “Tell Mother about your first day!”

She put her icy cold hands on my cheeks and cocked her head to the side, eyeballing me as if she were waiting for me to make some incredible revelation. Mother was always chilly, but today her hands were particularly frosty. I guess that was why she had the fire going.

“I’m going to a party,” I blurted out, instantly wishing I hadn’t.

“That’s a lovely idea!” Mother gushed. “It’ll give you a chance to get to know some people!”

Mother was so hard to understand. My mother had kept my brother and me away from humans our whole lives. She refused to hire humans as servants – even though they cost far less than vampires. She escorted us on almost every trip to the store and every outing personally, and those she couldn’t attend she had our vampire nanny chaperone. Why, now, was she suddenly so determined that I be around them? It was bizarre.

“What time is the party, dear?” Mother asked.

“Eight,” I answered.

“Do you have any homework?” she wanted to know.

“No, Mother,” I said.

“Well, then you’d better go get ready for the party,” she told me. “Where is it?”

I couldn’t remember the exact address, so I sat my backpack down on the coffee table and fumbled through it. I finally found the paper on which Van had written the address, and I handed it to her.

She unfolded the paper and turned it around the proper way. When she read the address, her face blanched. She suddenly became weak in the knees, and she sat down on the couch as if she were dizzy.

“Mother!” I gasped. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“This address, I know the people who live there,” she replied.

“I thought I recognized the address,” I admitted. “When Van wrote it down, it seemed familiar. Why?”

“Because,” she said. “That’s where your father was killed.”

Chapter Two – The Revelation

I was speechless. I suddenly felt my own knees buckle, and I sat down beside her on the couch and exhaled sharply. That's where I'd seen the address. I remembered that my mother kept a newspaper clipping in her dresser drawer about an incident that happened at that address. I never knew what it was, but I knew it must have been important for her to keep it like that.

I had always been a snoop. I was a curious child, and I went through every inch of the house on a regular basis. I'd found some dirty magazines under my brother's mattress when I was 12. I blackmailed him into giving me half of them in exchange for not telling Mother. Hey, I said I was a curious child!

When I found the clipping, I hadn't understood what it meant. I had looked at it several times after that first day, but it never registered to me what it was. It was a simple story that mentioned a murder at the address, and police said it was a crime of passion. I never knew what that meant.

I couldn't speak. I desperately wanted to ask her a million questions, but I couldn't find the words. I opened my mouth, but the words would not form. It was like I'd been struck dumb.

"What happened?" I heard my brother ask. I'd forgotten he was in the room.

Mother got a faraway look in her eyes, and suddenly I saw tears begin to fill them. I couldn't remember ever seeing my mother cry, and it was shocking. She sighed deeply, and she closed her eyes tightly in an effort to regain her composure. A single tear escaped her eye and fell down her cheek, but she quickly brushed it away. After another deep breath, she spoke.

"Your father and I were in love once," she began. "It was so natural with him. Everyone said it was fate."

Mother paused, as if the memory was too much to bear. Then she continued, "His parents and my parents arranged for us to be married, but neither of us

objected. You see, back then parents still arranged marriages for their children. We had no say in whom we were to marry. We did as we were told.”

Tears filled her eyes again in remembrance, and she had to take a moment to regain her composure. She reached into the pocket of her dress and withdrew a white lace-edged handkerchief and blotted her eyes carefully. She took another deep breath and went on.

“Fortunately, we were madly in love. I couldn’t stand to be away from him, and when we were married I was so relieved that I could spend every day with him. We were happy for the first three decades or so, but then things changed. Your father began to spend more time away from home, and soon he was away for months at a time. I never knew where he went – or why.”

“And you just let him go?” I asked her.

“What choice did I have?” she questioned. “He was not a slave. He could come and go as he pleased, as could I.”

“You never knew where he was going?” I asked.

“No, not at first,” I said. “It killed me to be away from him, but I had Will to look after, and we conceived you when he was home briefly. With the two of you to care for, I didn’t have much time to wonder.”

“Not at first,” I repeated. “Does that mean you found out later?”

“Yes, I found out later,” she agreed. “But not before I began having an affair with a human.”

That statement knocked the breath out of me. My mother had been having an affair with a human while my father was away. I was only a baby. This was totally unexpected. I looked over at Will, and he looked just as shocked as I.

“A human?” I whispered.

“Yes,” she answered. “His name was Roger Walker. He was our gardener – the only human we ever hired. We hadn’t been able to find a vampire who could

properly care for the grounds, and with your father away so much I couldn't do it myself. In his absence, I hired Roger to take care of the lawn and the gardens. Just a few weeks later, we were having an affair."

