

Twelve Stops And Home

Chapter 1

A Little Bit Of Dutch Courage

Sadie

My aunt was getting married.

In the minds of most people, this wouldn't be a particularly momentous occasion. At least, it isn't when you're part of the civilian population. For hunters, though, it usually means one of two things. One, you've learned as much about weaponry and hunting as possible to keep yourself alive long enough to reach adulthood. Or two, it's taken nothing more than sheer dumb luck to keep yourself from being skinned by a werewolf or drained by a vampire.

My aunt's marriage was unusual even by hunter standards, though. It wasn't that this marriage was her second. Nobody gave a damn about that – it was an unfortunate fact of life in the Clans that people died before their time and left their spouses and children behind. No, it was more the fact that she had divorced my Uncle Geoffrey after she had caught him cheating on her with my cousins' nanny, and *then* had decided to remarry. If not for Aunt Rosemary's massive amount of influence as the leader of Clan Albright, it would have resulted in the mother of all scandals. As it stood, the matter had been quietly swept under the metaphorical rug and largely forgotten.

"Your sister is fucking crazy," I informed my mother the afternoon of the wedding. Unfortunately for me and my big mouth, I was rewarded for my opinion with a sharp smack to the back of my head. "Ow!"

"That's quite enough out of your mouth," she reprimanded.

"But she is!" I protested.

"I said *enough*, Sadie. Remember who your aunt is for once in your life – you will hold your tongue and give her the respect her station commands." She gave the back of my dress a final tug, as if she were making sure that the zipper wasn't going to come undone halfway through the ceremony. "Now go and see if that girlfriend of yours is ready yet."

"She isn't my girlfriend," I said automatically, even though I knew very well that the opposite was true.

"Oh, don't protest so much. It's the twenty-first century, you don't need to hide it from everyone." Here she lowered her voice a little. "Besides which, protesting the truth is very unbecoming of someone who might one day be Clan leader."

"They'd never pick me," I said quietly. "I don't have what it takes. Never mind that I'm too young, and that I associate with the civilian population more than any proper hunter should."

My mother merely gave me a small, secretive smile. "Go and hurry her up, and let me worry about whether or not you're good enough to be Clan leader someday."

I resisted the temptation to roll my eyes as I left the dressing room and walked out into the corridor, the long skirt of my dress gathered up in one hand so that I didn't step on and rip it. In my other hand was the handle of my makeup case.

That morning when we had all arrived at the wedding venue, a centuries-old manor in Pennsylvania, the wedding co-ordinator had taken one look at the lot of us and split us up – women and men, hunters and civilians. I had found myself in a large, airy room with most of my female relatives and fellow Clan members. My girlfriend, on the other hand, had been marched off to a room in the same wing of the manor and left to get ready on her own. It was just one of the many things I hated about the world I lived in, and one of the many things I intended to change if I ever became Clan leader. There were only four other doors at this end of the corridor

– two were public bathrooms, while a third opened onto what I was pretty sure was a cleaner’s cupboard. There really was only one place my wayward girlfriend could be.

I stepped up to my chosen door and rapped on it. “Tay, you ready yet?” I called through the wood, and was greeted with silence. I frowned at this – Taylor could be a real chatterbox once you got her going, so it was always a worry when she was quiet. “Tay?” I called out again, and immediately pressed my ear to the door. To my surprise I could hear quiet sniffing. “I’m coming in Tay, all right?”

“Go away!” I heard her shout.

“Nice try Taylor.” I turned the doorknob and pushed the door open, and stuck my head in through the gap just in time to see her turn sharply to look at me. “Hey, are you all right?” I asked her.

“Does it *look* like I’m all right?” she asked, her voice cracking just a little. It was a purely rhetorical question, so I didn’t bother to answer it. Instead I slipped the rest of the way into the room and shut the door behind me, setting my makeup case down on a low table. She was still in her jeans, T-shirt, hoodie and socks, her beat-up Converse sneakers tossed carelessly to one side, and her long blonde hair was still in its customary braid down her back. “I don’t belong here Sadie, you saw how that bitch looked at me this morning!”

“You belong here if I say you do,” I said. “And my aunt adores you, you know that. Screw what some stupid cow of a wedding co-ordinator thinks.” I turned to a clothes rail that stood not an arm’s length away and slid a coat hanger that was draped with a clean white sheet toward me. I could see Taylor eyeing it with a healthy degree of suspicion, one slender blonde eyebrow arched toward her hairline. “Oh, get that look off your face. It’s only for the rest of today. You can go back to trawling YouTube as much as you like once we get home.”

"That's an afternoon and an evening too fucking long," she grumbled as she unzipped her hoodie and shrugged it off her shoulders.

I quickly helped her into her dress and zipped it up the back, and set about undoing her braid. I could tell immediately that she had done her hair that morning while it was still wet or at the very least damp, for while I was pulling the braid apart her hair fell into waves. I wasn't going to need to do a thing with it aside from neatening it up a little.

Once I had run a comb through her hair, I moved to pick up my makeup case again. "Oh *hell* no," she said when she spotted it. "There is no fucking way that you're putting that shit on my face!"

"Stop being such a big baby," I scolded her, and I undid the latches on the case so I could lift it open. I quickly scanned the contents and picked out mascara, eyeliner and lipstick. "And I'm barely going to put any on you. You can take it straight back off again soon as we're done with the ceremony."

"I'm going to hold you to that," she informed me as I led her out of the room and down the corridor to the ladies' room. I needed a mirror for this, if only to make sure my eyes weren't playing tricks on me.

"Have I ever steered you wrong?" I asked. "Don't answer that," I added hurriedly when she opened her mouth. "Let me work my magic, and we can go and stand up in the ceremony."

Taylor's makeup was finished quickly, and I soon moved onto doing my own. "I feel like a cheap whore," I heard her mutter, and I cast a sidelong glance at her. "I probably *look* like one too."

"You only feel that way because you're not used to it." I put my eyeliner on and capped the pencil, and turned her to face me. "You look absolutely gorgeous, Tay. I'm not saying that because you're my girlfriend and I have to say it. I'm saying it because it's true and I *want* to say it. And anyone who tells you otherwise is either blind, an idiot, or a dirty rotten liar."

She managed a very weak smile at this. "That makes me feel a little better."

"Good. That's exactly what I wanted to hear." I reached out and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her left ear. "Come on. Let's go show the masses what a gorgeous girlfriend I've got."

Her smile now became a fully-fledged grin. "After you, then."

Aunt Rosemary was waiting just outside the manor's chapel when Taylor and I finally found our way there. She wore a long cream-coloured dress and had her black curls pulled up on top of her head, with a rose pinned behind her left ear. It was an amazing transformation – her role as Clan leader normally had her running around in either combat fatigues or her ceremonial robes. "There you two are!" she said, relief obvious in her tone. "I was starting to think that you'd got lost somewhere."

"I don't get lost, Aunt Rosemary," I informed her, and tapped my right temple. "Got a damn good compass in here."

"Well, be that as it may, we're running very late. Come on, inside with you both." She pushed gently at my shoulders, her long fingernails digging in just a little.

"Is it just us two?" Taylor asked in a low voice as we began walking down the chapel's nave toward the altar, where my soon-to-be Uncle Derek stood awaiting my aunt.

"Yeah," I replied quietly, my voice just loud enough to be heard over the processional music. "There's three nieces in my family, but I'm the only one who was asked to be part of the ceremony. Neither of my aunt's daughters wanted anything to do with this. For some reason they think Aunt Rosemary is betraying my uncle. Don't know where they got *that* idea from." I rolled my eyes just a little at this.

"They don't sound like very nice people."

"They're not. They're both heinous bitches," I said, and Taylor let out a snicker.

As the ceremony began, I inched a little closer to Taylor and grasped hold of her left hand with my right. Her fingers immediately curled around my hand and squeezed tightly. *This will be us one day*, I thought determinedly. *I'll be Clan leader one day, and I'll marry her – and there won't be a damn thing anyone will be able to do to stop us.*

"What are you thinking about?" Taylor asked me softly.

I didn't even need to consider my response. "About how much I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you," I replied. I gave her a sidelong glance just in time to see her eyes light up, and I bit back a grin. *One day*, I promised. *I swear to you Taylor, one day it'll happen.*

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Two weeks later in the middle of the night, I awoke with a start. My right hand was burning, the pain centred around the base of my ring finger. Or in other words, the exact spot where I wore my Clan ring.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" I nearly shouted, remembering at the very last moment to keep my voice down. Not only did I live in an apartment that had relatively thin walls, but Taylor was also asleep in her bedroom down the hallway. I didn't want to wake her until or unless I deemed it to be an absolute necessity.

Unfortunately for me, that particular decision was quickly taken out of my hands.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the radio I kept on my night table switch on. "Fucking poltergeist," I grumbled and turned to switch it off, but froze when a voice started speaking.

"This is an emergency alert notification for all hunters resident in the San Francisco area. Instructions will follow shortly."

That doesn't sound good, I thought. If my radio was switching itself on in the middle of the night, not even a minute after the burning of my ring against my skin had woken me up, then something monumentally awful was about to happen.

"Shit," I mumbled. There was no way I would be able to get back to sleep now. "This is just *wonderful*."

The voice came over my radio again, and I immediately paid attention. "The Hunters' Council has been advised that the tensions between the vampire and werewolf enclaves have reached flashpoint. All hunters are therefore strongly advised to evacuate from their places of residence to a prearranged safe haven. Hunters should travel in groups of between three and seven people for purposes of safety. Each hunter should carry with them enough food, clothing and water to last one week, along with a cell phone, battery-operated radio, flashlight, spare batteries and a survival kit. All groups should also carry a fully stocked first aid kit. It is further advised that under no circumstances should civilians travel with hunters, unless those civilians would be in danger were they to remain behind."

The instant that my radio fell silent once more, I was up out of bed and getting dressed. My backpack, bicycle and survival kit were all ready to go, as they always were, so it was really only a matter of gathering up everything else I was certain I would need, pulling on my boots and hightailing it to Duncan's place.

Almost as soon as I was dressed, I left my room with my boots and socks in hand and padded barefoot down the hallway toward the kitchen. Guilt crept over me as I passed by Taylor's closed bedroom door. I couldn't leave her behind – my conscience wouldn't allow it. I didn't care what anyone on the Council said. I was bringing her along with me, and if anyone else considered her to be a liability then that was their problem. To hell with rules and regulations.

I tapped lightly on the door before turning the doorknob and quietly pushing the door open. The room beyond was dark, lit only by the glowing blue digits of Taylor's alarm clock. She was asleep, just as I knew she would be, and I felt another surge of guilt.

"Why do those alerts only ever come in the middle of the night?" I grumbled quietly, and set my boots and socks down by the door. I crept into the room, picking my way across the floor, and dropped to my knees by the side of her bed. "Tay, wake up," I whispered, and shook her by the shoulder. "Come on, we have to go."

"What?" she mumbled, sounding very much half-asleep. One eye popped open and she squinted at me. "Sadie?"

"Yeah, it's me. Who did you think I was, your mother?" I gave her a gentle prod. "Up and at 'em – we have less than half an hour to get out of here."

"Sadie, it's three in the fucking morning," she informed me. She sounded less than pleased about being woken up at this hour, and I could hardly blame her for that. "I need to sleep. Leave me alone already."

"You can sleep when we get to Duncan's place." I got back on my feet. "Get dressed, and pack your backpack with enough clothes and other bits and pieces to last at least a week. We can probably send for everything else later on."

"You're making it sound as if we'll never be coming back," she said, and I could see her frown at this.

I bit down hard on my bottom lip. "We might not be, Tay. I don't know yet." I gave her a weak smile, even though I wasn't sure she was able to see it through the darkness. "Come on, up you get. I'll make you some coffee before we head out."

"Thanks, Sadie."

"Anytime, Tay." I bent down again and kissed her quickly. "See you in ten."

Ten minutes later, I'd pulled on my boots and had just finished filling two travel mugs with coffee when Taylor came into the kitchen. She had one strap of her much-abused backpack slung over one shoulder, and was pulling her hair back into a ponytail as she walked. I quickly poured most of what was left in the coffee pot into Taylor's favourite mug and pushed it across the kitchen bench to her. "It's instant, I don't have time to make it properly," I said apologetically.

"It's okay," she said dismissively. "I don't care, so long as I get some." She put her backpack down on the floor and took the mug into her hands. "I know we don't have much time before we have to go, but can I ask you something?"

"Of course you can."

"Exactly what the fuck is going on?"

I didn't answer immediately. Only after I had poured the remainder of the coffee into another mug did I speak.

"There's been a gang war brewing for about the last five years or so," I replied. It really was the best description of the vampires and werewolves – each species was nothing more than the beastly equivalent of a civilian gang. "It's finally about to come to a head, which is why we're evacuating now. Before too long it's going to be far too dangerous to stick around here."

"I can take care of myself, you know," Taylor informed me. She sounded a little insulted.

"I don't doubt that – in fact I know you can. Take it from me, though – you don't *ever* want to get into a fight with either of those gangs, or get caught in their crossfire. It's likely to be the last thing you'll ever do."

We finished our coffees quickly, and I took our mugs to the sink to rinse them. "Got everything you think you'll need?" I asked. "We won't be back until it's totally safe, and I don't know when that will be."

"I've got everything," she replied softly. For the first time I noticed something that worried me a little – Taylor looked absolutely terrified. I was getting her into a situation that I barely understood myself, but she was completely unaware of the mess that we were about to walk into. I hated myself for it, but I couldn't leave her here on her own. She didn't stand a chance by herself.

"Hey..." I left the mugs in the sink and walked up to her, and drew her into a tight embrace. "It's going to be okay, Taylor. I'll make sure you stay safe. They'll have to get past *me* first." I drew back a little and gave her a small smile. "Come on, let's go."

Before we left the apartment, I rummaged around in my backpack and took out a half-filled bottle that I'd stored in there earlier. I had two of them packed away, but one of them was unopened and reserved for one of my friends. I unscrewed the lid and offered it to Taylor. "It's whiskey," I explained when she looked at it suspiciously. "It'll take a bit of the edge off. A little bit of Dutch courage can't hurt, right?"

"Right," she echoed, and took the bottle. Two long swallows later, she handed the bottle back and wiped her mouth off on the back of her hand. I copied her and recapped the bottle, stowing it safely back in my backpack.

"Time to face the unknown," I said, my cheerful tone a little forced, and lifted my backpack onto my shoulders once more. "Once more unto the breach – that's what they say, right?"

Once more unto the breach indeed. It was time to take that final leap into the darkness – and hope that we both made it to the end.

Chapter 2

Cast Adrift

Taylor

"My friends are a little strange," Sadie said once we had reached our destination. I had no idea where exactly we were – after she had driven us across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco, we'd left her car by the side of the road and continued the rest of the way on bicycle. All I knew was that we were standing outside what looked for all the world like a warehouse somewhere in Oakland.

"They can't be any stranger than you," I snarked, my tone an attempt to hide how lost and scared I felt. My world had been rocked to its foundations barely an hour earlier – I had gone from a safe, comfortable life as a shop assistant in a bookstore during weekdays and playing my guitar in coffee shops on occasional weekend evenings, to now essentially being on the run. The sole constant in my life now was Sadie.

"Ha-freaking-ha," was Sadie's response. She mock-scowled at me before closing her eyes briefly. "Duncan I know will be expecting us – you probably won't get to meet Flynn until the morning, though that's probably for the best. Flynn isn't exactly at his best in the middle of the night."

Sadie didn't even have a chance to knock at the door before it slid open, and I automatically shaded my eyes against the light that spilled out of the doorway. Standing there in the doorway was a tall, dark-haired man who was dressed much the same way as Sadie.

"I'm so glad to see you, Dee," the man said. He stepped out of the warehouse and caught Sadie up in an embrace. "I was so worried."

"Me too, Duncan," Sadie said, and for the first time I heard real fear in her voice. "Have you heard much more?"

"Nothing else aside from the broadcast I'm going to assume woke you up." He released Sadie and looked at me. "Who's this, Sadie?"

Sadie's initial response was to grab me by the wrist and pull me forward. "This is my girlfriend, Taylor Hanson. Tay, this is Duncan Clements – he's my main...well, I suppose you'd call him a contact, but he's also a very good friend of mine."

"A pleasure to meet you, Taylor," Duncan said. He held a hand out, and I took hold and shook it. "Inside, both of you – I've been watching the monitors and nobody's followed you, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Can't be too careful right now," Sadie said, and she led me inside. Duncan slid the door shut behind us, and as I looked back over my shoulder I saw him lock it and set what looked like an alarm. "Any news from Flynn yet?"

"Only that he'll be coming here bright and early in the morning. I've also heard from Amy and her crew – they'll be here sometime after lunch to strategise, but they're headed somewhere different so they won't be joining us on the road."

"Did Amy say where they were going?" Sadie asked. We were walking down a central corridor with Duncan leading the way.

"She didn't say, and I didn't ask," Duncan replied. "I think it's probably better that we don't know where each individual group is headed – there's less of a chance of the rest of us being betrayed if someone from a group gets snatched up."

"Good thinking," Sadie said, her tone approving.

Here the corridor ended, and we stepped out into a large, open space that, judging from all of the windows that lined the outer walls, would have been brightly sunlit during the day. It was sectioned off into three distinct spaces – a kitchen and dining area on the left wall, an informal living area in the middle, and to my right what looked like a meeting space. A spiral staircase against the far wall led upstairs.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Duncan said.

“It’s big,” I commented, immediately feeling like an idiot.

To my relief, Duncan laughed. “Yes, it is at that. Would either of you like some coffee?”

“We’re good for coffee, thanks,” Sadie replied.

Duncan’s mouth twisted in a scowl. “Not that instant shit, I hope.”

“It was all I had time to make before we left!” Sadie protested.

“Mmm-hmm,” was Duncan’s response. I could tell that he wasn’t quite convinced. He pointed toward the kitchen. “Go and sit – I’ll make you some *real* coffee.”

“I might pass, actually,” I said. “I’d rather just go and lie down for a while. I’m not used to being awake in the middle of the night.” It wasn’t that I was tired – the coffee was taking care of that for the time being – but I needed a little bit of time by myself. I wasn’t going to be able to get my head around what was happening if I didn’t.

“Sadie, why don’t you take Taylor upstairs?” Duncan suggested. “It’ll be a few hours at least before Flynn makes his way here, so there’s really no point hanging about for much longer.”

“Did he say what time exactly he would be here?” Sadie asked. She was leading me toward the staircase as she spoke.

“Not precisely, but I’m guessing sometime between six and eight in the morning.”

"Sounds good." She gave my hand a tight squeeze. "Let me talk to Taylor for a little while, then I'll be back downstairs for my coffee."

As soon as Sadie and I reached the top of the staircase, she steered me down a short hallway. I caught a quick glimpse out of the corner of my eye of a room that had a bank of monitors against one wall before Sadie pulled me past its doorway and up to a closed door.

