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"Turned at Dark"

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About the Author

Sixteen-year-old Della Tsang had never seen a ghost until she saw her dead cousin zip across the street and duck into the alley. If it hadn't been for the streetlight spitting out its spray of wattage overhead, she might have missed him.

And if it hadn't been for a scar that ran along his chin, she might have thought it was just someone who looked like Chan. Then again, it was after midnight. But she *had* spotted the scar. A scar she'd sort of given him when they'd been six, jumping on the trampoline and he'd collided with her head.

Hardheaded Della had been her family nickname after that. Sometimes Della wondered if she'd really been obstinate then, or if the name had just been another thing for her to live up to. Being of Asian descent, there were high expectations, sometimes too high. But because she and her sister were half-white, her father insisted they work twice as hard to prove that their parents' love hadn't tainted the family tree.

A pair of headlights moving down the road pulled Della's attention from the alley where Chan had disappeared. Not that she completely believed it was Chan. Did she?

The car drew nearer, and thinking it was Lee to pick her up, Della stepped off her best friend Lisa's front porch, leaving the sound of the party still going on behind her.

At least twice a month, Della and Lee tried to sneak away so they could be together for an entire night. She knew her parents would freak if they knew she and Lee were sleeping together. It wouldn't even matter that they were practically engaged. But at least Lee had gotten a stamp of approval from her father. Luckily, she agreed with him, too. Not that she agreed with her father on everything. However, Lee was everything Della wanted in a boyfriend—hot, popular, smart, and thankfully for her father's sake, Asian. It didn't even bother her that Lee wasn't totally into the party scene.

She gave the alley one last look. It couldn't have been Chan. She'd attended his funeral less than a year ago—had seen his casket being lowered into the ground. She remembered she hadn't cried. Her father had insisted she not. She wondered if her father would be disappointed if he knew that very night, while alone in bed, she had cried her eyes out.

When the car drove closer, Della realized she'd been wrong. It wasn't Lee. She watched as the car moved down the street, past the alley. She stood there, staring, suddenly feeling alone in the dark, when her phone beeped with an incoming text.

Pulling it out, she read the message. *Parents still up. Will b late.*

Frowning, she re-pocketed her phone and her gaze shifted back to the alley. What would it hurt to just... go check? To prove that ghosts didn't exist.

Moving slowly in the shadows, she neared the alley. The cold of the January night seeped through her leather jacket and the soft tap-tapping of her footsteps seemed loud. Maybe too loud. No sooner had she cut the corner than she heard yelling. She stopped short. Her breath caught at the sight of the fight—or out-and-out war—taking place. The sound of fist hitting flesh filled the cold darkness and she saw bodies being tossed up in the air like rag dolls.

Della might not have been familiar with this darker side of life, but she immediately knew what she'd stumbled on. A gang war. Her heart jumped into her throat. She had to get out of here and fast.

She stepped back, but the heel of her shoe twisted and she lost her footing. Her leg shot up in the air and she went down with a loud thud.

Slamming butt first, her hands went back to catch herself. She felt a sharp pain in her palm, no doubt from a piece of glass from a broken beer bottle a few inches away. Wincing, she muttered, "Shi..." The one-word curse hadn't yet left her lips when the dead silence suddenly drew her attention upward. The fighting had stopped and at least six guys, young, about her age, starting moving toward her. Moving oddly, as if... Their posture reminded her of a pack of animals coming to check out their prey.

Della's focus shifted from the group's strange body movements to their eyes. Her heart jolted when she saw their eyes glowing burnt orange. Then low growling noises filled the shadows. "What the—"

Before she could finish her sentence, they were upon her. "Human. Yum," one of them said.

Tension filled her chest. "I'm leaving." She jumped to her feet.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps behind her, and knew they had her surrounded. The growling escalated and for a second she could swear the sounds weren't human. She turned, hoping to find a path to run, but

instantly something grabbed her around her middle and a cold wind blasted against her face. She felt dizzy, disoriented, as if she were suddenly traveling at high speeds like she was on a roller coaster. She tried to scream, but no sound came out. Darkness surrounded her and it took a second to realize she had her eyes closed. She tried to open them, but the rush of air coming at her stung so badly she slammed them shut. What the hell was happening? Now it felt as if...as if she were flying.