"Were you in love with him?" I begged to know.

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. "I was so blindly in love with your father, I'm not sure if I could have fallen in love with anyone else. I was certainly enamored with him, though. He was handsome and kind. So full of life."

Mother got that faraway look in her eyes again, and she looked as if she might burst into tears.

"So what happened to him?" I asked.

"I can't talk about this anymore right now," Mother said.

She stood up and fled from the room in a flash, leaving Will and me stunned and confused.

"What do you make of this?" Will asked me when Mother was safely out of earshot.

"I don't know," I replied. "I remember seeing this newspaper clipping in Mother's drawer. It talked about a murder, and I remember now it was the address where this party is happening tonight."

"Wow," said Will, dumfounded.

"I know," I agreed. "What are the odds?"

"Are you still going," he wanted to know.

"I guess so," I said. "I said I would."

"Then you'd better get ready," Will told me.

Chapter Three – The Meeting

I didn't see Mother before I left for the party, and she wasn't in her room. I guess she had gone to the garden to be alone. I didn't want to disturb her, so Will and I got into the car and left.

On the way, I fiddled with the door lock nervously. I flipped the power lock switch back and forth over and over, and eventually Will had enough of the persistent click-click-click-click.

"Oh, my God, will you stop that?" he snapped.

"Stop what?" I asked, oblivious.

"Flicking the lock like that!" he shouted.

I looked down at my hand and it was resting on the switch. I hadn't even realized I was doing it. I fidget when I'm nervous, and it occurred to me that this party was giving me more anxiety than I'd initially realized.

Will pulled up to the curb at 725 Sycamore Street and asked if I wanted him to go in with me. I stared at the house – small but well-kept – and I tried to brace myself for the uncertainty. I noticed a few people already going inside.

"No," I answered. "I'll be fine."

I took a deep breath and got out of the car. I was desperately hoping Van would already be there. It's not that I wanted to see him, specifically. I just wanted to see a familiar face.

Fortunately, just as I was closing the car door, I heard Van shout from behind me, "Hey, Alice! You made it!"

I waved through the window to Will, and he nodded and pulled away from the curb. I watched him drive away, and then I turned to face Van. He grinned at me, and I smiled back out of habit.

"Come on!" Van said. "Let me introduce you to everyone."

I followed him into the house where my brain was suddenly overwhelmed by the thundering boom of too-loud music. Zach was there, and he shot a broad smile at me when he noticed me. I smiled back politely. Van introduced me to several people, and I noticed that most of the people were unfamiliar. Other than Van and Zach, there was no one else there that I recognized from my classes.

“Aren’t Amanda and Ashley coming?” I asked, hoping he would tell me they were not.

“Seriously?” he asked – his eyes wide as if I’d made a serious snafu. “Like they’d lower themselves to show up at one of our parties.”

“Oh, good point,” I said quickly.

“I’ll introduce you to my cousin, Kai, as soon as I can find him,” Van shouted over the music. “He’s not big on socializing.”

“Then why is he throwing a party?” I yelled back.

“He’s not,” Van shouted. “He’s just letting Zach and me have the party here because our parents don’t want us having parties at our houses, anymore.”

“Anymore,” I parroted. “What does that mean?”

“Long story,” Van stated. “Let’s go out back. I bet he’s in the shed.”

It was a relief to get out of the crowded house and into the night air. The loud music was still pounding in my brain, although it was much less audible once we were out of the house.

I followed Van to a shed in the back yard, and he opened the door.

“Hey, there you are!” Van said to someone inside.

“Hey, man,” answered the voice.

The voice was low and quiet, and it had a melancholy edge to it that almost saddened me.

“Kai, let me introduce you to Alice,” Van said, stepping aside. “Alice Wright, this is my cousin Kai Walker.”

I started to mention the fact that his name sounded like Skywalker without the “S”, but I didn’t want to let anyone know how much of a *Star Wars* nerd I really was. I got the idea that “nerds” were a group that was often ostracized.

I peeked into the shed, and there stood a sight that took my breath away. Kai was tall and thin, but his muscles were well defined. He wore a dark gray shirt that clung tightly to his frame, and it was tucked into black jeans. He wore black strappy boots, but splotches of paint in different colors dotted the toes. He had crystal blue eyes and long, striking rich burgundy hair. He was intensely beautiful. I never imagined any human could be so attractive.

Kai paused with a paint brush in one hand and a palette in the other, and he eyed me suspiciously.

“Hello, Alice,” he finally said.

“N-nice to meet you,” I replied, fumbling for words like an idiot.