"Sadie, wait." I caught Sadie by the elbow as she went to open the door. "I need you to be honest with me here. This is more than just a gang war, isn't it?"

She didn't respond for a few moments. "It's a lot more than a gang war," she admitted finally. "A whole lot more than that. And it's driving me mad that I can't tell you anything specific."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Can't tell me, or *won't* tell me?"

The *second* that question left my mouth, I knew I had stepped out of line. I had long known that if Sadie didn't tell me something, she had a very good reason for it. I felt awful that I had doubted her.

When she turned away and walked back down the hallway without saying another word to me, or even just *looking* at me, I felt even worse.

"Nice going Taylor," I mumbled to myself as I let myself into the room. "You just alienated the one person who even *remotely* means anything to you. I hope you're pleased with yourself right now."

I lowered my backpack carefully to the floor once I had closed the door behind me and turned on the light. The room was plain – a single bed, a desk with a chair, a chest of drawers, and a rug on the wooden floor – but it didn't matter that much, seeing as I was getting the distinct impression that we weren't going to be here for long. Especially considering Sadie's dumping of her car by the side of the road – she wouldn't have done that if there was any need for her to drive it.

I changed out of my jeans and T-shirt back into my pyjamas and toed off my sneakers, and climbed into the bed. For the first time in so long, I felt completely adrift. It was exactly how I'd felt when I was nearly fifteen years old.

I pushed back my covers and got back out of bed, and went over to my backpack. Before Sadie and I had left the apartment, I had remembered almost at the very last moment to grab something that meant the world to me, something that I would have been utterly lost without – a framed picture of my parents and I that I'd kept on my night table. Without even hesitating I prised the back off of the picture frame and took out the photograph inside, sinking down onto the floor so that I could stare at it.

"I'm so lost right now," I said quietly, even though I knew they existed only in a photograph. "My whole world's crashing down around me and I don't know what the hell I'm going to do. I just..." I took in a deep, shuddering breath and squeezed my eyes shut. "I really need you guys right now. I need my mom, and I need my dad, but I know I can't have you. A girl can dream though, right?"

I turned the photograph over and ran the tip of a finger along the words penned there in my aunt's handwriting, written by her because I'd been too distraught and broken at the time to do it myself: *David, Susannah and Taylor Hanson – Christmas 1997.*

I turned the photograph back over again, kissed my fingertips and touched them first to my mother's face, then my father's. It had been thirteen years since my parents had died and I'd been left an orphan, and it burned just as much now as it had back then. I wasn't sure the pain would ever die down completely, but part of me hoped it never would. That way, at least, I knew I could still feel *something*. The photograph went back into its frame, and I replaced the back of it before returning the frame to my backpack.

"I miss you Mom," I whispered. "I miss you Dad. And I love you both. I always will."

* * *

I ended up spending the better part of the next few days hidden away in my temporary bedroom. Sadie still wasn't speaking to me, and I hadn't yet found it in me to apologise for what I'd said the night we'd arrived, so I kept to myself much of the time. The only human contact I had was during the odd meal time.

Just after lunch on our third day at Duncan's place, a knock sounded at my door. I set my laptop to one side and went to answer it, pulling the door open to find Sadie standing there. I noticed right away that she refused to look at me, her dark eyes downcast.

"Duncan and Flynn would like to speak to you," she told me, before turning to head back downstairs. I grabbed her by the shoulder before she could walk further than a few steps.

"I'm sorry for what I said the night we got here," I said, deciding it was high time I acted like an adult. "I was totally out of line – it was childish and petty of me to say it."

"You've got that right," Sadie said. She still hadn't turned to face me.

"I know that you always have a reason for not telling me one thing or another – I should have remembered that. Forgive?"

For almost half a second, I was sure she would tell me to go to hell. To my relief she turned around and gave me a smile.

"Now what kind of girlfriend would I be if I said no?" she asked. I didn't answer her – I knew it was a rhetorical question. She stepped close and drew me close, and I leaned my head on her shoulder and closed my eyes. I didn't feel so lost now.

I could hear a discussion taking place as Sadie and I went downstairs. It was clear from the words being used and the way those words were being said that the discussion in question was about me. Three words in particular made me freeze halfway down the staircase.

"She's a liability."

Behind me, I heard Sadie let out a sigh. "How did I know one of them would come up with that at some point?" I clearly heard her mutter.

"They're talking about me, aren't they?" I asked quietly.

"I wish I could tell you otherwise," Sadie said, her tone apologetic. "Come on. Best go and see what they've got to say."

Almost at the second that Sadie and I stepped over the invisible threshold that separated the meeting area from the rest of the ground floor, the discussion between the people ringing the long meeting table died away. "Oh, don't stop on *our* account," Sadie said sarcastically. "You were having a grand old time chatting away before *we* got here!"

One of the men at the table was the first to speak. "Is it true that you've been fraternising with civilians?" he asked bluntly. "More specifically, *that* civilian?" He nodded toward me, and I felt myself tense up.

"Oh, go fuck yourself Clarence," Sadie spat. "This *civilian* just happens to be the love of my life and one of the very few people who I would sacrifice myself to protect. She deserves the same amount of respect as any of us hunters do. It's people like you who are dragging our world down into the dust."

"*Enough*," Duncan said loudly. "This is neither the time nor the place for arguments about whether someone deserves respect or not. All I'm frankly concerned about is one thing, and one thing only." He turned to face me. "Taylor, I need you to be completely honest with me now. How well can you defend yourself without assistance?"

"I can hold my own in a fight," I replied. "And I can kill when the situation warrants it."

Eyebrows went up around the table, and I rolled my eyes. "I'm not a helpless little girl, you know. I'm a grown woman, and I did taekwondo for sixteen years – earned my black belt and everything." I shifted my weight nervously from my right foot to my left. "I also killed my uncle when I was twenty-one, out of self-defence."

"Okay, so we've established that she can look after herself, against human assailants at the very least," Sadie said. "Can we drop the issue of her being a supposed liability already?"

"You heard what that announcement said, Sadie," one of the women piped up. "No civilians unless their safety would be compromised."

"And I fully believe that Taylor's safety would have been compromised if I'd left her behind," Sadie countered. "I made a judgement call and I'm sticking by it. Besides, you've seen what the gangs do to a hunter whenever they manage to get their hands on one. Imagine what they would do to a civilian, even one with Taylor's skills. Point of fact is that she's mine, and I'll do anything within my power to keep her safe. Even from other hunters."

"You'll have to hide her," another woman informed Sadie.

"Only in the beginning. By the time we reach our second safe house I should have a plan in place."

The meeting broke up after this, and soon only Sadie, Duncan, myself and a second man I didn't recognise were left at the table. The man in question had short light brown hair, and had a coffee mug and a shot glass on the table before him.

"Introductions are in order, I think," Sadie said. "Though you might want to get the neurotic one here some more coffee and whiskey before he tries to talk around Tay and I, Duncan. Get him liquored up well and good."

Duncan barked out a laugh. "Nice, Sadie."

The coffee mug and shot glass were soon filled up, and it wasn't long afterwards that introductions were finally made.

"Taylor, this is Flynn Wilcox," Sadie told me. "He's our local medic – he treats our hunters after scraps with the various gangs, and he also helps us to get civilians out of the country during wars. He also can't talk around the fairer sex unless he's got some alcohol in him. And Flynn, this is Taylor Hanson – I mentioned her to you earlier."

"Nice to meet you, Flynn," I said, feeling suddenly nervous.

"And I you, Taylor," Flynn replied. He gave me a warm and welcoming smile, one I readily returned. I immediately felt at ease around him – and as it turned out, this was to my benefit.

"Has Sadie told you how we help civilians to escape during our world's wars?" Flynn asked me.

I shook my head. "I had no idea about any of this before a few nights ago," I admitted. "She's kept it all hidden from me pretty well."

"As I expected," Flynn said. "It's one of our laws. The two of you aren't married, and so the only way she would have been able to tell you without breaking the law would be if your life was in jeopardy. And right now it is, as I'm sure you can appreciate." I nodded mutely at this – I was well aware of how much danger I was in now, purely because Sadie had chosen to go against official decree by bringing me along.

"How do you help people like me get out of the country?" I asked, deciding it was best to get this part over and done with. There was of course a chance I wouldn't like the answer I got, but I figured it came with the territory.

"With their full consent and awareness, they're given a mild amnesiac that will ensure they have no memory of the journey taken during their escape. In some cases the escapees are sedated for the trip out of the country, but this is rare and usually only happens during the night time."

I was quiet as I took in what Flynn had said. "When do you normally travel?" I asked after a couple of minutes.

"During the day, mostly," Flynn replied. "For this...well, *crisis*, we'll travel at night. There's more surveillance at that time, but fewer patrols – it means there will be less of a chance that we'll be pinged for having a civilian in our presence."

"Could I have a little time to think it over?" I asked. "It's a lot to take in, and I don't want to make the wrong choice."

"I can give you until tomorrow morning," was Flynn's response. "We're on a tight schedule – we need to leave as close to sundown tomorrow as we possibly can."

"Okay," I agreed. This was more daunting than I ever imagined it could be – I was being given a choice between having my memory erased or sleeping for the duration of the first part of our journey. Both of them had their advantages.

Duncan and Flynn disappeared to other parts of the warehouse shortly afterward, leaving Sadie and I to talk. "What do you think I should do?" I asked her. "Either one could work, I think, but I'm definitely wary about having my memory tampered with."

"This has to be wholly your decision," Sadie cautioned me. "I can't have any input in what you decide to do – I can only advise. But I will say that I've done both – each method has its advantages and disadvantages." She toyed with a pen that had been left on the table. "I much prefer sedation," she said at last. "Taking the amnesia drug...it's jarring. You know something's missing but you can't quite put your finger on it. Sedation is far more natural in my eyes, and Flynn is a genius at it – it's just chemically-induced sleep, nothing more than that."

I considered what Sadie had just told me. The more I thought about it, I was leaning more and more toward sleeping for the duration of the drive.

"I should probably think about it overnight," I finally said. "I don't want to regret the decision I make."

"Good thinking. Whatever you pick, that's likely the method that will be used during each drive between safe houses until I figure out a way to disguise you." Sadie's hand reached out toward me, and she caught up the tail of my braid between her fingers.

"You're not touching my hair," I said automatically.

"I might not have any choice in the matter. Cutting your hair might be the only way that you can escape detection, at least in the very beginning. I know how attached you are to it, and I know you've been growing it out for a long time, but we all have to make sacrifices sometimes. Cutting all your hair off, that might be one of those sacrifices. And it will grow back, remember?"

"I know it will. It's just...my mom really liked me with long hair, that's all. I mostly keep that way because of her."

"I think I understand a little." She gave me an encouraging smile. "I think you'll fit right into my world – family is important to us. I'll make a hunter out of you yet."

Chapter 3

To Sleep, Perchance To Dream

Sadie

Taylor made her decision late the next morning.

"I think it would be best if I were sedated for the trip to the first safe house," she told Flynn during lunch. "I..." I watched her gaze lower to her feet, and her fingers start to worry at the hem of her T-shirt. "I don't like the idea of having my memories tampered with. And I think otherwise, there'd be too much of a risk of me waking up halfway through the drive." She walked over to the kitchen table and took a seat next to me. "I have nightmares a lot of the time, of my uncle."

"The uncle you killed?" Duncan asked, and Taylor nodded her confirmation.

"The same one. My parents' wills stated that in the event of their deaths, if I was underage at the time I was to go and live with my aunt and uncle. I was a week away from my fifteenth birthday when they died, and so I was sent to live with my Aunt Elizabeth and my Uncle William in New York. My aunt was amazing for the three years I lived with them, but my uncle..." She wrapped her arms around herself and hunched her shoulders a little. "Toward my aunt and my cousins he was completely loving, but toward me he was abusive and extremely controlling. He dictated my every move – how I travelled to school, who I was allowed to be friends with, what I was permitted to spend my spare time doing, even how I dressed. If I stepped even one toe out of line, he beat me."

"Jesus Christ," I whispered. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I've been trying to forget, to be honest. Not the easiest thing in the world." She gave me a weak smile. "I finally managed to escape when I got accepted to college in San Francisco, and I

didn't see my uncle again until he tracked me down at my apartment three years later." Her eyes dropped closed. "I shouldn't have opened the door to let him in, I know that now. As soon as he was inside he came at me with the hockey stick I kept just inside the door, and he started to belt me with it."

"Holy fuck," Duncan said. "I can understand why you killed him."

Taylor nodded again. "When he tried to strangle me, I managed to grab a knife from the draining rack on the sink, and I stabbed him to death. He would have killed me if I hadn't. There wasn't even any consideration of sending me to prison – it was clear to anyone with half a brain that I'd acted in self-defence."

"I wish you had told me this," I said to her, my voice low enough so that only she and I could hear. "You're meant to be able to tell me anything, remember?"

"Like I said, I've been trying to forget," she replied.

"Focus, please," Duncan said sharply, and Taylor and I fell silent. "As we discussed yesterday, we'll be leaving as close to sundown as we possibly can. Our first stop is in Bakersfield, about a four-and-a-half to five hour drive from here. We'll leave at around eight-thirty tonight, and provided we don't stop very often or for too long during the drive we should arrive at the safe house between one and one-thirty tomorrow morning. Theo and Marie will meet us there – Flynn will be calling them as we leave to let them know that we're on our way." He opened the notebook that sat on the table in front of him. "Flynn, I need you to wait until about half an hour prior to our departure before you sedate Taylor – we have a lot to do this afternoon and evening, and if we're to leave on time I need all hands on deck."

Flynn nodded. "I can do that."

After the lunch dishes had been cleared away, we got to work packing the van Flynn had driven over in with everything we were likely to need for our trek cross-country. It was a daunting task

– we had no idea exactly how long we would be on the road. Our destination was fixed, but the route wasn't. There was no telling what could get in our way – the van could break down, we could be ambushed by a hunter patrol, a pack of vampires or werewolves could attack us...I shook my head to dispel those thoughts. We would stay safe – so long as we stayed together, we would stay safe.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I looked over at Taylor. The two of us had just finished sliding a long steel case into the back of the van, locking it into place against the interior wall so that if we stopped suddenly it wouldn't go flying.

"I'm trying not to think about everything that can go wrong," I admitted. "Because really, when you think about it? All four of us are putting ourselves in serious danger here. We pretty much are the human embodiment of stupidity." I barked out a laugh and slid down the side of the van so that I was sitting on the concrete of the warehouse's loading area. "There is so much that could go wrong, and not even all of the protective runes and sigils in the hunter repertoire could save us." I looked up at Taylor. "Are you scared?"

I half-expected her to shake her head, but instead she nodded. "I'm still pretty scared, Sadie. I mean..." She came up next to me and lowered herself onto the concrete next to me, propping herself up against the van's rear wheel. "Flynn is going to put me to sleep for the whole time we're on the road. What if I don't wake up? Hell, what if I stop breathing, and what if my heart stops? I could *die*, Sadie. I don't want to die like that! I want to go down *fighting*, for fuck's sake."

"And I know you do. I know you do, Tay." I brushed aside a few locks of her hair that had escaped from their ponytail and tucked them behind her ears. "But it happens sometimes. People have died under sedation, though not on Flynn's watch. And you know, if you *do* stop breathing, Flynn will be able to handle it. That much I can promise you. All right?"

"All right," she said softly, but I could tell by the way she was biting down on her bottom lip that she was still somewhat unconvinced.

"Look, I'll tell you what – I'm going to be there when Flynn puts you under, and I'll try my best to be there when he brings you around again. Does that make you feel a little better about this?"

She was quiet for a few moments. "It does, yeah," she answered at last.

"Good." I stood up and extended my hand down to help her up. "Come on. We should get back to packing up."

We finally finished packing the van at around seven-thirty, with the only objects left to be loaded being our backpacks. Dinner had been limited to what we could grab on the run, each of us still being very busy with getting ready to hit the road.

"You might want to go and get changed," I suggested quietly to Taylor once the van's rear door was closed and locked. "Take it from me – you don't want to be wearing anything particularly tight or that's got a lot of zips, seams or buttons in it." I eyed her jeans pointedly. "Those are going to be very uncomfortable to wake up in."

"Good point." She gave me a smile, one that didn't completely reach her eyes, and headed back inside. I stood there for a few moments watching her leave before going after her.

Not even ten minutes later she had changed out of her jeans and T-shirt into what were essentially her pyjamas – long and loose pants, and a sleeveless top. "Sadie, can you do something for me real quick?" she asked as she folded and stashed her clothes in her backpack.

"Of course I can."

She held out her hairbrush and an elastic band. "Braid my hair for me?"

I managed at the last moment to bite back a laugh. "Turn around," I instructed, twirling my right index finger around in the air. She did as asked, and I started pulling the brush through her hair.

"Normal or French braid?"

"Just a normal braid."

"You got it."

She looked back over her shoulder at me and managed a small smile before facing forward again. "Thank you, Sadie."

I gathered all of her hair up in my left hand, leaned forward and kissed her just below her right ear. "Anytime, Tay," I said, and began to braid her hair.

When I was done, I led her downstairs to one of the two rooms at the front of the warehouse's ground floor. One of them was Duncan's office and the larger of his two surveillance rooms, while the other had been set aside as a clinic and laboratory for Flynn to work in. It was the door of this second room that I knocked on.

"Come in," Flynn called. I pushed the door open and guided Taylor inside, and closed the door behind us. "Ah, there you two are," he said without looking up or turning around from the lab table he was working at. I opened my mouth to ask how he knew it was us before remembering that there was a mirror on the wall above that particular lab table. In one of the back pockets of his jeans I could see the hipflask he always carried with him – full to the brim with whiskey no doubt. "Take a seat and I'll be with you shortly."

Whatever it was he was busy with, he was finished quickly. "I'm going to check your heartbeat and breathing before we begin," Flynn said as he snagged his stethoscope from a side table.

"Hop up on the bed for me, please."

“What exactly will you be doing to me?” Taylor asked as she climbed up on the clinic’s lone bed and perched herself on the edge, swinging her feet back and forth. Flynn pushed the back of her top up around her shoulders and stuck the earpieces of the stethoscope in his ears.

“Take a deep breath and hold it,” Flynn instructed before he answered her question. “I’ll be putting you on an IV of a sedative medication that will keep you asleep at least until we reach the safe house. It’s entirely up to you whether or not I keep you on the medication until morning. Though based on what you have said about your nightmares, I think it may be a good idea to continue sedation throughout the night. Are you on any anti-anxiety medication for your nightmares?” he asked, and Taylor shook her head. “Okay, we’ll figure something out – I don’t want to sedate you every night.” I saw him raise an eyebrow in amusement. “You can let that breath out now.”

“What if I stop breathing while I’m sedated?” Taylor asked almost as soon as she had released the breath she had been holding. “I know it could happen and it terrifies me.”

“It’s likely that you won’t stop breathing, but if you do I can put you on a ventilator – it’ll keep you alive until you can breathe on your own again.”