Or falling. No, not falling—someone, or something had her.

Her lungs screamed for air, but what she thought was an arm wrapped around her stomach, cutting off her ability to breathe. She tried to yank herself free, but her efforts were futile. Whoever had her was built of steel, and his flesh felt cold, hard. Something wet seemed to ooze from her hand and she realized it was her blood from where she'd cut herself.

Right then, the cut started to burn. Burn badly, as if someone had just doused it with rubbing alcohol. The searing pain seemed to follow her arm upward, all the way to her chest, and for a second, her heart didn't beat. She gasped, hoping to breathe, but nothing seemed to get through to her lungs. Refusing to let the fear stop her, she forced the words out, "Let me go, you asshole!"

A jolt shot through her body as her feet hit the ground. The arm released her. Her knees buckled, but she caught herself at the last second and shot her eyes open. Blinking, she tried to focus, but everything appeared blurry.

"Breathe," someone said and she recognized the deep, masculine voice. Recognized Chan.

Ghosts did exist?

No, they couldn't.

A couple more seconds later, her vision cleared and holy mother of pearls, she was right. Chan stood directly in front of her. Nausea hit. Her palm still burned. She grabbed her middle, bent over, and puked all over the front of her dead cousin.

"Oh, shit!" He lurched back.

She stood upright again and stared, thinking that any minute now she'd wake up. Or maybe it wasn't a dream. Had someone slipped something into her drink tonight? She pressed her palms into her eyes and didn't care that she was probably smearing blood from the cut on her hand all over her face.

When she dropped her hands, Chan stared, only now his black eyes glowed a bright green color.

He jumped back from her. "You're bleeding!"

"You're dead." She pressed her bloody hand on her middle hoping to squelch the nausea and wipe away the sting.

He pinched his black brows together and stared harder. "Friggin' hell! You're turning."

"No, I'm not! I'm standing still. In one spot," she snapped. "Then again, I do feel dizzy." She closed her eyes and then popped them back open again.

"You needed help so I... I didn't know you'd cut yourself or—"

"I did not need your help, I would have... I would have figured something out."

He shook his head. "Still hardheaded, huh?"

She hugged herself. "What just happened? No, what *is* happening?" She looked around and saw they were no longer anywhere near Lisa's house or that dark alley where she'd gone looking for... "You're dead, Chan. How can you be here?"

He shook his head and stared at her forehead. "If I'd known you were bleeding, I wouldn't have... I should have known you were a carrier. But if I hadn't got you out of there, the dogs would have eaten you alive."

She stopped listening and tried to make sense of the crap that had just happened. She remembered seeing the gang fight, then she fell, and then she'd been surrounded, and... "Oh damn, am I dead?"

"No. But you're going to think you're dying in just a bit. You touched me with an open wound. Your virus is turning live now. That's why you're feeling like you do." He stopped talking and put his nose in the air. "Damn, the hounds are looking for us. I've got to get you out of here." He reached for her and she jumped back.

"Stay away. You've got puke all over you."

"It's your puke."

"I don't care. I don't want it on me. I think?" Whatever she thought went out the mental window. Once again, the wind whipped her hair around her shoulders. The long strands flipped around so hard, it stung when they slapped against her face.

Della's head hurt something fierce. Was this her official first hangover? How many beers had she had, only one, right? She never drank more than... She opened her eyes, and found herself staring at her bedroom ceiling. She knew it was her bedroom, because she could smell the vanilla-scented candles and the Lemon Pledge she'd faithfully polished her furniture with every Friday. And her pillow still smelled like Lee, from when he'd dropped her off at home from school on Monday and no one was home. She loved how he smelled.

But how had she gotten home from the...

Fragments of memories started forming—Chan, the gang fight, flying.

Flying?

She jackknifed up. Her head nearly exploded. "Crap," she muttered and told herself it had been a dream.

"Hey, cuz."

His voice came at the same time the nausea did. She turned and for the second time puked all over her dead cousin.