He turned his head to the side, looking at me like a puppy with its head cocked to the side as if he were trying to understand me. His crimson hair fell over his shoulder, and I noticed his eyes were piercing into me as he attempted to size me up. I noticed his eyes fall downward from my face, eying the whole length of my body and back up.

“Hmm,” he said.

I wasn’t sure what that meant. His face gave me no clue. It was completely expressionless and dull. He stared at me for a moment, then he turned his attention back to his painting. I wanted to see what he was painting, but the easel was facing away from the door.

I stood there awkwardly for a few moments, and then I started to leave to go back into the house. It seemed obvious he had no interest in talking to me, and I saw no reason to keep standing there like an idiot.

“Hey, Van!” shouted Zach from the back door. “Dave brought a keg!”

“Come on,” Van said, slapping me lightly on the arm with the back of his hand.

I started to follow him, when I heard my name.

“Alice,” Kai called.

I paused. I was extremely uncomfortable in the huge crowd of people inside the house, but I also wasn’t sure if I wanted to be around Kai. The way he had looked at me... I wasn’t sure what he was thinking. That made me nervous.

“I’ll be inside,” Van said, heading back to the party.

Anxiously, I turned around to face Kai. The golden light of the lamp inside the shed cast a glow onto the grass. It was almost inviting me in – like a red carpet rolled out for me. I took a step toward the door, but I did not enter.

“Come in,” Kai said softly. “Close the door.”

With some trepidation, I stepped up into the shed and closed the door behind me. I turned back toward Kai, who once again seemed lost in concentration as he painted. He said nothing.

After several long moments of silence, I was just about to frantically burst out of the shed to escape the awkward situation. Finally, Kai looked at me and spoke.

“What do you do?” he asked.

“Do?” I returned, confused.

“Yes, Alice,” he replied. “What do you do? For fun.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling stupid. “Not much. I play the piano.”

“I see,” he said. “What do you play?”

“You mean what kind of music?” I asked, feeling completely moronic.

“Yes, what kind of music do you play on the piano?” Kai clarified.

“Mostly classical,” I answered.

“Are you any good?” he asked, looking at me with that sideways puppy look again.

“I never thought about it,” I said. “I’ve had lessons since I was five, so I suppose so.”

Kai turned back to his painting and added a few more details. I still hadn’t seen what he was painting, and I thought it might be rude to ask to see it. Still, I was curious.

“Interesting,” he said.

I couldn’t tell if he was referring to what I’d said or to the painting, because he was concentrating on his art so intently.

“How long have you been painting?” I asked after another pregnant pause.

“For as long as I can remember,” Kai replied.

“You must be pretty good, then,” I commented, hoping it would spur him to let me see what he was concentrating on.

“I suppose,” he answered. He poked the canvas with his brush, and then he settled the brush into a glass of water and placed the palette on the table behind him.

“Do you want to get out of here?” he asked me, turning to me.

“Out of the shed?” I asked. Suddenly, I felt dumber than I had in a long time. “Oh, you mean away from the party.”

“Yes, Alice,” he agreed, nodding with a slight grin. “Away from the party.”

“Yes, actually,” I said, my cheeks flushed violet with embarrassment. “I’m not real big on parties.”

“Me, either,” Kai said.

“Yeah, I get that,” I responded.

Kai pushed past me and opened the shed door, heading out into the cool night air. I paused briefly. I wanted to see that painting. For some reason, I couldn't budge.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered, casting a glance back at the easel before following Kai out into the yard.

I followed Kai around the side of the house to the detached garage. Kai opened the door on the side, and we entered the dark garage. My eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness, and I could clearly see an older model car. Kai flicked the light on, and I squinted in the sudden brightness.

"Hop in," he instructed me, walking around to the driver's side.

Normally, I knew it would not be wise for a teenaged girl to get into the car with a guy she'd just met. Being a vampire, it was really no issue for me. I knew I could overpower any human. Should he try to hurt me, he'd be in for a nasty surprise.

I got into the passenger's seat, and Kai pulled down the visor above his seat. He grabbed his keys and pushed them into the ignition, turning the key to start the car. The engine roared. He turned on the headlights, and pushed a button on the device attached to the visor. The garage door loudly screeched and hummed, and Kai pulled out into the driveway.

"Wait!" I gasped. "I need to tell Van we're leaving."

Kai put the car in park, the engine idling loudly. He reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a cell phone. After tapping away at the keys for a moment, he put the phone back into his pocket.

"Done," Kai said, looking at me reassuringly. "I sent him a text and told him where we're going."

"Oh, okay," I nodded. "Where *are* we going?"

“It’s a surprise,” he said.