Flynn continued to listen to Taylor’s heartbeat and breathing for the next couple of minutes.

“Everything sounds good to me,” he said when he was done.

A knock sounded at the clinic door. It opened to admit Duncan. “We leave in ten minutes,” he told us. “Is everything ready to go?”

“Just about,” Flynn replied. “I’m going to need help carrying everything out to the van when we leave – Sadie should be able to carry Taylor, but I have more equipment than I have hands.”

“Just let me know when you need a hand,” Duncan replied. He pulled up a chair and sat down on it, and Flynn nodded before getting to work.

"This may sting a little," he told Taylor, his tone apologetic, before sticking a needle into the back of her left hand. I had to look away – I had never been able to watch IVs being placed, whether my own or others'.

"You can look now, Sadie," Taylor said around a minute later. She sounded somewhat amused. "It doesn't hurt," she said. "It just feels weird."

It wasn't very long until Flynn had the sedative hooked up to Taylor's IV line. "Just lie down and relax," he instructed. "It won't be long now."

I shifted my chair closer to Taylor's bedside and took up her right hand in both of mine. The fingers of my left hand I threaded through hers, and I rubbed circles on the back of her hand with my right thumb.

"It's going to be okay," I told her. "You'll be okay."

"I know," she murmured. I could tell that the sedative was beginning to kick in. "S'long as you're with me, I'll be okay." Her eyes fell closed for the briefest of moments, popping straight back open again a second later. "Jesus Christ I'm tired..."

"So go to sleep, then," I teased gently. "I swear to you, the first thing you see when you wake up will be my face."

"Good." She gave me a sleepy smile before closing her eyes. Her hand loosened on mine and her breathing slowed and evened out, and I knew she had fallen asleep.

"What now?" I asked Flynn. I wasn't prepared to move or let go of her hand until I knew exactly what was going to happen next.

"Keep an eye on her for the next few minutes," he replied. "Make sure she doesn't stop breathing. We can go once she's stable."

I nodded mutely and let go of her hand. The last few days had seen her more or less completely on edge, even during sleep, and I could hardly blame her for that. Now, though, she finally looked relaxed. The worst part in my eyes, in all honesty, was that it had taken chemicals to erase all her worries and fears – even if only for a few hours.

About five minutes later I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked up to see Flynn behind me. “She’s still breathing,” I reported, and I saw him visibly relax.

“Thank heavens for that.” He turned to Duncan. “Ready when you are, Duncan.”

Until that night, I could never have imagined I would find myself in this position – carrying my girlfriend through the warehouse to the loading area and Flynn’s waiting van. It was a little awkward – Taylor wasn’t exactly petite, with long arms and even longer legs, and I was beginning to wonder how she was going to fit on the backseat of the van. I’d always known that necessity was the mother of invention, though, and I was sure we could figure something out. Duncan walked behind me, carrying Taylor’s backpack over one shoulder and holding the clear plastic bag full of sedative that was connected to Taylor’s IV up above his head with his opposite hand. Flynn walked ahead, his arms protectively cradling a cardboard box full of medical instruments and vials of medication. He had already loaded the rest of his equipment into the van while Duncan and I had finished up in the clinic.

“Watch your step,” Duncan cautioned as we came to the back entrance of the warehouse. I glanced downwards just long enough to make sure I wasn’t going to trip on the step down into the loading area, looking back up again as I walked toward the van.

Flynn put his box down on the concrete once we had all drawn level with his van and slid the back door open. “I’ll take that,” he said, and took the IV bag from Duncan. I watched as he climbed inside the van and hung the bag from a hook on the interior wall. That was my cue to lift Taylor into the van and onto the backseat. Flynn and I managed to get her settled without too much difficulty, buckling all three seatbelts on the backseat around her as a precaution.

"Make sure you hang on tight if you're going to be sitting there," Duncan cautioned as I settled myself into place on the floor of the van with a cushion between my back and the van's interior wall and a pillow under my backside, both of them nicked from the warehouse. There was nowhere else for me to sit, besides which I wanted to stay close to Taylor. I knew she was so deeply asleep that nothing short of an earthquake could rouse her, but I wanted her to know (even if only subconsciously) that she wasn't alone. I knew that it was one of her greatest fears. And if being close to her meant parking myself on the van floor without a seatbelt, then so be it.

"I will," I promised. For good measure I braced my right foot against the side of the driver's seat. Duncan nodded and gave me a tight smile, and slid the door closed.

"This is Hunter Wilcox of Oakland Command reporting in," Flynn was saying into the handset of a CB radio as the front passenger door opened and Duncan pulled himself up into the van. "Bakersfield Command, do you read me? Over."

"Hunter Wilcox, this is Hunter Geraghty of Bakersfield Command – we read you loud and clear. Over."

I quite distinctly heard Flynn let out a sigh of what could only be described as relief. "Good to hear, Bakersfield. Oakland One is ready and preparing to leave for the first safe house."

"Roger that Oakland One. What's your ETA?"

"One-thirty Thursday morning at the latest." The van's engine roared to life. "On our way, Bakersfield Command."

"Understood, Oakland One. Bakersfield One will be notified of your impending arrival. Over."

"Roger that Bakersfield. Over and out." The CB radio fell silent, and Flynn hooked the handset onto the side of the ceiling-mounted receiver. "Let's get this show on the road."

I looked out of the opposite window as Flynn drove out of the warehouse's rear driveway into the street. The sun had set now, and the blue summer sky was streaked with pink, purple and orange. It would have made for a spectacular photograph if I hadn't been so preoccupied with trying to outrun the vampire and werewolf packs. I felt the tiniest stab of regret at having left my photography gear in the apartment – Taylor had managed to remember to pack her laptop, so how I'd forgotten my camera was beyond me.

But there was no point in worrying about it now. It was time to focus on what lay before me – getting myself, Duncan, Flynn and Taylor across the country without getting pinged or ambushed, and figuring out some way of disguising the fact that a civilian was travelling with us in direct contravention of the Council's official emergency decree.

I reached up for Taylor's right hand and threaded my fingers through hers. In my ear I could hear her breathe, right now one of the most comforting and reassuring sounds in the world, and I subconsciously altered my own breathing to match hers. It wasn't very long until I too fell asleep, my early morning and all of the hard work I had done that day finally catching up to me.

Chapter 4

Hiding In Plain Sight

Taylor

I could feel a warm, oddly reassuring weight against my back as I drifted awake. Even though I was still in the plane between sleep and wakefulness, I could immediately tell that I wasn't in Flynn's clinic or even in his van travelling to the first safe house – for one, whatever it is that I was sleeping in was actually comfortable, and it was also completely stationary.

"Sadie?" I mumbled, not wanting to open my eyes just yet.

"Yeah?" A hand I recognised as Sadie's crept over my shoulder, fingertips sweeping across my face.

"Am I awake?"

An amused chuckle. "Open your eyes and see for yourself."

"I don't want to."

"You're going to have to open them sooner or later."

I sighed and rolled over onto my back, and opened my eyes to yet another unfamiliar ceiling. "I hate waking up," I grumbled.

Sadie didn't respond to this. Instead, she sat up and reached for something that was under her pillow – her phone, as it turned out. "I'm going to call Flynn and let him know you're awake, so he can come and give you a quick once-over. He wants to make sure you're all right before he lets you get up."

"I'm *fine*, Sadie."

"Let's just make sure, okay? It's better to be safe than sorry."

I scowled at her. "That's so fucking cliché."

"Cliché or not, you're getting checked over before you leave this room. We can't afford to have any of us out of commission unless it's completely unavoidable."

"You sound like my aunt," I mumbled.

"Someone has to."

I raised myself up on my elbows and looked over at Sadie. She gave me a smile and leaned in to kiss me on the forehead. "You know I only do this because I worry about you," she reminded me gently.

I snorted softly. "I'm older than you, Sadie. If anything I should be doing the worrying."

"Not by much, though." She now proceeded to flip her phone open, and she started tapping away at the keypad.

It wasn't long before Flynn had given me a once-over and the subsequent okay to get up and on with my day. Unlike the first few days at Duncan's usual base of operations, though, life at the Bakersfield safe house wasn't a holiday – every minute was focused on getting to the next stop on the journey unscathed. First up was a meeting in the safe house's kitchen.

"I spent most of last night during the drive here trying to work out how we could hide Taylor from any hunter patrols that we might come across," Duncan said to begin that morning's meeting. We sat around a scrubbed wooden table that had a crystal vase of dried flowers as a centerpiece. "Fact of the matter is that we were *exceedingly* lucky last night not to get pinged. Regular patrols haven't yet started, but by the time we head off it's highly likely they will have."

"So basically, we need to come up with a way to hide her *today*," Sadie added. "We'll be leaving for the next safe house tomorrow evening, and we can't risk travelling any further without making sure that Taylor is fully hidden."

"How do they know who she is, though?" Marie asked. She and her husband Theo, both of them hunters, owned the safe house we were currently staying in – it was a Gothic-style mansion on the outskirts of Bakersfield that had been heavily fortified, ringed by a high brick wall that was topped with what I had been told was electrified barbed wire. A heavy-looking and ornate security gate barred the way into the grounds.

"She was a bridesmaid at my aunt's wedding two weeks ago," Sadie replied. "My Clan is massive, and all but a few members were present during the ceremony. They know who Taylor is, they know what she looks like..." she trailed off, pausing briefly. "And they know she isn't a hunter. That's why we need to hide her. She's not helpless, but she's still very vulnerable – she's in danger from not just the gangs, but from our fellow hunters."

"Have you given any thought to initiation?" Theo asked.

Sadie nodded. "Many times. The moment needs to be right, though."

"What's this about initiation?" I asked, deciding it was time I spoke up. I didn't like the sound of that particular word one bit. If this was something that would be affecting me directly, then I needed to know what I was in for.

"Civilians who marry a hunter are required to be initiated prior to the wedding ceremony in order to be considered full members of our society," Marie explained. "You and Sadie are hoping to marry one day, correct?"

"That's our intent, yes," I replied. "So what you're saying is that before I can marry Sadie, I have to go through *initiation*?"

"I truly wish it didn't have to be that way," Marie said. "But only a vote by the Hunters' Council can change that particular law, and most who are chosen to serve on the Council are quite conservative. They consider the initiation requirement to be enough of a turn-off to civilians so that they won't 'taint' our society." She eyed me. "Though I can already tell that you're determined to marry Sadie no matter what you have to do to make it happen."

"I think that's an understatement," Sadie said. "Initiation is a moot point right now, to be honest – Taylor's birthday is in March, and it's the middle of June right now. It's going to be at least eight months before we can even *consider* an initiation ceremony. Anything we do until we get to the compound has to be purely cosmetic in nature."

Marie now rose from her seat. "Stand up," she said to me, "and unbraid your hair for me."

"I'll do it," Sadie said. I got up out of my chair, and Sadie came around behind me. She had my braid undone quickly, her fingers combing through my hair. My eyes closed involuntarily every time her fingertips touched my head.

"Stand out in the middle of the room so that I can get a good look at you," Marie directed once my hair was loose and hanging down my back once more. I was so used to keeping it in a braid or a ponytail that having it in its natural state, as it were, was a little unnerving. Once I was where she wanted me to stand, Marie then proceeded to walk in a circle around me.

"How long have you been growing your hair?" she asked me.

"Since I was almost in my teens," I replied. "I keep it this way because of my mother. It's sort of my personal memorial to my parents."

"You're an orphan?" Marie asked, and I nodded.

"It'll be fourteen years at the beginning of next March," I replied.

Marie now took a long stick from the left sleeve of her shirt – to my eye it looked very much like a magic wand. “I’m only going to try a few illusions,” she said when my gaze locked onto it and I felt my eyes narrow. “I won’t touch your hair without your express permission.” Her hand landed on my left shoulder, and she guided me over to stand in front of a mirror that was hanging on a wall of the kitchen.

Most of the illusions Marie tried out were either little more than variations on my usual hairstyle or made me look far younger than my twenty-eight years. She dispelled the last of the illusions with a sigh of what could only be described as defeat and tucked her wand back into her sleeve.

“May I suggest something?” Sadie asked.

“Be my guest,” Marie replied, and I shrugged. Right now I didn’t care *what* they did to my hair, if it meant I could sit down.

Sadie came up behind me and proceeded to gather all of my hair up in her hands. I watched and felt her tuck her hands up behind my head. That one simple action produced a complete transformation – I looked like a completely new person.

“We cut it all off,” she said, “and leave just enough length that she can still tie it back in a ponytail. We’d still need to do a few other things, but it’s a start.”

I stared at my temporarily short-haired reflection and bit my bottom lip. “I feel like I’m betraying her,” I said softly.

“I don’t think your mother would feel that way if she was still around,” Sadie said. “If she was anything like my mother is, she would love you and be just as proud of you no matter how long or short you kept your hair.”

She’s right, you know, the ever-present small voice in the back of my mind whispered. *Your mother wouldn’t give a damn if you cut all your hair off. That wouldn’t matter a bit to her.*

"Cut it off," I said. "And make sure it's short."

"Are you absolutely positive?" Sadie asked. "Because this will be no illusion – once it's cut, it's cut. It'll have to grow back on its own."

"Just do it before I lose my nerve completely," I said.

From somewhere in the kitchen Marie produced a pair of steel dressmaker's shears that looked wickedly sharp. I felt my hair being pulled back into a low ponytail at the very base of my neck, and I swallowed hard as the blades of the shears were placed against my skin. They were ice-cold, and I dearly hoped that the hand of whoever it was that was wielding them didn't slip. I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to see my hair being cut. "How short are you cutting it?"

"About shoulder length," Sadie replied.

"Cut it shorter than that."

I felt the ponytail tighten as the elastic band was drawn closer to my head. "How's that? And keep in mind that if it's not short enough, I can cut it shorter."

"That feels better."

Almost without any warning at all, the shears were at my neck again, and I heard the dull *snick* of the blades as they cut through my hair. "You can open your eyes now," Sadie said. She was fiddling around with what was left of my hair as she spoke.

I'd never been more reluctant to open my eyes than I was right at that moment. Subconsciously I knew that Sadie would never have mangled my hair, but the fear was there nonetheless. *Oh, grow up and open your damn eyes*, I scolded myself, and I finally allowed myself to look in the mirror. What I saw there surprised me.

My hair was *curly*. The sheer length of my hair had weighed them down for so long that I'd believed my hair was dead straight, but it seemed that wasn't the case. My head was covered in a riot of loose blonde curls, and I hadn't even needed to break out my curling wand.

"I can straighten it for you later if you like," Sadie offered. "But it looks nice this way. It's different."

I tentatively touched my hair, as if I were afraid that the slightest bump or knock would make it all fall out. "It *feels* different," I said. "Not as heavy."

"Think of all the money you're going to save on shampoo and conditioner now," Sadie commented. She leaned forward and rested her chin on my right shoulder, looping her arms around my waist. "You look fucking *amazing*, Taylor. And I'm not just saying that." Here her gaze drifted upward, to meet that of my reflection. "Next, we need to do something about your eyes. How does grey sound to you?"

* * *

We left Bakersfield the next evening. I had no idea where exactly we were headed on this particular leg of the journey, and nor did I know the route we would be taking. I only knew our eventual destination – Philadelphia. And the only reason I had any idea of that was because I had cornered Sadie just after lunch that afternoon.

"Where exactly are we headed?" I'd asked her in the safe house's upstairs bathroom. "And I don't mean the next safe house either – that's of no concern to me. What's our final destination?"

"Philadelphia. A few of the Clans have a compound there, just outside of the city – it's sort of like a little town, except that it's got a dirty great big wall around it. It's one of the safest places in the United States."

"For hunters, you mean."

"For *everyone*. Civilians as well as hunters. Nobody will give a damn there that you're not fully part of my world just yet. Come March next year you will be, but we'll worry about that when the time comes."

That Sadie was so sure I would be accepted as part of her world one day made me smile every time she made mention of it to me. It was a not-so-tangible reminder that I was well and truly adored – and that I always would be.

But now we were on the road again – and this time, I was awake and fully aware of my surroundings. Part of me wished Flynn had knocked me out again, because even though I was awake it didn't mean I was entirely comfortable. My eyes itched from the contact lenses I wore to change my eye colour, my head ached, my throat was stinging, and it was getting increasingly difficult to breathe properly. I suspected part of it was my constant worry that one of the hunter patrols I was positive was spread out around the country would swoop down on the van and spirit me away into the night.

"Sadie," I whispered, hoping she was able to hear me over Duncan and Flynn's murmured discussion in the front of the van.

"Yeah?" she said. I could hear the springs inside the backseat creaking as she shifted around to look at me (or so I assumed, considering it was dark).

"D'you think we might be able to stop for a little bit? I need a break and some air."

Almost in response, Sadie shifted forward. "Duncan, we need to stop for a few minutes," she said.

"We're on a tight schedule, Sadie – we can't stop. They're expecting us to arrive by two o'clock."

"Duncan, unless you want to bear witness to one of Taylor's panic attacks, I would suggest that you stop this damn tin can on wheels and let her out for a few minutes." Sadie's tone was dangerous – it promised dire consequences and a lot of pain if Duncan didn't do as he was told.

"Okay, okay. Flynn, find somewhere to pull over."

I could soon feel the van slowing down and pulling across to the right. Almost at the moment that Flynn had stopped driving, I had my seatbelt unbuckled and was pulling the back door open so that I could get out. Sadie grabbed hold of my arms a split second before I hurled myself out onto the side of the highway.

"Easy does it," she cautioned. "Let me get my flashlight first, you don't know what's out there."

"Or who," Flynn added. "Be careful you two, I'm pretty sure we passed by a patrol a couple miles back."

Sadie had now found her flashlight and flicked it on. Weak, dull orange light lit up the van, and she gave the base of the flashlight a smack with the open palm of her right hand. "Needs a new battery," she said. Even despite this, there was enough light for the two of us to see by. "We'll be careful Flynn, don't worry."

Because of how weak the battery in Sadie's flashlight was, we ended up sticking close by the van. More to the point, we sat down on the highway's shoulder against the rear bumper so that we had a clear view of any cars that might come up behind us.

"Feeling any better?" Sadie asked once we'd been out of the van for a couple of minutes.

"Much better," I replied. "I was starting to feel a little claustrophobic in there – it was getting hard to breathe." I ran a thumbnail along a seam in my jeans. "I could do with a drink, though."

"Watch your head," Sadie said as she stood up. I ducked down low against the gravel just in time for Sadie to open the van's rear door and begin rooting around in one of the boxes we had stowed in there. She soon found what she was after and closed the door again. "Water okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine," I said, and took the bottle she handed to me. I unscrewed the lid and proceeded to drain most of the bottle of its contents, not even stopping to breathe. "Can I ask you something?" I asked when I was finished.

"Of course you can."

"What is it with you and Duncan?"

Sadie's head whipped toward me, the braid she had worked her dark brown hair into swinging around as her head moved, and in the flashlight's orange glow I saw her eyes widen. "How did you know there was anything between us?" she asked in a low voice. "I've never told anyone about that."

"Woman's intuition," I said simply. "Come on, out with it."

She didn't speak for almost a full minute. "We dated for a few months, about ten years ago."

"So it was a high school thing, then?"

"Pretty much, yeah. And dating Duncan, well..." She seemed to shift uncomfortably, though I couldn't tell if it was because the subject was a sticky one or because her backside was turning numb from sitting on the hard asphalt. "He's a wonderful guy, and a great friend, but..."

"There was no spark there," I finished.

"In the beginning there was. But it was nothing like it is with you. Duncan made me feel loved, and he made me feel like a princess. That was wonderful for the time we were together. The whole time, though, I always felt like there was something missing. Now that I've got you, though...I've found my missing piece. I feel like I've finally found my way home."

I was about to open my mouth to respond to this when I was blinded by a bright, white light. I instinctively raised my hands to my face to block out the worst of it. Beside me Sadie was doing exactly the same as I was.

"Such a *touching* story," a voice said mockingly. Slow handclapping accompanied the voice. "On your feet, both of you."

"*Duncan!*" Sadie yelled out. "We've got company!" Her voice was panicked. For half a second I wondered why, right up until the light finally died down and I could see again.

"Oh, *fuck me,*" I whispered when I saw the embroidered badge that the man standing in front of us wore on his jacket, one that Duncan had warned me to look out for – a falcon that held an arrow clutched in its talons. It could only mean one thing – we'd been pinged.

It wasn't very long until all four of us stood in a line on the side of the highway. The hunter that had caught us was pacing back and forth in front of us, hands clasped behind his back. He finally stopped right in front of me and proceeded to grab me roughly by the chin.

"Full name and Clan, if you please," he said. It wasn't a request.

"Jordan Taylor Hanson, of Clan Stanhope," I said, fervently hoping my voice wasn't shaking. It was a lie and I knew it – with no time to come up with a proper lie, I'd used my mother's maiden name and hoped for the best.

"The rest of you – full name and Clan. *Now!*" the hunter ordered.

"Duncan James Clements, of Clan Noonan," Duncan replied.

"Flynn Michael Wilcox, of Clan Agostini."

"Sarah Dominique Albright, of Clan Albright," Sadie finished, using what I knew to be her proper name.

"All right then. What are the four of you doing by the side of the highway? These are dangerous times."

Neither of us spoke for a few moments. "We're on our way to a safe house," Flynn said at last. "Took a break because T-Jordan was about to have a panic attack. But she's okay now – right, Jordan?"

I nodded. "Completely fine now."

"Then may I suggest you all pile back into your...*vehicle*...and keep on your way to your safe house. You never know what's just up around the next bend." The hunter flashed us a nasty grin. "Get the hell out of here."

"Yes, sir," Duncan said, and the four of us all but ran back to the van and piled in. "That was close."

"Why did that have to happen tonight, of all nights?" Sadie asked. She looked at me. "But at least we know your disguise works."

"Thank Isis for that," Flynn said.

A voice came over the CB radio just then – one that sounded somewhat panicked. "Oakland One, this is Vegas Six – come in Oakland One."

Flynn grabbed hold of the radio's handset and spoke into it. "This is Hunter Wilcox of Oakland One, is everything all right?" he asked.

"We need you to come to the safe house as quickly as you can, Oakland One," the voice informed Flynn. "The current situation has escalated."

"All right, thank you Vegas Six – we're on our way. Over and out."

At the second Flynn replaced the radio handset on its hook, the text message tone for Sadie's phone sounded off. She worked it out of her pocket and flipped it open. "Oh no," she breathed as she read the message.

"Sadie, what happened?" Duncan asked.

"The war's begun," she replied, and handed the phone to me. As I read the words of the text message, what felt like a massive block of ice formed in the pit of my stomach.

Vampires have made first strike – civilian found drained of blood in Times Square. Get to your safe houses and/or compounds asap.

"That could have been me," I whispered as Sadie rescued her phone from my hands and passed it to Duncan. "That could have been *me*..."

"But it wasn't," Sadie reminded me. "And if I have my way, it never will be." She pulled me close and kissed the top of my head. "Let's get going – and let's see if we can think of a way to keep Taylor safe before we get there."

Chapter 5

Servatis A Periculum, Servatis A Maleficum

Sadie

The rest of the journey to our next safe house was a quiet, tense one. None of us spoke a word for what felt like an eternity – we were all too freaked out by not only how lucky we had been not to be taken into what the hunter patrols liked to call ‘protective custody’, but also by how quickly the conflict between the gangs had degenerated into all-out war. Beside me I could feel Taylor shaking, trembling like a leaf being buffeted by a strong wind. I knew the news that a civilian had been found dead of exsanguination in Times Square terrified her – we all knew that had recent events happened differently, that civilian might well have been her. As tragic as the circumstances were, though, I finally felt completely vindicated that I had made the right decision in bringing Taylor along.

“Why don’t you try and get some sleep,” I suggested quietly to her, but she shook her head. I bit my bottom lip in worry – if she was too scared to even sleep, then I knew this was something I needed to fix as soon as possible. And it was going to take all of my hunter know-how and a copy of my Clan’s grimoire to accomplish it.

I pressed a kiss to Taylor’s forehead and leaned forward against my seatbelt, touching Duncan on the shoulder. “I think we need to work a protection when we get to the safe house,” I told him.

“Who for?”

“Taylor. She’s terrified, Duncan – she’s *shaking* for crying out loud!” I closed my eyes briefly. “Now I *know* I did the right thing. I can’t imagine what she must be feeling right now. I just want her to be safe.”

"And she is," Duncan said. "She's with you."

"Not completely safe. I'd feel so much better if I could get someone to work a protection for her."

"Why don't you do it yourself?" Flynn asked without taking his focus off the road. "It would probably work better than if you had someone else do it for you."

"I probably could. I'm just not sure I'd be up to it right now, that's all."

Duncan looked back over his shoulder at me and gave me a smile. "We'll figure something out."

We arrived at our next safe house, located a couple of miles outside of the Las Vegas metropolitan area, without any further incident. Unlike the Bakersfield safe house this one was completely unassuming and indistinguishable from the others in its neighbourhood, and consequently only those who needed sanctuary there knew it existed. Taylor had finally dozed off about half an hour before we had reached the safe house, and it was with a great deal of regret that I woke her.

"We're here, Tay," I whispered once I judged that she was awake and aware enough to understand my words. "Come on, let's go inside."

"So long as I can go back to sleep when we get there," she mumbled. One eye opened and she squinted at me. "Promise?"

"I promise."

At the safe house's front door, I took hold of the doorknocker and rapped three times. The door opened just far enough for someone to put their eye to the gap and look out at us.

"We seek sanctuary," I said to the eye's owner. The eye blinked and the door closed, reopening properly barely a minute later.

"Inside quickly, all of you," the woman at the door said in a low voice as she ushered us into the house. As soon as the door was closed again she deadbolted it and drew a chain across to properly secure it against potential intruders. "Everyone is downstairs, it's safer."

"Is there somewhere we could sleep for a few hours?" I asked as we followed the woman to a staircase against one wall of the front hallway. "We've had a long journey, and we got pinged by a patrol on our way here."

"Oh yes, of course." She took a small flashlight from a pocket, flicked it on, and trained its beam on the stairs as she led us down them. As we descended the staircase I could feel Taylor close at my side, still trembling, and I snaked an arm around her waist. "It's just the four of you, then?"

"Just the four of us," Flynn confirmed.

At the bottom of the stairs was a door that opened after the woman had knocked upon it. I didn't see who it was that opened the door to admit us, even after it had been closed again, so I figured a spell was at work. It was usually a safe assumption when it came to hunter society.

"How did that door open all on its own?" Taylor asked. There was still quite a bit of fear in her voice, but overlaying the fear was a healthy dose of suspicion.

I bit back a chuckle, knowing it wasn't the best time to be amused. "Magic," I replied succinctly.

"Bullshit. There's no such thing."

"No bullshit." And here I guided Taylor through the spacious, more or less deserted basement room to a couch against one of the walls. "I can tell you honestly that there *is* such a thing as magic. It's not just something reserved for fantasy novels. You saw what Marie was doing with your hair, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Taylor replied, sounding extremely dubious.

"That was magic. Each hunter specialises in a different form of it – Marie does illusory magic, for example, and Flynn's speciality is healing magic. Myself, I lean in the direction of defensive and protective magics. I never rely solely on my magic, though – when it all comes down to it, I favour my weapons. My magic only allows me to defend myself and protect others, not to harm someone who is attacking me."

"I suppose that you'll be telling me that vampires and werewolves exist next," I heard her mutter.

"You read that text message, didn't you? Vampires are very real, and so are werewolves. We're going to have to be on our guard more than ever now – a vampire will happily drain you dry if you don't watch yourself, and a werewolf will skin you alive."

Taylor had now gone very pale, her shaking beginning anew. "I'm going to have nightmares now. You do know that, don't you?"

In response I drew her close again. "I'm going to teach you to defend yourself," I promised. "And in the morning I'm going to work a protection ritual for you. No harm will come to you while you're with me, not if I can help it. I can't promise that you'll be totally safe – nobody is, not even we hunters." I ran a hand through her curls. "But you will be protected as far as possible. That much I'm able to promise you."

She didn't say anything in response to this, and I didn't pressure her to give me one. Instead I gently turned her around to face me, so that I could look into her eyes. She had taken her contacts out at some point, the natural vibrant blue of her eyes in place of the contacts' stormy grey.

"I swear it on my grandfather's grave," I said to her, my tone now turning serious. "As long as you're with Flynn, Duncan or I, you will be protected. And once I've done that ritual, only someone who is very stupid or determined will dare to cause you any harm." I leaned in close

and pressed my forehead to hers. "I would give my life to save yours," I said quietly. "I honestly would."

"Let's just hope it never comes to that," Taylor said.

"If it does, though..."

Taylor nodded. "I know. Just don't do anything stupid."

"I won't." I took her left hand in mine and squeezed it gently. "Come on, bedtime. If I'm going to be able to work ritual in the morning I need to sleep. And so do you, for that matter."

I ended up rattling at least five doorknobs and knocking on their respective doors before I found a room that was unlocked and unoccupied – and better yet, inside that room was a double bed that had been made up with two pillows and a patchwork blanket. A touch plate on the wall just inside the door lit up a lamp above the head of the bed.

"I am so tired," I heard Taylor whisper once we were inside the room with the door closed behind us. She was sitting on the end of the bed with one sneaker off and tossed aside, hunched over with her head bowed and shoulders raised up around her ears. Her whole posture spoke of utter misery and exhaustion, and I bit down hard on my bottom lip. Guessing that she wasn't about to move anytime soon, even despite how tired I knew she was, I dropped to my knees at her feet and unlaced the sneaker she hadn't yet taken off.

"I know you are, Tay," I said as I eased her sneaker off her foot. "Are your pyjamas in your backpack?" I asked, and she nodded.

As much as I had hoped that she would stay awake a little longer, Taylor was asleep almost as soon as she was in bed. It wasn't long afterward that I joined her, burying my face in her hair and breathing her in before giving myself over to sleep.

The next morning I was up early, something that surprised me – I had expected that I'd be asleep until at least mid-morning, owing to being up late the night before, but it seemed that wasn't to be the case. I wasn't entirely bothered, even though it meant I was probably going to need a nap later on – mornings were best for working protection rituals, anyway. By my watch it was almost six-thirty in the morning.

There was a kitchen area off to one side of the safe house's basement. Sitting there at the rickety-looking wooden table on one of an assortment of mismatched chairs, nursing a steaming mug of what I guessed was tea or coffee, was someone I hadn't seen in a good ten years.

"Aunt Clementine?" I asked, feeling just a little shocked to see her. She turned around in her seat, and a bright sunny grin appeared on her face.

"Sadie!" she said, sounding quite pleased. "I'd heard you were here, but I didn't quite believe until I saw you with my own eyes." She rose from her seat and held out her arms to me. "How is my favourite niece?"

"Your only niece that's worth your time and effort, you mean," I snarked as Aunt Clementine hugged me tightly, but not so tight as to cut off my oxygen supply. "I'm okay, all things considered. The last week has been pretty frightening."

"Now that is something I can agree with," my aunt said once she had released me. "But aside from that, everything's good with you?"

I nodded and took a seat next to her at the table. "Everything's fantastic." I tilted my head slightly to one side and studied my aunt. "This is probably a very stupid question, but why didn't you go to Aunt Rosemary's wedding?"

"It was mostly a problem of distance. I'm sure that your mother has told you that I've been in Antarctica teaching at the college there?" she said, and I nodded. "The usual transport ship wasn't due to arrive in port for another month, and the only shuttle I could have booked

wouldn't have arrived until three days after the wedding." She took a sip from her mug. "But when the college chancellor received news of this war breaking out, he immediately arranged for an emergency shuttle to get all of the American instructors and students home. Peter and Catriona – they own this safe house, and you probably would have met Catriona when you arrived – were at the shuttle port to meet me when I arrived yesterday afternoon, and here I am."

Here she fixed me with a hard gaze. "Now, what's this I've heard from your mother about you settling down?"

"What of it?" I said, my tone unintentionally sullen.

To my surprise, Aunt Clementine smiled. "I think it's wonderful that you've found someone, Sadie. What's his name?"

"*Her* name is Taylor," I replied, correcting my aunt. "Taylor Hanson."

Aunt Clementine frowned. "That isn't a Clan name I recognise."

"She's not a hunter," I said quietly. "She's a civilian." Here I braced myself for my aunt's reaction – I wasn't ashamed of the fact that Taylor wasn't a hunter, but I always dreaded the reactions of other hunters when they discovered that I wasn't dating another of our kind. I'd always considered dating other hunters to be a little incestuous.

"I see," Aunt Clementine said. "And you're happy?"

I nodded emphatically. "I'm very happy. I completely adore her, and I fully intend to spend the rest of my life with her."

"That's the main thing, then." She slid her mug out of the way and took my hands into hers.

"You shouldn't bow to the expectations of others, Sadie. If being with Taylor makes you happy,

then that's what matters most. I don't want you to make the same mistake that I did when I was your age."

Aunt Clementine now proceeded to tell me a story I had heard many a time before, mostly from my mother but never from my aunt herself.

"I broke with Clan tradition and got myself accepted to a civilian college right out of high school. While I was there I fell in love with a wonderful man who was just like your Taylor is – a civilian. Times were far different then, and fraternising with civilians was very much frowned upon. Falling in love with and marrying them was considered to be even worse. My parents were pleased that I'd found someone I was happy to settle down and spend the rest of my life with, but the rest of my Clan, well..." She took her mug back into her hands and tapped her fingernails on its rim. "My own aunt decided to take it upon herself to discourage me and force me to question just what I was doing with my life. And I'm sad to say that she succeeded. I broke it off with him, and I've regretted it ever since."

"Did you ever see him again?" I asked.

Aunt Clementine shook her head. "Never again. He was quite possibly the best thing ever to happen to me, and I still can't believe I let him go." She grasped my hands tightly. "Don't ever let her go, Sadie. You hold onto her for as long as you can. If she makes you as happy as you say she does, then she's worth it."

"I'll do my best." I rubbed the pad of my right thumb along a shallow gouge that had been left in the table. "Can I ask a favour, Aunt Clementine?"

"Of course you can."

"I brought Taylor along with me, even though the Council said not to – I knew she would be in danger if I left her behind, and I was right. We got pinged last night on our way here. If I hadn't disguised her, and if she hadn't used her real first name and a false Clan name to identify

herself, there is absolutely no doubt in my mind that the patrol would have taken her into custody." I felt my hands beginning to shake, and I immediately curled them into fists to still their trembling. "I need to work a protection for her but I don't know if I could do it myself. I couldn't bring my grimoire with me and I haven't got any rituals of that sort memorised. Could you work one for her?"

"Of course I can. Do you have something that I can use as a focus? A ring or a necklace, for instance?"

"She doesn't wear jewellery." I looked down at my right hand and studied my Clan ring. It was a circlet of titanium inlaid with rose gold and set with three rubies. On the inside of the ring was an engraving of my Clan motto – *Et lux in tenebris lucet. And light will shine in darkness.* I wasn't supposed to take it off, as it was spelled to warn me of danger or to tell me when to pay close attention, but this was more important. With some effort I twisted the ring around and moved it far enough along my finger that I could easily slide it off. "Would this work?" I asked, and held up the ring.

My aunt took the ring from me and held it on her palm, studying it intently. "I think it will do nicely," she said at last. "Let her sleep for now. When she's awake, have her come and talk to me – I'll explain the ritual to her. I'll only do it with her consent, though I'm sure she won't say no."

"She definitely won't. Hearing about the vampire attack in New York completely rattled her. She knows very well that she could have been killed if I hadn't brought her along. I know her well enough to be sure that she'll agree to just about anything if it'll keep her safe."

Taylor stumbled out of our temporary bedroom about an hour and a half later, rubbing at her eyes and yawning as she walked. I hid a small smile and got up to make her some coffee.

"My aunt is going to work a ritual for you once you're a little bit more awake," I told her once she was sitting at the table, a mug of coffee before her. "I don't trust myself to do it – I don't have any protection rituals memorised and I didn't think to bring my grimoire with me. I couldn't have carried it anyhow." I smoothed down her unruly curls, smiling again as she automatically leaned closer to me. "Are you okay with that?"

She nodded. "Let me finish my coffee and I'll talk to her," she replied, her voice still a little rough from sleep.

Taylor was as good as her word. As soon as she had finished drinking her coffee I introduced her to Aunt Clementine, and the two of them disappeared into mine and Taylor's bedroom. The door closed behind them, and I retreated to the kitchen to await the completion of the ritual.

Sometime after eleven, the door opened again and out came Taylor and Aunt Clementine. Taylor was wearing something around her neck that I recognised instantly – my Clan ring, suspended from a silver chain. I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief – she was protected now.

"We can have someone sew the ring into your clothes at a later point," Aunt Clementine was saying to Taylor as they approached the table. "But the necklace will do for now."

"Just as long as it's done before we leave for the next safe house," I said. "I haven't talked it over with Flynn or Duncan yet, but I'm going to see if we can hold off leaving until next week at the very least. Give Taylor a little bit of time to train as much as possible."

"What kind of training are we talking here?" Taylor asked. She was toying with my ring as she asked her question.

"Well, primarily to defend yourself." I paused, not sure how to put it. "But also because if it comes down to it, you may have to kill your attacker to save yourself."

She let out a quiet groan and dropped her head to rest on the table. "How did I know you were going to say that?" she asked.

"This is a war, Taylor," I reminded her gently. "In this war especially, it's entirely possible that you will have to kill to save yourself. If you don't, it's almost a certainty that you'll die. Vampires and werewolves don't turn civilians – they only turn hunters." I reached across and touched my Clan ring. "This will protect you, but it won't last for very long. As soon as the protection wears off, that's it."