I had no idea where Kai was taking me, but it didn’t matter much. I was glad to be away from that horrible party and all of those loud, irritating people. In fairness, none of them had actually done anything to me. I just didn’t like being around big crowds like that – especially humans. I still didn’t understand them very well, and large groups of them were intimidating.

It wasn’t long until Kai pulled into the parking lot of what appeared to be a very small old church. He turned off the car and got out, and I obligingly followed suit. He walked up the steps to the front door and jingled his keys, fumbling in the darkness. He finally inserted the correct key into the padlock that held the chain around the doors, and the chain fell to the ground.

Kai pushed open the doors and we walked inside. Instantly, my eyes adjusted to the darkness and I could see clearly that this church was very old. It was tiny. There didn’t seem to be any electricity, or any even any electrical devices. There was a small podium at the front, and two columns of six pews. Near the podium sat a dusty old upright piano.

Kai strode over to a candelabra near the piano and lit it with a lighter he pulled from his pocket. The candlelight flickered and cast glittering golden points of light over the piano.

“Would you play for me?” he asked. “The piano might be out of tune. No one has played it in years.”

I was a bit startled. I wasn’t prepared to play for anyone. In fact, the only people who’d ever heard me play were my mother and my brother, my piano teacher, my tutor, and a few of my family’s servants. Still, he’d brought me all the way here to hear me play.

Kai brushed a thick layer of dust away from the piano bench with his hand, and then he blew some more dust off the lid that covered the keys of the piano. He stepped back and waited for me to take a seat.

I sat down and opened the lid, pushing it back behind the keys. I thought for a moment, unsure what to play. I knew dozens of pieces, but I wasn't really sure what he'd like to hear.

"What should I play?" I asked him.

"What is your favorite piece?" he asked me.

I thought for a moment. I had several songs I really enjoyed, but there was one in particular that I loved more than all others. My fingers paused over the keys. I was worried that the piano would be out of tune and I would sound terrible. I gingerly played a few arpeggios, and they all sounded fine. I breathed a sigh of relief. After another deep, cleansing breath, I began to play.

The melody was haunting. I still hear it in my mind like a haunting dream when I think of that night. "Moonlight Sonata" had always been the song I turned to whenever I was feeling lonely, and now I played it for Kai as if I was telling him how alone I always felt. I was drawn deeply into the song as I played, and for a few moments I forgot that I wasn't alone. I knew the whole song, but the first movement was my favorite. It was so melancholy and deep.

As I completed the song, I looked around. At first, I didn't see Kai. Then I noticed him sitting in the front pew with his feet up, leaning his back against the arm rest at the end by the aisle.

"Moonlight Sonata," he acknowledged quietly.

"Yes," I agreed, impressed that he knew the song. "It's my favorite."

Most vampires my age listened to contemporary music, and even a lot of the older vampires had stopped listening to classical music decades ago. From what I knew of human teenagers, their appreciation for classical music seemed about as

strong as their appreciation for liver or lima beans. In other words, it was virtually non-existent.

“Please,” he asked solemnly. “Play more.”

I thought for a moment, and I decided to play something a little more exciting. It was a piece I’d spent months practicing when I first began to learn it, and it was years before I could play it without making major mistakes. From what my piano teacher told me, it was one of the hardest pieces to play. Most of her students never mastered it.

As I began the opening notes to “Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2” by Franz Liszt, I noticed I was not anxious like I normally was when I played the piece. It is a difficult song, and at around ten minutes long, it was also exhausting. This time, the song flowed from the end of my fingertips and onto the keys like water flowing over rocks in a river. It was inexplicable, but I felt completely comfortable for the first time since I was a young child.

My fingers danced over the keys as I played the song, and the glow from the candelabra was so warm I could almost feel it on my skin in the crisp, cool air of the church. I abandoned every other thought, and I just let the song flow forth. I hadn’t noticed, but I closed my eyes a few moments into the song and I played by touch alone. This song was so much a part of me that I did not need to see the keys. I knew every finger movement by heart.

At the end of the piece, I didn’t feel drained as I usually did when I played it. I felt energized – alive. I looked over at Kai, and he appeared to be mesmerized. He did not speak; he just looked at me.

At once, I became a little self-conscious. I cleared my throat, and I stood up. Kai just watched me as I stepped away from the piano. I looked back at it, trying to turn my eyes away from Kai. His pale eyes seemed to be burning into me, and it was difficult to look at him. Why did he stare at me so intently?

“Please,” he finally said. “Sit with me.”