"How long before it wears off?" Taylor asked. She now sounded very worried.

"Provided we're not too far apart from one another, slightly more than a year. I should have my grimoire back by then, and I'll be able to restore the protection myself. If we're separated..." I trailed off as I did some quick mathematics in my head, and I swallowed hard. *If we're separated, she's well and truly screwed*, I realised.

"Sadie?" Taylor asked.

"One week, if I remember what I've read in my grimoire correctly," I replied quietly. "The protection feeds off of me – it's linked to my magical core. The moment we're separated, the link will be broken and the ring will progressively lose its protective energies day by day. The moment that week is up, the protection will be gone and you'll be completely vulnerable."

I shifted my chair a little closer to her and drew her close. "You don't have to worry. I'm going to do everything possible to keep you safe."

"Do you promise?"

I pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "I promise."

Chapter 6

Armed And Dangerous

Taylor

I was going to have to kill.

If I wanted to survive long enough to get to Philadelphia and the safety of Sadie's Clan compound, I was going to have to kill anyone who attacked me.

It didn't matter that I'd already done it once before. That was irrelevant as far as I was concerned. Nor did it matter that vampires and werewolves were no longer anything close to human and would quite happily drain me dry, skin me alive or tear my throat out given half a chance. What *was* relevant was that if I was going to live long enough to reach my next birthday, I was going to have to take at least one life. It was a prospect that did not sit well with me at all.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I looked up from working a gouge into the tabletop with my thumbnail to see Sadie watching me. "Why is it always me?" I asked.

"Why is what always you?"

"Why does this shit always happen to me? I mean..." I pushed my chair back and stood up. "I'm orphaned *one week* before my fifteenth birthday, and I spend the next three years being psychologically and physically abused by my uncle. Three years after *that* the bastard manages to track me down and attempts to beat the living crap out of me, and so I kill him. And now, what, seven years later, I'm in the middle of a war that realistically I should have no part in, and you tell me that I'm going to have to kill *again*?" I shook my head almost violently. "Do you know what that *does* to me?"

Sadie opened her mouth, presumably to answer my question, but I held up a hand to her. She closed her mouth again.

"After I killed my uncle, and once I'd recovered from being beaten to within an inch of my life, I had insomnia for almost a week. I couldn't sleep, no matter how much I wanted to. I was terrified that my uncle wasn't really six feet under, even though I had seen the evidence with my own eyes, and I think my subconscious had decided that if I went to sleep, he'd come back for another go. You know, like Freddy Krueger." I curled my hands into fists to stop them from shaking. "I can't go through that again, Sadie. In all honesty I would rather have a vampire drain me dry or get my throat torn out by a fully-transformed werewolf than have blood on my hands."

"You wouldn't, though," Sadie said, her tone reasonable. "People get killed during wars – it's a fact of life." She got up out of her seat and stepped up to stand in front of me. "I want you to be able to protect yourself, that's all."

"I know you do, and I can already protect myself. Black belt, remember?" I reminded her.

"Yes, I remember. But *you* need to remember that a human enemy is far different from a werewolf or vampire. You make even the slightest of moves toward one of them while you're within grasping range, then you had better hope your will is up to date." She smoothed down my hair, tucking a few renegade curls behind my ears. "How about I teach you a bit of archery? Most hunters are either archers or have their firearms licences. It lets us defend ourselves while at the same time keeping our distance. Some favour a blade of some description, but those hunters are usually either too brave for their own good or monumentally stupid."

"Is that safe?" I asked dubiously.

"So long as you have a good teacher, it's totally safe. And considering that teacher will be me, you'll be in excellent hands."

"You're an archer?"

Sadie nodded. "I'm slightly rusty, being as I've been using a rifle for the last few years, but I know a thing or two. And I most definitely know my way around a bow and arrow. I'll ask around, see if any of the other hunters here have a bow and some arrows that we can borrow. Odds are I can find *something* around here."

And find something Sadie did. After lunch, she took me outside into the safe house's backyard. Over one shoulder she carried a quiver of arrows, with a bow in her opposite hand. Against the back wall of the house was a target that sat on something that looked very much like an artist's easel.

"Now, first things – do you know which one is your dominant eye?" Sadie asked as she set the bow and the quiver down on the grass.

I shook my head. "No idea whatsoever."

"Well, which eye do you use to look through a camera viewfinder?"

I frowned and tried to remember the last time I'd borrowed Sadie's digital SLR camera. "My left eye," I said finally.

Sadie's response was to take me by the shoulders and steer me to stand in front of the target, with my right side closest to it. "Seeing as you're left-eye dominant, I'm going to need to remember to reverse all my instructions somewhat. I'm right-eye dominant," she clarified when I raised an eyebrow at her. "This is the position you take up when you're aiming your arrow, and you'll be holding the bow in your right hand."

"Even in combat?"

“Even in combat. The enemy’s still a target, right?” She grinned at me and proceeded to position herself in front of the target. “Now watch me closely – I’ll demonstrate first, then I’ll walk you through it.”

Sadie bent down and picked up the bow with her left hand, drawing an arrow from the quiver. She fitted the arrow into the bow, keeping it against the bowstring with three fingers on her right hand, and raised it to point at the target. I watched closely as she drew the bowstring back far enough that her right hand was right next to her face, before releasing it and letting the arrow fly through the air. It hit the target’s bullseye barely seconds later.

“And you said you were rusty,” I teased her as she went to retrieve the arrow. “I couldn’t have done that.”

“Not to begin with, no.” She pulled the arrow from the target and came back over to where I stood. “But eventually you should be able to. Just as long as you can hit the target rather than the wall, I’ll be happy.”

“You don’t want much, do you?” I snarked.

She mock-scowled at me before stepping around behind me. “All right, let’s try loading the bow first. Take the bow in your right hand – don’t rush things, just take your time and make sure you can grasp it easily. Basically you should be holding it in such a way that your fingers aren’t going to cramp up and you’re not going to drop it easily.”

I did as I was told, and soon had the bow sitting comfortably in my right hand. It felt completely natural, almost as if I had been born to it.

“Now, you take an arrow and nock it against the string.” She took another arrow from the quiver and showed me the V-shaped groove in the arrow’s feathered end, where it was meant to sit against the bowstring. “You *always* do this with the arrowhead pointed toward the ground, for safety reasons. Otherwise if someone is walking across the path that your arrow is likely to take

once it's released, you could accidentally shoot them. Not that anybody *should* be walking through the shooting area, but you should always take precautions just in case."

With Sadie's help I loaded the arrow onto the bow, using the index, middle and ring fingers on my left hand to hold it in place against the string. "Now what?" I asked.

"Now you raise the bow and aim it at the target. You draw the string as you're raising and aiming it. Once the bowstring is fully drawn your hand should be sitting against your chin or your mouth." I raised the bow, and she helped me to pull back the bowstring until it was taut enough that my hand and my arm were beginning to shake from the sheer effort of holding the arrow in place. "When you're ready, let go of the arrow – *not* the string, just the arrow. With any luck you'll hit the target – doesn't matter if you don't, we can keep trying until you do."

As soon as Sadie had finished speaking, I let the arrow go and watched it fly toward the target. It smacked into the target a few rings away from the bullseye.

"Not bad," Sadie said, approval obvious in her tone. "If you spend a little more time finetuning your aiming, you'll be able to hit the bullseye. Still, for a first time you did well."

I grinned and went to fetch my arrow from the target. This wasn't as hard as I thought it was going to be.

We ended up spending the whole afternoon practicing our archery skills. As it turned out, I was a natural at it – while I wasn't yet at Sadie's level, with a fair bit of practice I'd at least be close to it by the time we left for the next safe house.

"Well, that wasn't so bad now was it?" Sadie asked as we packed up and headed inside. "At some point over the next week I'll see about getting you your own bow and arrows – borrowing is fine in a pinch, but if you want to get really good at it you need your own. That way you'll become accustomed to the way your bow feels when you shoot."

"I just hope I'll never need to use it before we get to Philadelphia."

“Well if it turns out you *do* need to use it, you’ll be prepared.” She took the bow and arrows from me once we were back in the basement and stowed them back in the cupboard she had taken them from. “We’ll have another go tomorrow – right now, though, we both need a shower before we can even consider sitting down to dinner.”

Things continued in much the same fashion for the next few days. Sadie and I would get up in the early morning and have breakfast together before anyone else made an appearance. It was our chance for some private time before the insanity of another day began. For the rest of the morning I trained in archery, and between lunch and dinner Sadie told me about the history of her world.

“You’ll need to know this before they let you go through initiation,” Sadie said before our first tutoring session. “Unfortunately it’s not all my decision, or even yours – in certain circumstances the Council will waive the history requirement, but if you’re going to be a full member of the hunter society it’s a good idea to know just what you’re getting yourself in for.”

“I realise that, Sadie,” I said as I leafed through the book she had given me. “It’s just daunting, you know? If it’s as you say, and I’m going to be initiated near my next birthday, I basically have less than nine months to learn hundreds of years’ worth of history. Hell, they don’t even expect that of high school students, or even college students.”

“You’re a quick study,” Sadie said. “You learned how to shoot an arrow pretty fast, right?”

“That’s different, though. I’m quick at learning physical things, but that’s because I tend to learn by doing. I don’t learn so well by reading. I graduated with honours from college, yeah, but I worked my ass off to get there.” I raked my hands back through my hair. “I don’t think I can do it, Sadie. Not while we’re on the run at least. When we get to Philadelphia and we’re a lot safer I promise I’ll knuckle down and work, but for now why don’t you just tell me a few stories instead?” I drummed my fingertips on the cover of the book. “I’ll read this book whenever I can, but I don’t want to commit to studying it with so many distractions.”

"I can live with that," Sadie said. "So what would you like to hear about first?"

I considered Sadie's question briefly. "How did the hunters come to America?"

Sadie chuckled. "You just *had* to start at the beginning, didn't you?"

"Isn't that always the best place to start?"

"Oh, I don't know – we could always have started *in medias res*, you know." She smirked at me.

"The first hunters came here on the *Mayflower*. Though you won't find their names in the official passenger lists – even back then, we were secretive about who we were. But I can trace my family's lineage on my mother's side all the way back to the sixteen-hundreds – it probably goes even further back, but my dad hasn't been able to find the time to work on the family tree."

Over those same few days, Duncan and Flynn spent the evenings teaching me a few things of their own – battleground first aid from Flynn, and weaponry from Duncan. The two of them alternated evenings, so that I didn't get all overwhelmed by taking in too much in the one night.

"Sadie told me that she's been teaching you archery," Duncan said at our first solo meeting, and I nodded my affirmation. "She also told me that you didn't have your own bow and arrows."

"I still don't," I said. "Haven't been able to get out to pick up a set."

"Well, you do now," Duncan said, and he bent down to the side of the chair he sat in, picking up a roll of what looked like leather. He held it out to me and I took it from his hands, unrolling it to find a bow and a full quiver of arrows.

"Half of those have silver arrowheads," Duncan explained as I examined my new weapon. "Silver is toxic to werewolves, so if we run into a pack of them along the way you'll have to shoot them using those arrows."

"What about vampires? I'm probably going to have to shoot some of those as well."

"Other half are hawthorn, and the arrowheads have been stained with dead man's blood. Hawthorn and dead man's blood are poisonous to vampires," Duncan explained when I raised an eyebrow. Here he drew two arrows from their quiver. One arrow had red feathers on the back, and the other had blue. "Red fletching for vampires," Duncan said, indicating the feathers, "and blue for werewolves. Let me know if you run out at any point – I know someone who can make you up another set."

"Thanks, Duncan," I said as he slid the arrows back in their quiver, and I rolled quiver and bow back up in the leather.

"Something on your mind?" he asked as I got up from my seat and stowed my bow and arrows near my backpack.

I didn't respond immediately. "It's wrong," I said at last.

"What is?"

"Killing," I said simply. "It's just...I know they're not human, not entirely anyway. But they once *were*, y'know? And it doesn't feel right, having to take a life – even if it is in self-defence." I raked my hands through my hair. "I know that people die during wartime, but it doesn't make it *right*."

"Well, with any luck we won't come across any vampire or werewolf packs between here and Philadelphia, but it's best to be prepared just in case. Keep training with Sadie as much as you can – I don't think she'll be prepared to leave until she thinks you're completely ready, so don't rush things."

"How long do you think that will take?" I asked.

Duncan shrugged, the movement barely more than a slight hitching of his shoulders up toward his ears. "I honestly couldn't say. But you guys have been dating for how long now?"

I quickly calculated just how long Sadie and I had been together. "We met a couple of years after I finished college, so it's been about four years."

"So she would know you pretty well, then."

"I should hope so."

Duncan gave me a smile. "Let her tell you when she thinks you're ready," he advised, continuing his previous thread. "Not the other way around."

"I'll try to remember that." I picked at a hole that was starting to be worn through the left knee of my jeans. "I'm so used to listening to myself instead of a teacher that I'll probably end up forgetting a couple of times."

"I'm sure Sadie will understand if you forget."

I forced a small smile and nodded. "Would you be able to show me the sort of weapon that Sadie uses?" I asked. "She said she uses a rifle but she didn't give me any specifics. I'm not saying I want to learn how to use one, because I've only just barely got my head around archery. I'm just curious."

As if in response to my question, Duncan rose from his seat and crossed the basement to a steel cabinet. I had seen other hunters storing what looked for all the world like very long and very flat tool cases in it during the first few days after our arrival, and it was one of these cases that Duncan took from the cabinet.

"Sadie and I use much the same sort of weapon," he said as he closed the cabinet and brought the case over to where I sat. He sat back down in his chair, set the case on the floor and unlatched it, lifting out a rifle. "This has been in my family for almost one hundred years. It's an M1903 Springfield rifle. My great-great-grandfather used it for the first time during World War One – it was his service rifle during his time in the United States Army, and it's been passed down from father to first-born son. My dad gave it to me at my official Clan initiation just after I

turned twenty-one. When I marry and have children of my own, my first-born son will be given it at his own initiation.”

“You can only kill werewolves with that, right?”

Duncan nodded. “Right.” He balanced the rifle on his knees and bent down to the case again, this time picking up a cardboard box. The box, I saw once he had opened it, was filled with silver bullets. “You fire one of these little beauties into them, aiming for the heart or as close to it as possible. Get them in the heart, and it kills them instantly.”

“What if you can’t get them in the heart?”

A near-feral grin now graced Duncan’s face. “It’ll still kill them. It’ll just take longer and draw the suffering out for as long as possible.”

“That’s barbaric.”

Here Duncan shrugged. “That’s hunting for you. It’s what we do – what we’re *trained* to do from our early teens. I learned it, Flynn learned it, Sadie learned it. And when you and Sadie have kids, then your kids will learn it too.”

“*If* we have kids,” I corrected gently. “If you haven’t quite realised it by now, both Sadie and I are women.”

“So you adopt. There’s always a way, Taylor.” He gave me a smile. “There’s always a way.”

Chapter 7

Snatched

Sadie

We departed the Las Vegas safe house a few evenings later, directly after dinner. I was content now that Taylor was able to properly defend herself – I had spent a full day after Duncan had given her the bow and arrows training her in how to handle her new weapon, even though I knew she was able to use it safely. She needed to know how to use *her* bow and arrows, not a set belonging to someone else. Just prior to our departure Catriona had taken my Clan ring and Taylor’s favourite hoodie, and had sewn my ring into one of the pockets. So long as she wore her hoodie or at least kept it close by, she was fully protected.

“Where are we headed now?” I asked Flynn as Duncan eased the van onto I-15 North.

“Colorado,” he replied. “We need to get to Philadelphia as soon as possible – we spent far too much time at the last safe house. I know why we did,” he added when I raised an eyebrow at him, “but it doesn’t change the fact that we’re much further behind than both Duncan and I are comfortable with. We were scheduled to be in Colorado half a week ago.”

“Since when were you so concerned with our schedule?”

“Since your mother called me and asked how close we were to home,” Duncan replied.

That shut me up. I’d been so concerned with making sure that Taylor was safe that I hadn’t even considered my parents could be worried for my own safety.

“How many more stops do we have to make?” I asked.

“Including the upcoming one? Ten.”

“*Ten?*” I asked, my tone incredulous.

"Yep," Duncan replied. "Twelve stops in total, then we'll be in Philadelphia."

"Thank the Goddess for that," Flynn said. "All of this road trip business is getting a bit old." He rolled his head around in a circle, and I suppressed a shudder of disgust when I heard the vertebrae in his neck pop and crack.

"Do you *have* to do that while the rest of us are in the car?" I asked, my tone pained. "It's disgusting."

"Get used to it," Flynn fired back. "We're going to be on the road for about the next thirteen hours. Probably more if we end up stopping off for fuel or food."

Beside me I heard Taylor let out a squeak. "*Thirteen hours?*" she asked.

"Unless you want to be surrounded by Mormons for a day or so," Duncan replied. "Because there's a safe house in Salt Lake City that we could stay at."

Taylor immediately and rather violently shook her head. "No thank you. I don't like Mormons." Though it was said *sotto voce*, I distinctly heard her say almost as an afterthought, "Freaky bastards."

"That isn't very nice," I told her, though my words didn't carry any real heat.

"Don't care," Taylor replied. "It's true and you know it."

"Doesn't make it polite, though," I countered. "And you know damn well that Utah isn't all Mormons." She didn't respond to this. Instead, through the half-dark I could see her shrug.

We fell into silence after this, the quiet broken only by the rumble of the engine. I'd just bent forward to unzip my backpack to rummage around for my book light and the book I'd started reading during the drive between Bakersfield and Las Vegas when I heard it – the pattering of raindrops on the roof of the van.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I heard Flynn grumble. "This is the last thing we need right now..."

"Flynn, it's just rain," Duncan said, ever the voice of reason. "The van isn't going to melt if it gets wet."

"No, but I can almost guarantee that it'll break down once it starts to rain hard enough," Flynn fired back. "Wouldn't be the first time either." I looked up just in time to see Flynn glance at me in the rear view mirror. "And don't even *think* about telling me I should have had it serviced before we left, Sadie."

I abandoned my search for my book and straightened up in my seat, holding my hands up before myself in self-defence. "I wasn't going to say anything of the sort!" I protested. "I know you wouldn't have had time for that."

The light pattering of rain grew steadily harder as Flynn drove down the highway. I could see that he was gripping the steering wheel a lot harder than he would normally – a clear indicator that he was well and truly on edge. If the van broke down, an ambush would leave us almost completely vulnerable. Especially considering it was both night time and raining – the vampire packs worked best under cover of darkness and during inclement weather.

We had been on the highway for around twenty-five minutes when a crash of thunder sounded overhead. It was so loud that we felt more than heard it when the engine stalled.

"Oh no, no, no, *no!*" Flynn shouted, hitting the steering wheel with the palms of his hands every time the word 'no' left his mouth. "Don't you fucking *dare!*"

"Flynn, it can't hear you," Duncan said tiredly.

"Shut up, Duncan," Flynn growled.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and shifted forward in my seat, propping my chin up on Flynn's seat. He had taken one hand off of the steering wheel and moved it to the ignition, and was turning the

key over and over again in an attempt to get the engine to start again. "Come on, start damn you," he was muttering, barely audible over the rain that lashed the roof and windows of the van.

"Flynn, give it up," Duncan said. He was now unbuckling his own seatbelt. "Sadie, come on – we need to get the van off the road."

"Do it yourself!" I said. "I'm not getting out of this van when the weather's like it is right now! And you know damn well there's probably a vampire pack on our tail a few miles back down the road. I don't want to be turned!"

"Would you rather the van was hit from behind by some maniac driver?" Flynn asked me. He had now abandoned trying to get the engine going again, and was sitting back in his seat with his head back against the headrest. "Please just do it, Sadie."

I sighed. "Oh, all right," I relented. "But you both owe me one."

I twisted around in my seat and climbed up on it, and started digging around in the back of the van for my raincoat. "Tay, I want you to listen to me very carefully," I said as I caught hold of one of its sleeves and started to drag it out.

"Okay," she said, sounding dubious.

"If I tell you to hide, you need to do it straight away. Odds are there'll be a vampire or werewolf pack on approach." I nodded toward the back of the van. "Get in the back and cover yourself with as many blankets and jackets as you can, and hold your breath for as long as possible."

"I'll pass out if I do that for too long, though."

"Which is why I said to do it for as long as possible – I know that you'll need to breathe at some point. Hopefully if we do get jumped on, they'll leave us alone before too long."

I pulled my raincoat on and buttoned it up, flipping the hood over my head before venturing out into the pouring rain. The thunder was much louder outside the van, and lightning was beginning to streak its way across the cloudy sky. It was going to be a long night by the side of the road if we couldn't get the van going again.

"On three, then?" Duncan asked once the two of us had positioned ourselves behind the van. I looked at him, noting that he looked about as anxious as I did. Even in the dark I could see the worry in his eyes and on his face. "Sooner we get this done, the sooner Flynn can have a root around in the engine and see if he can figure out what the hell's going on."

"On three," I agreed.

With some effort, and with Flynn steering, Duncan and I managed to roll the van off the highway. I didn't think anyone would be driving past at this hour or in this weather, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Not to mention that if someone *did* come barrelling down the highway, they wouldn't end up slamming into the rear of the van.

"You know Sadie, I was thinking-"

"Did it hurt?" I interrupted, and Duncan forced a grin.

"No, but if it ever does I'll be sure to let you know." Duncan led the way back around to the side of the van. "I checked the weather forecast before we left the safe house. It said nothing about rain at any point during the next few days. I can't help but wonder if this is a trap."

"And here I thought you were supposed to be the voice of reason. It's not a trap, Duncan. It's just Mother Nature playing tricks with the weather, that's all."

"You know as well as I do that some hunters can manipulate the weather," he reminded me.

"And some of those hunters might well have been turned."

I lifted my right foot up onto the edge of the rear doorway and grabbed hold of the doorjamb with one hand, Duncan grabbing onto my other hand. "I know that, Duncan," I said patiently as I started to haul myself back into the van. "I just don't want to think about it."

Duncan didn't respond to this, and for a moment I thought the subject was closed. And then I heard it – a sound that was most decidedly *not* thunder, rain or lightning. It was the sound of a car pulling up behind us.

"Sadie, tell Taylor to hide," Duncan said in a very low voice. "Tell her to hide *now*."

I nodded and pulled myself the rest of the way into the van. This was what we had all feared from the moment we had set out on our road trip. "What's going on?" Taylor asked.

"What's going on is that you need to hide," I told her. "Quickly, before they see you."

She didn't hesitate for even one second. One moment she was sitting there with a history book in her lap, and the next she had climbed over the backseat and disappeared under the pile of blankets and coats we had stashed back there. It had originally been intended to hide all of our weapons just in case we were flagged down by police, but now it served a wholly different purpose. Before too long all I could see of Taylor was a flash of bright red from the T-shirt she was wearing under her hoodie.

"Is she hidden?" Flynn asked.

"She's hidden," I confirmed.

"Thank the Goddess." He nodded toward the highway. "Go back up Duncan. I think he might need it. I'll keep trying to get us rolling again."

Flynn was right, as it turned out. Duncan was facing down a pack of what were unmistakably vampires – five of them. If not for the very pointy and likely extremely sharp fangs that jutted over their lower lip, a vampire looked just like anyone else. They weren't pale, and they most

certainly didn't sparkle in the sun. These vampires had just recently fed, judging by the smears of red around their mouths, so I was hoping and beseeching the ruling Goddess of my Clan that none of them would want to feast on the four of us.

"Well, well, *well*," the lead vampire drawled. She was taller than her companions and dressed all in black. "What do we have here?"

"Just a breakdown," Duncan replied. I could tell that he was doing his best to keep his voice from shaking. Every hunter knew that both vampires and werewolves were able to sense fear given enough of an opportunity. "We'll be back on the road in no time at all."

The vampire raised an eyebrow. "I think not. We're all *so* hungry, you see, and we don't want to leave until we've had a decent meal. Isn't that right, boys?" she asked her companions, all of whom nodded. A couple of them even licked their lips, and I swallowed hard. "Spread out," she snapped, and the four male vampires of the pack broke free of their formation. They started to circle the van like any predator would, keeping low and moving with long, loping strides.

"You told her to hold her breath, right?" Duncan asked me in a low voice, and I nodded.

"She can't hold it as long as I can, though," I replied quietly. "Couple minutes if she's lucky." I glanced down at my watch, visible through the translucent sleeve of my raincoat. "It's been at least three since I told her to hide."

As those words left my mouth, the lead vampire's head snapped up and she froze. *Oh no*, my mental voice whispered.

"What do you have in the back of your van?" she asked us, her tone of voice very strongly suggesting that we should tell the truth.

I swallowed hard and squeezed my eyes shut. *Please forgive me, Tay*, I begged silently before answering, "My girlfriend."

The vampire snapped out something in a language that I didn't understand, and her companions returned to her side. "Open it," she commanded, pointing to the back of the van.

"Do it, Duncan," I said quietly.

"You *want* Taylor to be taken?" he asked, his voice low but shocked.

"Of course not! But you have to realise that we might not have a choice. They like civilians because they can completely drain them – they can't do that to us. Civilians are the vampire equivalent of a three-course meal. You should know this already, Duncan."

Duncan sighed and pushed the hood of his raincoat back over his head, and raked his hands back through his hair. "I do know this, Sadie," he said. "It doesn't mean I like it."

I looked back over my shoulder at the lead vampire. She was twirling a lock of her hair around a finger, in much the same way that one of my cousins was wont to do whenever she was bored.

"We'd better open it up," I said, feeling regretful. I really didn't want to do this.

One of the first things I saw once Duncan had the back of the van open was the bare sole of Taylor's left foot. I leaned forward and ran a fingernail down it. It twitched, her toes curling inward, and I suppressed a grin.

"C'mon Tay, up and at 'em," I said as I pushed her coverings aside. Apart from her foot-twitching episode she remained completely still, right up until I uncovered her head. She opened her eyes now and looked up at me.

"Are they gone?" she asked in almost a whisper, and I shook my head. "Goddamnit," she mumbled.

"Bring her out," the vampire commanded. "And bind her hands behind her back."

"I'm sorry, Tay," I whispered as Taylor climbed down out of the van. She kept her head bowed while Duncan found a length of rope and pulled her hands behind her back, binding them at the wrists. "I wish I didn't have to do this."

"I know you do," she said quietly. Her voice cracked a little as she spoke, and for half a second I could have sworn I saw one lonely tear track its way down her face. She was scared, I knew and could tell that much, but I could also sense something else she felt more than anything else – something that left me cold.

Betrayal.

Taylor was one of the sweetest, most loving and most trusting people I knew. She had been counting on me for the last few weeks, believing that I would do everything in my power to keep her as safe as I possibly could. And so far, I had done just that. Handing her over to the vampires, though, would be a complete and total betrayal of that trust. Even I could work that out.

"I propose a trade," I said suddenly, deciding this was the kind of situation that demanded formality.

"A trade of what?" the vampire asked. She sounded intrigued, and I knew I had piqued her interest.

I swallowed hard and turned to face her, drawing myself up to my full height. "A trade of my humanity for her life. She's sworn to me, and her life means more to me than my own does. Spare her life, and I swear that you may take me to do with as you will. And if that means you strip my humanity from me and transform me into a creature of the night..." I trailed off and swallowed hard. "Then so be it. I don't fear death, and I fear becoming a vampire even less."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "The offer is tempting, I admit," she mused. "You offer yourself willingly?"

I nodded. "I willingly offer to you the whole of my heart, my life and my soul. I would be yours for all of eternity."

"Sadie, please, don't," I heard Taylor pleading behind me. "You don't have to do this!"

I didn't answer her – at least not verbally. *Yes, I do*, I answered her in my mind. *I'd rather she took me than you. She can't kill me – she can only turn me. There are potions I can take, spells that can be woven to restore my humanity. No spell or potion can restore life.*

"I desire a taste first, before I accept your offer," the vampire said suddenly. "If you are as willing as you say you are..." She left the unspoken words to interpret as I wanted to.

I stepped forward until I was almost invading her personal space, and I lowered myself to my knees before her. Rain soaked the knees of my jeans almost immediately, but I didn't care. It was a small price to pay in my attempt to divert the vampires' attention toward me and away from Taylor. Ice cold fingers swept my hair away from my neck and over my shoulder. I suppressed a shiver, fighting the urge to close my eyes.

I had been bitten by vampires more times than I cared to count. It was a part of every hunter's training, and it had been a part of my own Clan initiation. In all of those instances a numbing spell had been cast, or I'd drunk an anaesthesia potion to deaden the specific area where I would be bitten. I knew being bitten hurt, though, but being *told* it hurt could never have prepared me for this. I would never have offered myself had I known.

The second the vampire's fangs sank into my neck I let out a strangled scream and my vision went white. The pain was both blinding and paralysing – I couldn't see, I couldn't move, and I could barely breathe. I could feel each and every mouthful, for want of a better word, that was forced from my body into hers, the pain beginning anew with every second that passed. I fought the extremely strong temptation to pass out, knowing that would make her think me less than willing to give myself wholly to her.

After what felt like an eternity she released me and I fell forward, putting my hands out to brace myself against the ground. "Your offer is acceptable," she decided. Relief flooded through me, and I raised my head just in time to see her wiping my blood away from around her mouth. "However, I am still hungry, and your offer does not completely sate me."

"My trade was her life for my humanity," I said, my voice as cold as I could make it. "I did not make an offer of both. My humanity for her life. Take it or leave it." Almost in defiance, I lifted my chin and met the vampire's gaze.

"Oh, now you've just made me angry," she said. She shook her head in seeming disapproval. "I was merely going to feed from your fellow hunters and leave the four of you in peace. The trade is off." She raised her voice. "Boys, you know what to do."

I whipped my head around just in time to see two of the vampires seize Taylor roughly by her arms. The hood of her jacket fell back, and even through the darkness I could see her eyes blazing with sheer terror. Tears were rolling down her face now, and she kicked out and screamed as the two subordinate vampires dragged her down the road.

"Don't let them take me Sadie, please!" she begged.

"Move even half an inch, and she dies right now," the female vampire murmured. She mimed breaking someone's neck as if to emphasise her point.

"Please let her go," I pleaded. "You can take me right here and now, just let her go. *Please.*"

There was no response. I watched helplessly as Taylor was bundled roughly into the boot of the vampires' car, and I winced as one of the vampires slapped her across the face. She was still screaming and sobbing when the boot was slammed closed on her.

"You're free to go," the vampire said carelessly. "We have what we came for." Almost as an afterthought, she added, "Your vehicle should be no worse for wear."

I didn't move until after all five vampires were back in their car and driving back down the highway. Even then, I only moved because my arms could no longer hold me up. I fell face-first onto the road and started my own little sobbing fit, one that didn't cease even when I felt a far gentler set of hands grasp my shoulders and help me up to my knees.

"They took her," I sobbed as Duncan drew me close. "They just *took her*, Duncan. And I let them do it..."

"Shh," he whispered. "The first safe house we get to, we'll start scrying. And we'll *keep* scrying until we find her." He put a finger under my chin and lifted my head so that he could look at my face. "Think of that ring of yours as a homing beacon. We'll latch onto it and see if we can track her location using its connection to you."

"And if that doesn't work?" I asked.

"Then we'll figure something else out." He helped me to stand. "Come on. I think Flynn has something in his medical kit for that bite."

I allowed Duncan to lead me back toward the van, where Flynn waited for us with his medical kit. In no time at all the bite I had received was cleaned and bandaged, I had changed my clothes, and I was settling down in the backseat of the van.

"Get some sleep," Flynn said as he closed his medical kit. "Right now, that's really all you need. You should be all right in the morning."

I nodded and drew one of our blankets over myself, shifting around until I was completely comfortable and didn't have a spring or a wire digging into my side.

We'll find you, I promised right before I fell asleep. *Even if it's the last thing I ever do, I'll get you out of there.*

Chapter 8

From The Department Of The Bleeding Obvious

Taylor

By the time I was released from my makeshift prison, I had screamed myself hoarse. I had no idea where I was, and my only clue to the time of day was the sky. It was still night time, but the weather had cleared up at the very least. No longer gunmetal grey, as it had been when I was abducted, the sky was now black with scattered clouds and multitudes of pinpoint stars. There was hardly any sign of the storm that had caused the van to break down. *They trapped us*, I thought dazedly as hands grabbed me and hauled me out of the car, dumping me on the ground. I landed hard on my back, my head smacking into what felt to my hands like concrete. Little lightning bolts of pain spiralled their way down my spine and out into my hands and feet. There was no doubt about it – I was definitely going to be feeling it in the morning.

That's even if you manage to make it to the morning, my mental voice taunted.

"On your feet, human," a voice ordered harshly. A hand grabbed me by the hood of my jacket and the back of my T-shirt and yanked me to my feet. The collar of my shirt pulled up tight against my throat and I gasped for breath, unable to pull it away because my hands were still tied behind my back.

"Let go of me!" I managed to choke out, twisting myself around like a fish on the end of a line. I knew the action itself was futile, that I wouldn't get free until someone unbound my hands, but I didn't care. In that moment I felt like I still had some measure of control over myself and what happened to me.

I was under absolutely no illusions. I knew what was likely to happen to me if Sadie didn't manage to find me in time. If we were still apart one week from now, the protections over me

that had been anchored to Sadie's Clan ring would fail, and that would be the end of it. I would have vampires swarming over me before I could do anything more than blink.

I kept my head down as I was marched away from the car with a hand hard against my aching back, even though I knew I should probably be taking stock of my surroundings. It wasn't like I had any way of getting in contact with anyone. My phone was in my backpack, which was still in the van, and I didn't dare ask if I could use anyone else's. For all I knew vampires could be telepathic and didn't need to use telephones. The old me would have scoffed and said that was impossible, but I knew better now. A few months ago I had been adamant that vampires existed only in the realms of myth and horror fiction. Yet only a few hours earlier – or so I believed – I had watched a vampire latch onto Sadie's neck and drink her blood. If it hadn't been real before, then it most certainly was now.

It seemed an eternity before I was pulled to a stop and then shoved to my knees. More pain lanced through me, this time from my knees, and I heard myself let out a quiet whimper. I instantly regretted making that one tiny sound, for the second it left my mouth I jerked forward as a hand smacked the back of my head. I hadn't been hit so hard in years. The last time anyone had ever tried to hit me with violent intent I had killed them, but I knew that wasn't going to work here. If I so much as lifted a finger against one of them, I was dead – literally as well as figuratively.

"Must you be so cruel, Balthazar?" a bored voice asked, and I finally looked up.

The voice belonged to yet another female vampire, different to the one in the pack that had captured me. This particular vampire was draped over what could only be described as a throne. She had her back against one armrest and her legs hanging over the other, and was dressed all in dark red and black. Candles in wall sconces and free-standing lamps cast flickering shadows across the ceiling, floor and walls.

"She needs to learn her place, Desdemona," Balthazar growled from somewhere both above and behind me.

"And teaching the human her place involves hitting her across the back of her head, I take it." Desdemona swung her feet around to the front of her throne and straightened up the rest of the way, rising to her feet in one smooth, fluid movement. She came toward me and then began to walk in a circle around where I knelt on the floor. I held my breath, not wanting to give her any reason to attack me. "Did you really have to bind her hands as well?"

"Wasn't my idea," Balthazar said. "You can blame Katharina for that one."

"I'll decide who to blame, thank you very much. Unbind her hands, for the love of Eris."

Balthazar didn't protest, at least not verbally, and within moments I was able to move my hands once more. I winced when I saw the strips of inflamed skin around both of my wrists, the rope obviously having been a little too tight.

"On your feet," Desdemona ordered, and I eased myself upright. I was a little unsteady and very sore, but at least I was standing. That was the main thing right now. I resisted the very strong temptation to rub my wrists and instead allowed my hands to remain by my sides, fingers still and straight. She began to circle me again.

"What Clan do you hail from?" she asked, her tone brooking no argument – if I didn't answer her, protection or no protection, I wouldn't live to see the dawn. I swallowed hard and answered her with the truth.

"I hail from no Clan," I replied. "I'm not a hunter – I'm a civilian."

Desdemona didn't respond to this, not verbally at least – though I couldn't see her face, I was positive that she had raised an eyebrow. "And yet you have allowed yourself to be swept up in their affairs? The world of a hunter is no place for a civilian."

"My girlfriend is a hunter. I came along so that she could keep me safe." My mouth twisted in an ironic smile. "Didn't help much."

This time, Desdemona laughed. The sound was like ice – she definitely sounded amused, but there was no warmth in her laughter. I squeezed my eyes shut as she trailed long fingernails down the back of my neck.

"I think you will make a delicious meal for my pack," she said after a long stretch of silence. "But I should like to taste you first before they feast." She walked her fingers across my neck, trailing one nail around in a circle just under my jaw.

I regretted my next words the instant they had left my mouth.

"I'd like to see you try," I scoffed. "My girlfriend has a protection over me. It would take a very stupid and suicidal vampire to feed from me before it wears off." *Idiot, idiot, idiot!* my mental voice scolded. *Why the fuck did you tell her that?*

"Is that so?" Desdemona asked, but I knew not to answer – it was obviously a rhetorical question. "Well, then, I believe we should be able to wait until that protection wears off. Anticipation always makes a feast far more enjoyable."

And here her tone of voice changed. Where it had been almost conversational, it was now harsh and unrelenting.

"Balthazar, locate Juliana and take the prisoner down to the cells," she barked out. "Bind her hands and feet and lock her in cell number seven. She is only to be given water until her purported protection dissipates. We don't want her to die of thirst before our feast."