He beckoned me over by motioning toward the pew, and I picked my way across the floor to sit at the other end of the pew. He did not seem to be bothered by the fact that I sat as far away from him as I could. He just kept looking at me with those intense blue eyes. Again, he cocked his head to the side as he looked at me – apparently still trying to figure me out.

I sighed and absently brushed a piece of lint off my pants. I didn’t know what to say or do. I felt uneasy, and I thought perhaps I should go play something else. I had felt so comfortable while I was playing, and now the feelings of insecurity and awkwardness had come rushing back in. Were all humans so terribly befuddling?

“Enchanting,” Kai said suddenly.

“What?” I asked, confused.

“The music,” he clarified. “When you play, it is absolutely enchanting.”

I blushed and looked down at my hands, which twisted nervously in my lap.

“I have heard those songs a thousand times before, but when you play them they sound different somehow,” he told me. “I can’t explain it.”

I didn’t know what to say. It was a compliment, but it didn’t seem like something I should thank him for saying.

“What time do you have to be home?” he asked me.

“I don’t have a curfew,” I told him.

He raised one eyebrow at me quizzically. I guess it was unusual for a seventeen-year-old girl to have no curfew. I had never had one. After all, vampires love the night, and my mother knew I could easily defend myself. Even as a young child, I could have easily overtaken an adult human male. If he was shocked, he did not say so.

“Do you want to go to the beach?” he asked me.

“The beach?” I mumbled. “I’ve never been.”

“Never been to the beach?” he questioned. “It’s only a few miles from here.”

“I know,” I said uncomfortably. “I’ve... just never been.”

The beach isn’t exactly a place vampires typically go. We sunburn so easily, and we’re not fond of exposing our pale skin in swimsuits. It had never even occurred to me to go.

“Well, let’s go,” Kai said, standing up.

“I... I should at least call home,” I stammered nervously.

“I thought you didn’t have a curfew,” he stated.

“I don’t, but I should let them know where I’m going,” I shot back.

Kai took his cell phone out of his pocket and handed it to me. Obviously, he was not going to let me get out of this trip to the beach. I sighed, and I dialed the phone. A few moments later, Will answered.

“Will? It’s me,” I said. “I’m going to hang out with a friend for a while. I’ll be home late.”

“Uh... okay,” Will said. He was obviously confused.

I had no curfew, and I never called when I was out late. The “friend” thing should have surprised him, but either it didn’t or he just didn’t let on.

“I just wanted to let you and Mother know,” I told him.

“Thanks?” he boggled.

“See you later,” I said.

I quickly hung up the phone. I’m sure Will was staring down at the phone like some crazy person had just called him. That was completely out of character for me, and he had to know something was up. I don’t even know why I called. Maybe I was stalling.

Kai blew out the candles and closed the lid over the piano keys, and then he locked up the church. We got into his car and headed toward the beach. I'd lived in Savannah, Georgia my entire life, but I'd never been anywhere near the beach.

As we drove, I got curious about the church. How, exactly, did Kai have the keys to this little old church? I didn't think it was any of my business, but I was dying to know.

"Kai," I started. "I was wondering something about the church..."

He cut me off. "You wanted to know why I have keys to it?"

"Well, yes," I admitted, hoping I wasn't overstepping any boundaries.

"My great grandfather used to be the pastor," he explained. "The church has been in the family ever since it closed after he died."

"Oh," I said, hanging my head in solemn reverence.

"No one ever goes there but me," he said.

"Why do you go there?" I asked him.

"Privacy," he answered. "It's the only place I know of where I can be absolutely certain I won't be bothered."

"I see," I said. "I have a place like that, myself."

"Really?" he asked. "Would you take me there sometime?"

Whoa! I barely knew this guy and he was asking me to take him to the only place where I had any privacy at all. I felt a little invaded, but then I realized he'd just taken me to *his* private place. I was still a little befuddled as to why. We'd just met a couple of hours earlier. Still, our garden at home was my own private oasis. My mother and me were the only ones who ever went there, and it was rare when she went.

We stopped by a gas station and Kai picked up two bottles of water. He handed me one. I hadn't thought about it, but I was actually very thirsty. The dust in the church made my throat scratchy. I thanked him.

When we got to Tybee Island, I noticed the place seemed deserted. I didn't see anyone in the streets, and most of the shops were closed. It wasn't all that late, but everything seemed dead.

"Why is it so dead here?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "It's near the end of the tourist season, but there are usually quite a few stragglers hanging out during the off season."

He stopped the car in the lot of a small restaurant, and he reached into the trunk for a blanket. He took off his boots and socks and tossed them into the trunk, waiting, apparently, for me to do the same. I obliged.