Obviously you don't give a shit if I starve, I thought bitterly.

"Yes, Desdemona," Balthazar replied. A large hand grabbed me by the upper arm and yanked me backwards. "Do you have any other orders?"

Desdemona now smiled, and a chill spread through me.

"If she gives you any trouble at all, you have my permission to teach her where her place is on our food chain. You may do whatever you wish to her so long as it does not draw blood."

I looked back over my shoulder just in time to see a cruel grin stretch Balthazar's mouth, baring his wickedly-sharp fangs.

"As you wish, milady," Balthazar said.

I forced myself to close my eyes as Balthazar dragged me from the throne room, not wanting to see where he was taking me. Before long another hand had grabbed hold of me, this one smaller and quite obviously female.

"Can we feed, Balthazar?" a female voice pleaded. "I'm so *hungry*..."

"Not from this one, Juliana. Desdemona has expressly forbidden it." He paused for the briefest of moments, and for half a heartbeat I thought I would be spared the fate that I knew lay before me. "At least, she has forbidden it until the protection over this human has worn off. When we reach the cells you can have your pick of any of the other prisoners you like."

I didn't open my eyes again until we had stopped and I heard the metallic scraping of hinges. Before me lay what could only be described as a prison cell – it had walls of grey stone on only three sides, with the front of the cell being little more than the door that had just swung open into the corridor. Into the front of the right-hand wall had been carved a number 7.

"Turn her around," Balthazar ordered, and Juliana spun me around to face him. "Hands out," he said to me, and I obediently put my hands out in front of myself. From a pocket in his long coat he produced the same rope that Duncan had used to bind my hands in the first place and proceeded to tie the rope around my wrists. Another pocket held a much longer rope – this one was wrapped tightly around my ankles and tied off, the loose ends of the rope burned off with a flame from a cigarette lighter.

The next thing I knew, I was being shoved into the cell. I barely managed to catch myself against the cell door, grabbing onto one of the vertical bars with my hands. It was only the briefest of reprieves, though – I soon found myself falling onto my back, smacking my head on the stone floor again. Seconds later the cell door's hinges squeaked and scraped metal-upon-metal, and I was locked in.

I lay there on the floor for at least a minute before rolling over and pushing myself up onto my knees. "Ow," I whispered as pain rocketed down my legs. The second the pain subsided to a manageable level I started moving, shuffling my way across the cell on my knees to the back wall. I curled up on my side with my back to that wall, my hands under my head as a makeshift pillow.

One week. Sadie had one week to find me. I only had to hope she found me before that week was up.

Please, if someone somewhere can hear me, come and save me, I pleaded silently as I drifted into an uneasy sleep. *I don't want to die here.*

* * *

The week that followed my imprisonment was one of the most painful and torturous that I had ever endured. What with being starved, kicked around my cell, hit with various blunt objects and having buckets of water being tossed at me, by the end of that week I was feeling very sore and sorry for myself.

I felt it when Sadie's protection over me broke. Her ring had been sewn into the left pocket of my hoodie, which usually rested against my hip when it was zipped up. At the moment that the protection broke, the ring grew so hot that I could feel it through my jeans. I didn't make a sound as it burned me. Instead I closed my eyes tightly and forced myself to put up with it. Compared to the pain I was already in, it was little more than an annoyance.

I knew very little about human anatomy, having studied sociology at college, but I knew my own body and had a somewhat sketchy idea of what the vampires had done to me. From a very quick and extremely rough categorisation of my injuries, I had a nice long list stored away in my head that I dutifully added to every time they inflicted more harm on me. Broken ribs, dislocated right shoulder, badly broken right arm, both ankles fractured – how they had managed to do that while my feet were still bound together, I had no idea – broken fingers on my right hand from where they had been stomped on more than once...the list went on and on. More than likely quite a bit of damage had been done to my knees as well, but as they had stopped hurting a few days earlier I couldn't be certain. Finding out for sure was going to have to wait.

Right as the ring stopped burning against my hip, my cell door swung open with that by-now-familiar scrape of metal upon metal. I didn't bother to look up or even to open my eyes – I knew what was about to happen. It didn't take an idiot to work that out. Hands grabbed hold of me and lifted me to my knees, before proceeding to drag me from my cell. I didn't resist, knowing it would only mean more pain. It was just easier and marginally less painful to take the path of least resistance – though being tied up as I was, I really had very little choice in the matter.

I chose to keep my eyes closed even after I was no longer being dragged. I just lay there on the cold stone floor, feigning unconsciousness.

"Well, this is a fine mess you've got yourself into, isn't it?" a voice I recognised as Desdemona's said. She sounded faintly amused. "Maybe next time you'll be a good little civilian and stay home where you belong."

I opened my eyes now and looked up at Desdemona. "More like maybe next time, I'll be far enough away that I can use up all my arrows on your sorry behind," I rasped out.

She smiled coldly. "I'm afraid that there won't be a next time for you, my dear," she said. "Your precious protection has broken now, and your supposed girlfriend hasn't come to rescue you. Oh, don't look so shocked," she snapped, and I knew I must have gone pale from shock. "I know

how hunter protection rituals work. I *was* one many decades ago. You are going to die here in this room, right there on the floor, and *nobody* will be coming to save you.”

She crouched down now, and leaned in close enough that I could see how sharp her fangs were. “And once we’ve drained every last drop of blood from your veins, I fully intend to dump your sorry carcass on the front doorstep of the nearest hunter compound. Say, perhaps...the compound in *Philadelphia?*”

I didn’t even bother to react to that. I didn’t want to give the bitch the satisfaction of knowing she was right. She straightened up and turned away from me.

“The elders will feed first. Do not limit yourself to just one of the prisoners – there are more than enough to go around. And most importantly, do *not* take more than your fair share. Nobody likes a greedy vampire.”

The air was electric with anticipation now. I was surrounded by ravening beasts, with nowhere to run and no way of escaping. How *could* I escape? I was still tied up, with too many broken bones and all possible exits blocked. Unless I could pick a lock with my teeth, there was no way I was getting out of here. Not without a lot of help.

It took just one word from Desdemona’s accursed mouth for the feeding frenzy to commence.

“Begin.”

Barely seconds later the screaming began, as the vampires started their feast. I tried to tuck my head in toward my chest and raise my arms up over my head, but one of the vampires pinned me down before I could even try. I let out a scream of my own as the vampire latched onto me, a set of razor-sharp fangs piercing my neck. The world turned white hot, narrowing to just me and the vampire that was making a meal out of my blood.

I had thought I knew pain. Evidently I’d been completely wrong, because all of the pain I had experienced prior to this moment paled in comparison to the sheer agony of being mauled by a

vampire. On a scale of one to ten, all of that pain combined ranked about an eight. This moment pushed it completely off the scale.

I couldn't help myself. Instead of screaming incoherently, as so many of the other prisoners were doing, I screamed out one single word.

"Sadie!"

I had no idea at first if screaming out for Sadie had worked. Vampire after vampire descended upon me, with sometimes as many as two feeding on me at once. And with every second that passed by I started feeling weaker and weaker, wanting very much to just fall asleep and never wake up again. And I might have done just that if the next voice I heard hadn't given me even just the tiniest spark of hope.

"Hey! Leave them alone, you fanged freaks!"

Duncan, I realised hazily. *That's Duncan...*

The vampire that had just been feeding on me let out a laugh that sounded to my ears like breaking glass. "You and what army, *hunter?*" he retorted, seconds before an arrow with red feathers on the back caught him in the neck – one of *my* arrows. He dropped like a stone, a look of shock frozen onto his face.

"This army, vampire," Duncan replied decisively. "Anyone else want to try playing the hero? Because I've got plenty more where that one came from."

That was all it took for the feeding frenzy to stop. Out of the corner of my eye I watched every vampire in the room back away toward the walls. For just a moment I could have sworn they all looked utterly terrified, but I almost immediately dismissed it.

"Any of you who can walk," Duncan said as he walked into the room, "you're free to go. We have a team of medics outside who will be able to treat any injuries you might have sustained. Anyone who can't walk, stay where you are and you'll be attended to as soon as possible."

I knew there couldn't have been many other prisoners, yet when they departed the room it sounded almost like a stampede. When the figurative dust had cleared, I was the only one left lying on the floor. I tried to push myself up off the floor so that I could sit up, using my left hand for leverage, but I was shaking so much that all I could do was raise myself up just a couple of inches. Duncan must have seen me trying to move, for the next sound I heard was the pelting of feet coming toward me.

"Whoa, easy does it," he said softly in my ear, and I almost started crying out of sheer relief. "Come on, let's get you out of here. Can you stand up for me?"

I shook my head. "Can't move," I managed to whisper.

"Okay, okay. You don't have to move. I'll carry you."

I felt like I was eight years old again instead of twenty-eight as Duncan put one arm under my knees and the other around my shoulders. "I'm going to move on three," he warned me, and I instinctively braced myself. He counted to three before rising up out of his crouch and carrying me out of the throne room.

"Duncan!" I heard Sadie call out once Duncan and I were outside. She sounded completely panicked, and I could hardly blame her. Even so, I finally allowed myself to relax, and I closed my eyes again. I was safe now.

"I've got her, Sadie," Duncan called back. "See if you can find a knife or something, we need to get her untied."

"What did they *do* to her?" I heard Flynn ask. Even through my closed eyes I could see red light flashing on and off, the light growing steadily brighter as Duncan walked.

"It'd be easier to list what they *didn't* do to her, I think," Duncan replied. "We need to get her to hospital – they really roughed her up."

"Hey..."

I opened my eyes again to find Sadie standing next to Duncan and I, and I managed a very weak smile. "Hey," I mumbled. "Missed you."

"I missed you too," Sadie replied, before frowning. "You're bleeding."

Thank you very much, Captain Obvious, I snarked in my head.

"They were feeding from her, Sadie," Duncan said, and he lowered me onto what felt like a bed.

"Of course she's going to be bleeding. She's lucky I got in there when I did – look at her, they almost drained her dry."

"Almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades," Flynn said, and I felt the ropes binding my wrists and ankles together loosen. "No matter how lucky she is, she's going to be extremely unlucky if we don't get moving right now."

I looked up at Sadie as I was loaded into the waiting ambulance. She was holding my left hand in both of hers, and at that moment I knew I never wanted her to let go. "Stay with me?" I asked in a whisper.

"Always," she promised.

Chapter 9

Once Was Lost

Sadie

The waiting room at the hospital was quiet and almost deserted, which was just the way I wanted it to be. I was the only person in there at that moment – Flynn was off assisting in the hospital’s emergency department, while Duncan was at the hunter compound just outside of the city debriefing the Council after our little adventure. We hadn’t quite made it to Philadelphia after all – instead, our intermediate destination was Oklahoma City, with the vampires having set up their base of operations in an abandoned manor house about ten miles outside of the city limits.

I looked up from studying my boots when the waiting room door opened to see my mother sidling her way inside. “Hey Mom,” I said quietly once she had closed the door behind her.

“Hello Sadie,” she replied, and came to sit down in the seat next to mine. “How is she?”

“Last I heard, she was still in surgery. Has been for a couple of hours now.” I drew in a deep breath and let it out shakily. “They really did a number on her, Mom. I thought all they were going to do was feed on her.” I squeezed my eyes shut. “They about *broke* her. All I wanted to do when Duncan brought her outside was hold her close and tell her everything was going to be all right, but I couldn’t even do that. She was in too much pain for me to be able to do much more than hold her hand in mine.” I choked back a quiet sob. “Vampires are utter bastards, Mom. They’re bastard-coated bastards with bastard filling.”

To my surprise and relief, Mom didn’t comment on the words I had chosen to use. Just from that, I knew she understood how much emotional pain I was in – and I was in quite a bit of it.

“Is her family coming to visit?” Mom asked, and I shook my head. “Why not?”

"She doesn't really have any. Her parents died when she was fourteen, her uncle died seven years after that, and as far as I know she's not in contact with her aunt and cousins. No brothers or sisters either. I'm pretty much all she's got in the whole world."

"That isn't true," Mom chided gently. "She has all of us. Or aren't you going to marry her after all?"

I could have smacked myself. Of course Taylor had family aside from me. She had my entire family – hell, she had the whole of Clan Albright to call her own. Or at least she would in around eight or nine months' time.

"Of course I'm going to marry her, Mom. It's just..." I trailed off, biting down hard on my bottom lip.

"It's not important right now," my mother finished.

I nodded. "Right. Making sure she survives this is most important."

Quiet reigned for about ten or fifteen minutes after this. I had started pacing around the waiting room in an effort to stave off the rising panic I was starting to feel when the door opened to admit Flynn. He looked unusually solemn.

"Is she all right?" I asked once Flynn had seated himself. I resumed my own seat now, not wanting to distract Flynn with my constant movement around the room.

"From what I've been able to find out – and before you ask, it's not much," he added hurriedly.

"I'm about to go in there right now and relieve one of the surgeons. But as far as I know..." He bowed his head and closed his eyes. "They're coming close to losing her, Sadie. They've managed to set all her fractures and pop her shoulder back in its socket, but she keeps losing blood from somewhere. I'm guessing that when the vampires kicked her around all of this week, something inside of her just, well..." He shook his head. "It might be too much for her, Sadie. That's all I'm saying."

"But she was fine when Duncan brought her out," I said, beginning to feel desperate. "She was in a lot of pain, but otherwise she was all right."

Flynn raised his head to look at me. "Do you know what hypovolemic shock is, Sadie?" he asked, and I shook my head mutely. "It's basically what you go into when you lose too much blood. One step up from complete exsanguination. And Taylor was in the final stage of it when Duncan found her. Vampires in a feeding frenzy, they don't drain that much blood in one go. It usually takes them a good week or so to accomplish a complete draining. They had to have done something to her beforehand." He stood up now. "I promise you Sadie, I'll find out what they did to her."

"Don't you dare let her die in there, Flynn," I said fiercely. "Your life won't be worth living if she does."

"I won't let her die," he promised. "And as soon as I find anything out, I'll come and let you know."

"Thank you, Flynn," Mom said quietly as Flynn rose from his seat.

After Flynn left, I got up from my own seat and walked toward the waiting room's door, slinging the strap of my messenger bag around my neck and settling it on my left shoulder as I went. Up until now it had been stuffed away in my backpack, ready for when I needed it the most. And right now, I definitely needed it. "I'm just going down to the chapel, Mom," I said when she raised an eyebrow at me. "That's all. I'm not going to abandon Taylor. She needs me right now."

"I never said you *were* going to abandon her," Mom said evenly. "Just be careful."

"I will be," I promised.

It didn't take me long to find the chapel – it was empty, which I was thankful for. I didn't think I could have handled anyone seeing me cry, not least of all a stranger. I needed to take some time for myself right now.

I walked straight over to the chapel's bookshelves, nestled against the right-hand wall, and I crouched down to examine the spines of the books collected there. The shelves held all manner of religious texts – Bibles, the Book of Mormon, the Principia Discordia, some of the Vedas, a few copies of the Koran, a copy of the Tanakh, and most reassuringly quite a few copies of the Book of Shadows. Deciding to pick one completely at random, I closed my eyes and pulled out one of the books by its spine.

When I opened my eyes I found that I held a copy of the Bible.

"Damnit," I mumbled. I had never liked or trusted Christianity, and yet here I was about to try and find solace in that religion's holy book. Still, I supposed it was better than nothing.

I sat down in one of the seats furthest from the chapel door and set the Bible down in my lap. It ended up falling open to the Epistle of James, and my eye was immediately drawn to a couple of verses about halfway down the page. *And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.*

I closed the Bible and returned it to the shelves. I wasn't going to pray, but instead I was going to ask a blessing of one of the goddesses. Normally I asked blessings of my Clan's goddess, Morrigan, but this time I knew another goddess would be more appropriate. More specifically, one of the goddesses of healing.

I knelt down before the chapel's altar and closed my eyes, taking in a few deep breaths before unbuckling my messenger bag and opening it up. Hidden away under the morass of books, bottles of water, spare clothing and other random bits and pieces was a small cedar box that had runes carved into the lid. I took it out and balanced it on my knees, setting my messenger bag to one side before opening the box. Inside were my healing foci – two angelica flowers, two leaves from a blackberry vine, two flaxseed pods, and two acorns from an oak tree. I carefully

took them from their box and spread them out on the floor before the altar. I was horribly out of practice – it had been a very long time since I had needed to ask for a blessing from this particular goddess. Almost as an afterthought I dug through my messenger bag again and dragged out one of my books. Inside the front cover was a photograph from a vacation Taylor and I had gone on the previous summer, up in Seattle. I placed the photograph on the carpet just above my foci and put my messenger bag aside once more.

I took a few moments to collect myself before I started the ritual, closing my eyes and taking in a few deep breaths. As soon as I was ready, and not a moment before, I began to speak.

“Áine, tonight I call to you. Please aid me in this work I do. Taylor needs your healing tonight. Please shine on her your healing light. Please accept this offering, and to Taylor please bring a speedy and full recovery. For this I give my thanks to thee. For the good of all and harm to none, so say I, and so shall it be done.”

I ended up staying there before the altar for an age with my eyes closed and hands resting on my knees, meditating. The quiet of the chapel was just what I had needed to be able to clear my head and refocus – I definitely wouldn’t have been able to do that back in the waiting room. I had just returned all of my bits and pieces to my messenger bag and buckled it up again when I felt a hand land on my shoulder. I looked back to find Duncan crouched behind me.

“Flynn asked me to come and find you,” he said before I could say a word.

“Is she okay?” I asked immediately.

“I think I should let him tell you that,” Duncan replied. He helped me to my feet and led me from the chapel, back to the waiting room where Flynn and my mother were waiting for me.

“Have a seat, Sadie,” Flynn said. I complied immediately, sitting back down next to my mother. She immediately drew me close, putting an arm around my shoulders. “She’s extremely lucky,” Flynn said to begin. “However, I need you to understand that the next twenty-four hours will be

absolutely critical if she's going to survive this. Right now she's in an induced coma so that she can begin to heal."

"But she'll be okay, right?" I asked, needing confirmation on that one point.

"That depends entirely on her," Flynn replied. "She'll be gradually brought out of the coma once her doctor decides that she's ready for it. If she can breathe on her own, and so long as her heart's okay, then yeah, she should be all right."

"You're not going to be her doctor?" Mom asked, and Flynn shook his head.

"Too much of a personal conflict. I know her and I consider her a friend. The only reason they even let me assist during the surgery was because they were severely short-handed. But I've managed to get her doctor to promise that she'll keep me updated as much as she can, so that I can keep you guys in the loop as well."

"Thank you, Flynn," Mom said, and Flynn nodded before speaking again.

"I spoke to Dr. Edwards just before I came in here to speak with you three, and she's allowing one of you to go and sit with Taylor for a few minutes. I told her to expect you, Sadie."

Oh thank Morrigan, I said in silent relief. *I'm not going to have to beg and plead to be let in to see her.* "Thanks, Flynn," I said quietly. "Can I have a few moments first, please?"