We followed the road between what appeared to be two hotels, and moments later we were standing beside the sand dunes near a large pier with a pavilion at the end. The sand felt warm and soft between my toes, and I was instantly struck by the sharp, briny scent of the ocean air. We walked out onto the beach, and I was awestruck by the intense beauty of the ocean in the moonlight. My eyes widened, and my jaw went slack.

"It's incredible, isn't it?" he asked, noticing my expression.

"That doesn't begin to describe it," I whispered, barely able to speak.

The moon was huge and nearly filled the sky beyond the horizon. Its reflection shone over the black sea, sending sparkling moonlight over the waves like millions of glittering diamonds. The air smelled crisp and salty, and I could detect a slight seafood-like scent. It was intoxicating.

Kai spread out a blanket when we neared the surf. He sat down, and he beckoned me to do the same. The blanket was small, and I wasn't sure I wanted to be sitting so close to someone. My mother and my brother rarely even saw me sitting so close to them. Still, I didn't want to seem rude. I sat beside him, pulling my knees up in front of me and wrapping my arms around them – a kind of protective mechanism, I guess.

Kai stretched his legs out, letting his feet rest in the sand. A breeze picked up, and I noticed Kai's long hair fluttering around his face out of the corner of my eye. I was starting to become a little annoyed with myself. I had to admit, I was a little attracted to him.

Okay, in truth I was intensely attracted to him. Not only was he beautiful, but there was something so captivating about his personality. He wasn't like anyone I'd ever met. Were all humans so interesting? No. Van and Zach certainly weren't.

"Do you come here often?" I asked him.

"Only at night," he answered.

"Why only at night?" I quizzed him curiously.

"It's the only time you can see the moon on the water like this," he replied. "Plus, I don't like the crowds that are here in the daytime. At night, there are usually very few people around."

That made sense. I hated crowds, too. This seemed much more peaceful than a whole beach full of screaming kids and sun-tanning folks. It was nice. I was sad that I had never been before.

"I like it," I whispered.

"What?" Kai asked.

"This place," I answered. "It's amazing."

"Yeah," Kai agreed.

It must have been at least twenty minutes before either of us spoke again. We just sat and listened to the roar of the waves crashing against the shore, watching the moonlight sparkle on the surf, and feeling the ocean breeze through our hair. I finally became comfortable enough to stretch out my legs, and I loved the way the sand felt between my toes.

Suddenly, my tummy growled. That was a terribly inopportune time for it to happen, because I was really enjoying the moment. The sound of my stomach grumbling in hunger was not only disturbing – it was a little embarrassing.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“I am,” I admitted, hanging my head in shame.

“Me, too,” he said. “Why don’t we head back to my place and grab something to eat?”

I frowned. I didn’t like the thought of leaving this wondrous place and going back to that noisy party.

“We don’t have to go inside,” he said. “I have snacks in the shed.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” I breathed a sigh of relief.

We were both pretty quiet on the way back to Kai’s house. On the way, I began to wonder about the story regarding my father’s death. It hadn’t even occurred to me all night that my mother had just told me hours earlier that my father had died at Kai’s house. Suddenly, it was all I could think of.

“What’s wrong?” Kai asked, apparently picking up on my change in mood.

“Nothing,” I lied.

I turned my head to look out the car window. I watched buildings flash by as we drove – a welcome distraction from my curiosity. Kai must have sensed my discomfort, so he switched on the stereo. He had an MP3 player hooked up, and while we were stopped at a red light, he flicked through his playlists and chose one he was sure I would like.

The familiar sound of “Für Elise” began to play, and it instantly relaxed me. There was something about classical music that always comforted me, and I admit that I was more than a little surprised that Kai had a classical music playlist. Now I was curious about what else he liked to listen to.

I eyeballed his MP3 player, longing to take a peek at his playlists, but I didn't want to intrude. Admittedly, I would be rather annoyed if someone I just met started snooping through my music without asking.

Suddenly, I blurted out, "Can I look at your playlists?"

Kai glanced at me and gave me a crooked smile.

"Be my guest," he said.

I picked up the player and started nosing around through his music. He had two different playlists with classical music. One was mostly classical piano – my personal favorite. The other had a lot of orchestral compositions, some of which I wasn't even familiar with. I'd never really listened to symphonies much.

He also had a playlist full of 90s hair metal. That was interesting. My brother had a thing for that stuff, too. I enjoyed some of it. I certainly didn't hate it, but it wasn't my favorite.

Another playlist contained a bunch of love songs – mostly stuff from the 70s and 80s. I wasn't too familiar with human males, obviously, but it did occur to me that it seemed unusual that a guy would have a bunch of romantic music on his MP3 player. Then again, Kai seemed anything but ordinary. He was nothing like the human guys I'd seen on television or in movies.