"Yeah, of course," Flynn replied. He nodded toward the closed door of the waiting room. "I'll just be out in the corridor when you're ready."

Almost at the second that Flynn had left the waiting room, I broke down sobbing. It was terrible of me, but a small part of me had expected that she wouldn't make it. I knew there was still a chance that she wouldn't survive, but I had to hold onto whatever hope I could find. I felt two hands on my back, one each belonging to my mother and Duncan, and Duncan's other hand smoothing down my hair.

She's alive, I reminded myself. She's alive, and she's breathing. That's the main thing right now.

When I was ready, I followed Flynn through the hospital to the intensive care unit, clutching a stuffed toy lion in my hands as I walked. I'd had it since I was a baby, and it had always comforted me when I was sick, scared or lonely. It had gone from Philadelphia to San Francisco with me, and now here to Oklahoma City, all the while travelling in the very top of my backpack.

Now, though, someone else needed it more than I did.

The intensive care unit was almost deserted when Flynn and I entered. "It can be a little confronting if you haven't been in an ICU before," he said as we walked through the still and quiet space. "All you need to remember that everything you see, it's keeping her alive."

I gave a quick, jerky nod, not sure I could trust myself to speak. Flynn seemed to understand this, much to my relief, and he fell silent for the rest of our walk.

When we finally reached Taylor's bed, I had to look away at first. If not for the IV line taped down on her left arm, the wires snaking their way from beneath the plain white hospital gown that she wore instead of her street clothes, and the plastic tube in her mouth and down her throat, I would have thought she was just sleeping. Instead it was almost like the drive between Oakland and Bakersfield all over again.

She did look a whole lot better than she had when Duncan had rescued her. That much I was grateful for. Two bandages covered the bites that the vampires had inflicted during their feast. Her right arm from her hand all the way up to just above her elbow was encased in a bright blue fibreglass cast, while all of the fingers on that hand were bandaged together so that the healing bones didn't shift out of place. Her right shoulder was also bandaged up, as were both of her ankles.

"She's going to be in a lot of pain when she wakes up," Flynn said quietly. "With as many broken bones as she had..." I heard him let out a quiet sigh. "It's a miracle she survived in that place for

as long as she did. If you hadn't been scrying as much as you did, and if you hadn't been so determined to find her, she would have died in there. She's very lucky that she's got you, Sadie."

"Did you find out why she was bleeding out?" I asked as I sat down in a nearby chair.

"One of the arteries near her heart was damaged," Flynn replied, and I sucked in a sharp breath. "We had to stop her heart so it could be repaired." He reached over and pulled the collar of Taylor's hospital gown down just far enough that I could see the top of a line of stitches that marched their way down her chest. "I think that it was probably weak to begin with – it's likely that she was born with it that way. It just took a week of constant abuse for it to, well, pop."

I looked up at Flynn. "Thank you for saving her, Flynn. It means the world to me."

Flynn gave me a tired smile. "My pleasure, Sadie." He put a hand on my left shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. "I'll let you have a few minutes alone with her. Come and find me when you're ready to go back out – I'll be over at the nurse's station."

"Thank you," I whispered.

I didn't speak for at least a minute after that. All I did was listen to her breathe and to the high-pitched beeping from the machine that was monitoring her heartbeat, holding her left hand in mine. Someone, one of the nurses I guessed, had rescued my Clan ring from the pocket of her hoodie and slipped it onto her left ring finger. It looked good on her hand, probably better than it ever had on mine.

"I'm sorry," I said at last. "I'm sorry I didn't try harder to stop the vampires taking you. I'm sorry I didn't break my society's laws and tell you what I was when we started dating. But most of all..." I trailed off and took in a shaky breath. "I'm sorry that I dragged you into this. I honestly thought that by bringing you along, you'd be far safer than you would have been if I'd left you at home. But I was wrong, Tay..." I let out a hiccup. "I was wrong. I never intended for any of this to

happen to you, and I should have done more to keep you safe." I swiped at my face with my free hand, not surprised in the least to find tears there.

I picked my toy lion up off the floor where I had set it down and placed it on Taylor's bed close to her head. "I asked the goddess Áine to heal you, but I think you might like something a bit more tangible as well." I smoothed down the toy's fur with a thumb. "I'm going to let Rufus watch over you for me – he's always been good to me when I've needed a bit of company, and I think you might appreciate him right now. You need him a lot more than I do."

I took up her left hand again and kissed each of her fingertips in turn before curling her fingers around my hand. And that was how I sat until my time with her was up, watching her and wishing that I could somehow take her place.

I ended up spending the next few days at the hospital. I didn't want to go too far away, just in case something happened while I wasn't there. The nurses and Taylor's doctor seemed to tolerate my presence more than they would anyone else's, which I definitely appreciated.

It was a few mornings after we had all arrived at the hospital that I finally felt properly hopeful. I had known for at least a day now that she was going to be okay – she was breathing on her own again, and it was now only a matter of waiting for her to wake up.

I had just put my head down for a quick nap when I felt it – Taylor's left hand tightening ever so slightly around mine. I looked up so fast I thought I was going to end up with whiplash, just in time to see her eyes opening slowly.

"Hey beautiful," I said softly. "Welcome back." Her sole response was a weak smile, before her eyes slid shut once more. I could have started crying out of sheer relief right then, but instead I reached over and pushed her call button.

Thank you, Áine, for watching over and blessing her, I said silently as I stood up. I bent down and pressed a kiss to Taylor's forehead before backing away to allow the nurses and Dr. Edwards to do their work.

My world had been dark for one week, all because a pack of vampires had decided that my girlfriend made for the perfect unwilling dinner guest. I had been completely lost without her. And now that I had found her again, I wasn't about to let her go. Not without one hell of a fight.

Chapter 10

One Day At A Time

Taylor

"Full name?"

"Jordan Taylor Hanson."

"Date of birth?"

"March fourteenth, nineteen eighty-three. Can I ask what the point of this is, please?"

"Place of birth?"

I growled, frustrated at having my question completely ignored, and my fingers tensed around the tail of Sadie's stuffed toy lion. "Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, United States of America."

"Current residence?"

"San Francisco, California, United States of America."

"Parents' names?"

"Not that it matters because they *died* thirteen years ago, but their names were David James and Susannah Maureen Hanson. Now are you going to tell me what the fuck is going on here?"

Beside me Sadie started snickering, and I flipped her the bird with my good hand. The woman who was questioning me looked utterly scandalised, at which I hid a grin. "This is standard procedure, Ms. Hanson," she said. "We need to make sure that your recent ordeal hasn't resulted in impaired brain function."

"Well I can tell you right now that it hasn't," I snapped. "The only things wrong with me are that my right side is busted because a pack of vampires decided they were going to kick me around

for a week, and I also apparently have something wrong with my heart because I've got a dirty great row of stitches down my chest now. There is *nothing wrong* with my head, and I'd appreciate it if you'd take your clipboard and your pen, and fuck off before my girlfriend here goes apeshit on your ass."

I managed to keep up the pretence of irritation until Sadie and I were alone in my hospital room once more. As soon as the door snicked closed Sadie burst out laughing. "Did you see the look on her face?" she gasped out, too doubled over with laughter to be able to speak properly.

I didn't answer with much more than a nod. While I'd been able to ignore the worst of it while I was being questioned, the pain had now returned in full force. My entire right arm from my shoulder all the way down to my fingers was hurting worst of all, with the pain in both of my ankles pulsing in time with my heartbeat. "Ow," I whispered.

"I think you need to lie down," Sadie decided. "I keep forgetting that you just had major surgery less than a week ago."

"It wasn't *major*," I protested as Sadie found the button on my remote that lowered the head of my bed.

"I would beg to differ on that one," she disagreed. "Let's see now. You had to have pins put in both of your ankles because they were too badly broken to be set normally. Your shoulder had to be popped back into its socket and all of the tendons and ligaments repaired, because otherwise that arm would have ended up permanently disabled. Your fingers had to be splinted and bandaged to stop you using them before the bones have totally healed. You had to have pins and screws put into both bones in your right arm to set those particular fractures before they could put a cast on your arm. And all the while, you were losing more blood than they could put back into your body, all because one of the arteries near your heart pretty much burst while the vampires were having their feast. They didn't manage to find and repair it right up until

you'd almost totally bled out, and to be able to do that they had to open you up and *stop your heart beating*. And you tell me that what you went through isn't *major*?"

She breathed in after this, and I was shocked to see that there were tears in her eyes. "You almost *died*, Taylor," she whispered. "Flynn came and told me right before he went in to work on you that I should expect the worst. And the only thing I could do to help was ask one of the goddesses to heal you. After you came out of surgery I sat there by your bed in ICU for nearly three days while you were in an induced coma, wishing that I could somehow switch places with you. I can't go through that ever again. I almost lost you once, and I'm not ever going to lose you again."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I just..." I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose between my left thumb and index finger. "This is a lot to get my head around, that's all. It's easier for me to dismiss it almost entirely, at least to begin with. I'm not ready yet. Give me a couple of weeks at the very least."

Sadie nodded, and she swiped at her eyes with the heel of her left hand.

We didn't speak for what felt like an eternity. As usual, it was Sadie who broke our silence.

"I'm sorry."

I raised an eyebrow at her. "What do you have to be sorry for?"

"Dragging you into this. I..." She bit down hard on her bottom lip and squeezed her eyes shut. "You weren't even supposed to come along, Tay. The Hunters' Council expressly forbade it, and I completely ignored them. The only reason I brought you with me was because I thought you would be safer with me than you would have been if I'd left you behind. I thought I'd be able to protect you if we were together. And I couldn't even do that. I didn't even try to stop the vampires from taking you."

"Sadie..." I slowly pushed myself upright again, gritting my teeth against the pain in my chest and side as I moved. "Have you ever heard of a little something called free will?"

"Of course I have."

"I could have quite easily have stopped you. I could have put my foot down and told you I wasn't coming, and there wouldn't have been a thing you could have done to make me go with you. You should know by now how stubborn I am. And yet I did neither." I met Sadie's gaze. "You did what you thought was best, Sadie, and I believed you when you said it was getting too dangerous to stay in San Francisco. I trusted your judgement, and I still do. You know your world better than I do – better than I ever will, probably."

Sadie opened her mouth now, presumably to speak, but I held up my left hand to silence her.

"I'm not done yet. As for not protecting me...you *did* protect me. Your ring kept me from being bitten for an entire *week*. If you hadn't asked your aunt to cast a protection on it and then given it to me, I am fairly certain that they would have done it a whole lot earlier than they did. It's highly likely that they would have killed me that night. I've been through hell, yeah, and I broke more bones in one week than I had in my entire life right up until that point, but I'm healing and that's the main thing. And as for not stopping them taking me? You did your best to stop them. You were completely willing to sacrifice yourself to keep me alive, and anyway I heard what that bitch of a vampire said when they were dragging me toward their car. I'm not deaf. They would have snapped my neck like a twig if you'd tried anything. I owe you my *life*, Sadie. I will be forever grateful to you, Duncan and Flynn for that. The three of you did your absolute best to keep me safe, and that means everything to me."

There was more quiet after this, but this time it was far less tense than the previous stretch of silence had been. This time, it was my turn to break it.

"Sadie, would it be okay with you if we didn't go back to San Francisco right away?"

"Are you feeling quite all right?" Sadie asked. She reached over to try and put a hand on my forehead but I smacked it away.

"I'm fine, Sadie. I want to be close to family for a while, that's all. And seeing as I don't really have any of my own left..." I trailed off and gave a one-shouldered shrug.

"So you figured we could go and spend time with mine?" Sadie guessed, and I nodded. She let out a quiet chuckle. "You are one very strange creature, Taylor Hanson."

"Guilty as charged. So what do you think?"

Sadie seemed to consider this. At least that's what I assumed she was doing, seeing as she was quiet for almost a full minute.

"I don't see why we couldn't," she replied at last. "I think we both need to be close to family right now. And it's going to be hard for you to get up to our apartment for a few months anyway."

"That was one of the reasons why I suggested it. I'm going to be stuck in bed and then a wheelchair for at least the next six weeks, maybe even longer. And unless you want to carry me up all those flights of stairs and back down again anytime we need to go out, it's probably better that we don't go home straight away." Another shrug. "Well, we'll need to go back there anyway to pack up everything that we didn't bring with us on this little adventure, but you get my meaning."

"I do, yeah." She took my left hand in both of hers and entwined our fingers. "You just have to get better now, so that they turn you loose."

"You don't want much from me do you?" I asked cheekily, before laughing. "I'll get better, Sadie. I'm in good hands here. Yours as well as theirs. Just let me take things one day at a time."

* * *

A few weeks after my release from hospital, and after the relocation to Philadelphia, Sadie and I returned to Oklahoma City. I had spent almost the first fifteen years of my life there, and it was where my parents were buried. I had never seen where they were buried, not even directly after their funeral – I'd been too distraught to attend the burial, and after school had ended that year I had gone straight to New York. I'd never had a chance to say a proper goodbye to my parents.

"Your uncle was a real bastard," Sadie said as she drove us through the city toward the cemetery that had become the final resting place of my mother and father. "I can't imagine never being allowed to say goodbye to my parents."

"Welcome to my world," I mumbled.

Sadie took her eyes off the road just long enough to look at me. I managed a tiny smile, which she mirrored before returning her attention to driving.

It wasn't long until we arrived at our destination. Thankfully the cemetery's parking lot was empty aside from our rented car – it meant that I would be able to do my grieving in relative privacy. Once I was settled in the wheelchair that had been sent home with me from the hospital, and after Sadie had read over the email I'd received from the cemetery managers a few days earlier, we set off on our little journey. I ended up keeping my gaze fixed on my hands, both of them resting in my lap, and so when Sadie stopped pushing me it was a little jarring.

"This is it, according to the email they sent you," Sadie explained when I looked back over my shoulder at her. "D'you want any help?"

"Yeah, that might be a good idea," I replied. "Just help me get out of this thing, I'll figure things out from there."

Sadie had soon eased me out of the wheelchair onto the grass. I took a few moments to collect myself before I slowly shifted myself closer to the headstone that marked my parents' grave. It

took every last bit of emotional strength I had to be able to lift my gaze to read the inscription on the stone.

In Memoriam

David James Hanson

September 18 1958 – March 7 1998

Susannah Maureen Hanson

January 9 1959 – March 7 1998

Loving parents of Taylor

Always beloved, never forgotten

Ex Umbra In Solem

“From the shadow into the light,” I said quietly, automatically translating the Latin into English.

I sat there in silence for an age, gathering my thoughts and trying to work up the nerve to speak to my parents. I could do it so easily when all I was doing was talking to a photograph, but now that I was here...it almost seemed like I was tarnishing the sanctity of their memory.

“Are you all right?” I heard Sadie ask from behind me, and I nodded quickly. It was a lie and I knew it – I was gradually beginning to feel overwhelmed by thirteen years’ worth of memories, and I was already beginning to blink back tears. She had always seemed to know when I was lying, though, and for once I was grateful for that. In short order she had joined me in sitting right on top of the gravesite, and had pulled me into her arms. That was all it took for me to start sobbing – I turned my face away from the headstone and buried it in Sadie’s shoulder, finally releasing all of the grief and misery that had been building up for close to half of my life.

“Shh,” she whispered as she held me close, one of her hands rubbing in a small circle right over my spine. “Do you want to get out of here?”

"No," I answered, my voice choked with tears. "I..." I swallowed hard before I continued. "I need to do this, Sadie. I-I should have come here years ago but I could never make myself do it."

"You should never have forced yourself to do it anyway," she chided me gently. "You haven't been ready until now – I can understand that completely. My dad still hasn't said his final farewell to my Uncle Warren, and he died ten years before I was even born." Her hand now moved to threading through my hair. "We'll stay here for as long as you want or need to. I won't force you to do anything you're not ready for."

"Thank you," I whispered.

We stayed sitting like that for what felt like an age. I finally pulled away and took in a shaky breath before facing the gravestone again. It was time.

"Hi Mom," I started. "Hi Dad. It...it's Taylor, though I figure you already figured that out. I know I haven't come to visit before now and I'm really sorry about that, but I just wasn't ready until now. I was too upset and distraught for it when you were being buried, I wasn't allowed to come and see you before Aunt Elizabeth took me home with her to New York, and after that...every time I thought about coming back here I damn near had a panic attack. It took almost dying for me to finally get over myself." I forced a wry smile at this. "But I'm here now at least. I guess that's the most important thing.

"It hasn't been the same without you. But aside from a few years of hell when I was living with Aunt Elizabeth, it's been all right. I finished high school, I moved to San Francisco for college and graduated from there, and somewhere along the way I fell in love." My left hand found Sadie's now. "I've been dating my girlfriend Sadie Albright for the last four years. We absolutely adore each other and we're going to get married one day. We're not engaged yet, but just as soon as one of us works up the nerve to pop the question we will be." I looked up at Sadie, and she smiled at me before leaning in close to kiss me.

"It hurts sometimes knowing that I'm never going to see you again. I've got photographs, yeah, but it just isn't the same as having you here. And it's always the hardest around my birthday – I don't really take much notice of it anymore, to be honest. It doesn't seem right, grieving one week and then celebrating the next. It's just another date to me these days. The only difference is that it means I'm a year older than I was the day before."

I was quiet again for a little while after that. Sadie decided to take it upon herself to speak to my parents, and I couldn't help but smile at what she said.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hanson, my name's Sadie Albright – I'm Taylor's girlfriend and her roommate. She means the absolute world to me, though I'm sure she knows that very well by now. I can promise you both that I'm going to take good care of her – I would never intentionally allow her to come to any harm." Her left thumb moved in circles over the back of my left hand. "Unintentionally is a different story, but I'll do my best to make sure that never happens."

"Nice, Sadie," I commented dryly.

I leaned forward just far enough that I was able to touch the engravings of my parents' names, and I traced them with the very tip of a finger. "I love you guys," I whispered. "I always have, and I always will. And I miss you both so much."

I was truly exhausted after that. I was completely spent both physically and emotionally – I was still healing, and were I in my right mind I would at least have waited until I was out of my wheelchair.

"Sadie?" I asked once we were back in the car.

"Yeah?"

"Next time I suggest doing something like this, can you hit me?"

In response, Sadie smacked me across the back of my head. "I said *next time!*" I shouted as she started laughing.

Hey, there's no time like the present," she said with a grin. I managed to scowl at her for close to a minute before I dissolved into laughter of my own.

"We make quite a pair, don't we?" Sadie asked as our laughter tapered off into quiet giggling.

"We definitely do," I agreed. That at least was true. The two of us were a study in contrasts, especially when it came to our personalities – she was completely extroverted, whereas I was very introverted – but somehow we made it work. It helped a lot that we were completely and wholly in love with each other. And we always would be, for as long as we both lived.

"Come on," Sadie said, and she eased the car into gear. "Let's go home."

~ *fin* ~