That was it as far as playlists. It was a lot like my own. My computer at home had a grand total of six playlists. Five of them were classical piano playlists – each one created to fit a certain mood. The final playlist was mostly 80s music. I picked up a taste for it while watching those cheesy 80s movies. I don't know why, but those movies really stuck a chord with me. Probably because they portray social awkwardness – a feeling I was painfully aware of.

When we got back to Kai's, the party had broken up. It was only 11:30, so it seemed unusual that everyone was gone. Kai suggested things got boring so people headed out, but something didn't seem quite right about it.

“Oh, well,” Kai said. “At least we can get better food in the house.”

The house was completely dark, but I could see paper cups and garbage everywhere. His house was completely trashed, and it smelled strongly of beer. I followed him through the back door and into the kitchen.

Kai was bent over looking through the refrigerator when I heard a faint rustle behind me. I turned just in time to see an angry looking woman breeze into the kitchen and storm over toward Kai. I suddenly became very uncomfortable, and I pressed myself against the wall to try to avoid detection.

“Kai!” she screeched in a shrill voice. “What have you done to this house?”

“Mom!” he shouted, slamming the refrigerator door and jumping backward.

“Yeah, you didn’t expect me back until the weekend, did you?” she yelled at him. “I should have known you’d pull some shit like this!”

The woman viciously struck Kai across the face, and he recoiled. I jumped – startled. I wanted to say something, but I was afraid. I don’t know why I felt such fear. I could have ripped her to shreds. Somehow, though, I couldn’t move. I held my breath, and closed my eyes.

“You’re a pathetic piece of shit!” she shouted, and suddenly I smelled the overwhelming scent of liquor emanating from her general direction. She was intoxicated – heavily. “You’re worthless! You can’t even keep the house straight for two goddamned weeks! You have a party as soon as my back is turned? Did you think you could get away with that?”

“No, Mom,” he tried to explain. “It was Van. He...”

“Liar! Don’t blame your cousin for your stupidity! If you were more like Van, we’d all be better off! You’re just trash! That’s all you’ve ever been, and that’s all you ever will be!”

My lower lip began to tremble, and I felt my fists clench. I gritted my teeth together, trying to contain the strange mixture of fear and rage that suddenly began to overtake my body and my mind.

The slight woman grabbed Kai by the hair and shoved him against the counter. She reached over and turned one of the knobs on the stove, and blue flames shot up from one of the eyes. Still holding him by the hair with her left hand, she grabbed Kai's left hand with her right and shoved it toward the flames, and he screamed out in pain.

I was horrified. I wanted to do something, but I couldn't move. I'd been holding my breath for so long, I could feel myself getting lightheaded, and suddenly tears began to well up in my eyes.

I couldn't bear it. My entire body began to tremble violently. I saw brief flashes of a hazy reddish fog before my eyes, and I shut my eyes tightly, trying to block out the scene in front of me. I could feel a surge of violence begin to wash over me, and I was afraid of what I might do. Despite my best efforts to remain undetected, a shuddering growl escaped my lips. I gasped, and covered my mouth, but it was too late. I'd been detected.

The woman wheeled around to face me with fire in her eyes. For a moment, I was afraid she might strike me. I knew my instinct would kick in if she did, and I would hurt her. I didn't want that. Fortunately, she just glared at me in shock for a moment and grabbed her car keys off the table, heading for the door.

"Mom, no!" Kai shouted, chasing after her. "You can't drive like this!"

He tried to grab the keys from his mother's hand, but she snatched them away.

"Don't tell me what to do, you miserable fuck-up! I wish you were dead!" she screamed.

Kai watched helplessly as his mother barged out the door, got into her car, and sped away. For a moment, I was still frozen in place. Then I ran to him and grabbed his hand. Even in the dark, I could see it was badly burned.

“Oh, Kai,” I whispered, horrified.

“I’m fine,” he said, shaking his head. I could feel his hand trembling in mine.

My eyes began to sting as tears filled them. I couldn’t stand this. I’d never in my life witnessed something so completely heartbreaking. Kai’s own mother had hurt him this way, and then he tried to keep her from driving drunk. He was protecting the woman who had just treated him like a worthless piece of trash. A moment earlier, I felt like I could rip her apart.

Kai stood there, motionless. I couldn’t tell what he was feeling until he suddenly collapsed on the floor, sobbing. Instantly, I fell to the floor beside him. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around him. He trembled violently as I held him, and he cried harder than I’d ever seen anyone cry before.

I’d seen a lot of emotional movies, but nothing could have prepared me for this. The vampires I knew were rarely so emotional, so the sensation was foreign. My heart ached for him. I’d never felt such a deep emotion in my entire life. I almost felt human.

I tried to hold him as close to me as I could. I knelt there beside him, trying to pull him into my arms and shelter him. I wanted to comfort him. I wanted to take away what had just happened to him. I’d have given anything to be able to do so at that moment.

I rested my head against his, and I noticed how intoxicating he smelled. His hair had an indescribable scent that was somewhere between fresh-baked bread and French fries. I don’t know how I could even notice after what I’d just witnessed, but it lingered with me.

He sat on the floor with his knees in front of him, wrapping his arms around them as I had at the beach. I remembered how anxious and alone I felt, and I wondered if he was feeling the same way. My left arm wrapped around his arms, and my right arm cradled his head. My right hand reached around to his forehead, and I pushed his long hair gently away from his face.

With his left hand, he grabbed my left wrist, and he reached across with his right arm to pull my left arm tighter to him. He began to rock back and forth as he cried, and I tried to comfort him by whispering softly to him.

“Shh...” I shushed into his ear. “I’m here.”

It was all so unbearable. It was like the pain he was feeling was penetrating my soul – piercing my heart with a razor-sharp blade. I never imagined I could *feel* with such intensity. To go from an empty, nearly emotionless shell to such passion of feeling so rapidly was maddening.

I wanted to pull him into my embrace and let him get lost there. He was so weak and so gentle. All I wanted was to be the person to protect and comfort him. I wanted to shelter him from every horrible thing in the world.

Suddenly, I wanted to kiss him. I knew it was highly inappropriate to want to such a thing at that moment, especially considering we’d just met that night, but the feeling was overwhelming. As I sat there cradling him, I could little understand what was happening. I just knew if I didn’t kiss him I would go crazy.

I didn’t have to worry about impropriety for long. Seconds after I developed the overwhelming urge to kiss him, I felt his lips on mine. He’d pulled me across his lap, and he was pressing his lips urgently against my own. I could feel his tears against my face, and his strong arms wrapped around me and pulled me into his grasp.

It’s still difficult to explain the intensity of that moment. I know I had only known him for a few hours, but in that moment... it felt like a lifetime. As his arms

wrapped around me and his lips searched mine for comfort, I thought of nothing else. Suddenly, the whole world disappeared and there was nothing left but Kai and me.

I felt his fingers tangle in my hair as he struggled to pull me even further in. I gasped aloud, unable to contain the indescribable passion I felt in that kiss. My own fingers wrapped inside his hair, and I allowed myself to become lost in the moment.

As quickly as it started, it was over. He struggled to his feet and backed away from me. I sat in the floor and gawked up at him, unsure what had just happened. One moment, we were kissing in breathless passion, and the next moment he was distant – even cold.

He shook his head slowly, backing away from me one fragile step at a time. I reached my hand toward him, and he recoiled. His deep red hair hung wild and tangled around his face, and his breath was ragged and almost vicious. He wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, tugging at his lips so hard it looked as though it might've hurt. He turned and quickly fled out the back door.

For a long while, I sat in the floor and tried to assess the situation. I hadn't done anything wrong – I was certain of that. Surely it couldn't have been that he hated the kiss. But then I thought maybe it could have been. It was my first kiss, after all. That realization also hit me at that moment. I'd just had my first kiss. And it had been with a human!

More than anything, though, I just wanted to know if Kai was okay. The burn on his hand had been terrible, and I was even more worried about his emotional state. I still couldn't believe what I'd just witnessed. To think that a mother could treat her own son that way – it was unimaginable.

Maybe he wanted to be alone. For a moment, I thought it was best if I just called Will to come pick me up. But I was so overcome with worry about Kai, I couldn't leave. I had to see if he was okay.

I stood up and headed toward the shed. I figured that's where he'd be. There was a faint golden glow coming from the windows. I approached the door with consternation swelling within me, but I summoned the courage to knock gently at the door.

"Go away," he answered, his voice uneven.

"Kai, please," I called to him.

"Leave me alone!" he shouted.

I sighed.

"Kai," I said again. "Please let me in."

"No!" he yelled through the closed door. "I need to be alone!"

I opened my mouth to protest, but I didn't think it would do any good. Still, I couldn't leave him. I pressed my back against the outer wall of the shed and slid down to the ground. I landed with a thud, and I pulled my legs up against me and hugged them close – trying to comfort myself.

Why was he pushing me away? Had I done something wrong? I just couldn't understand it. But I knew I couldn't leave him.

Storm (Blood Haze: Book Two) is now available!

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