"Ahh, gross," Chan said, but then he snickered. "I guess I deserve this. Not that I meant for this to happen. I really didn't." But then he laughed again.

Della wasn't laughing. "What's happening?" Tears, partly from the frustration, partly from the pain, filled Della's sinuses. She forced them away. She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her shirt and saw her leather jacket tossed over the foot of her bed.

Chan put a hand on her shoulder and gave her a nudge. "Lie back down and I'll explain."

"There was a gang war," she muttered, trying to remember.

"Yeah, vampires and werewolves. I went to watch. It's cool to watch us take out a few dogs."

Her phone, sitting on her nightstand, beeped with an incoming text. She tried to reach for it, but moving hurt. Another surge of tears filled her throat.

"It's your lover boy," Chan said. "This is like the tenth text he's sent. I think you missed your hookup date." Chan shook his head. "So my little cousin is getting it on with a guy, huh? I feel like I should go beat him up or something."

She dropped back on the bed.

"Do you want me to text him and tell him you're okay?"

"I'm not okay!" Talking made her head pound worse. Realizing she was talking to a ghost made it pound twice as hard. Pain shot in the back of her eyes and she closed them, wishing for relief.

"What's wrong with me?" she muttered to herself and not to Chan, because logic told her that Chan wasn't really there. Someone must have put something in her drink at that party. Yeah. That had to be it.

She heard a chair being pulled up beside her bed. "You're not going to believe this, and that's to be expected. It will take a while to soak in. You see... I'm not dead. I...well, our family carries this virus. It's dormant and you can go your entire life and not even know it, but if and when we come in close contact with a live carrier, especially when there's blood involved, the virus turns active."

"I got a virus?" She swallowed another bout of nausea.

"Yup."

"Bird flu?" she asked.

"Not quite."

"West Nile?"

"No. Vampirism."

She opened one eye, that's all she could do, and peered at him. She would have laughed if she didn't feel as if she were dying. "I'm a vampire?"

"Not yet, it takes four days. And it's not going to be easy. But I'll help you through it."

"I don't need your help." She was her father's daughter, always figuring out how to help herself. Della closed her one eye. Another pain shot through the back of her head, and she realized the way she had to help herself right now was to get help. But not from a ghost. Using every bit of energy she had, she got to her feet. The world started spinning.

"Where are you going?" Chan caught her right before she fell on her face.

She started to ignore Chan, because he wasn't real, but what the hell. "Gotta get Mom." Whatever someone put in her drink was pretty powerful stuff because she was sitting here talking to a ghost about vampires.

"I can't let you do that." Chan pushed her back on the bed, not that it took much effort. She had about as much energy as a snail on Xanax, skinny-dipping in a cup of chamomile tea.

"Mom?" Della screamed.

Della wasn't sure if she'd been in the hospital three hours or ten. She wasn't feeling any better, but at least she'd stopped hallucinating. Chan had disappeared. He hadn't appeared since her mom found her in the fetal position, throwing up again.

The nurses came in and out of her room, trying to force her to drink something. She didn't want to drink anything.

"What the hell did she take?" Della heard her father mutter.

"We don't know she took anything," her mom answered.

"Why would she do this to us? Doesn't she know how this will look?" her dad asked.

Della considered trying to tell them one more time that the only thing she'd done was drink one beer. Earlier she'd almost confessed her theory that someone might have put something in her drink, but stopped when she realized that would've gotten Lisa in trouble. Best to keep her mouth shut, and take whatever punishment came.

"I don't give a damn how it looks! I just want her to be okay," her mom said.

It was the same argument, different version. Mom hated Dad's pride. Della didn't like it either, but she understood it. She hated making mistakes, too. And on top of that, she'd seen the one-room apartment over a Chinese restaurant that her dad and his six siblings had been raised in. Her father and his family deserved to be proud of what they'd accomplished. And it hadn't happened by making mistakes.

Della heard the hospital door open again. "Why don't you take a coffee break, I'm going to be here for a while," a female voice said. Della thought she'd heard the voice earlier. Probably a nurse.

The sound of her parents leaving filled the room. Della felt an overwhelming gratefulness toward the nurse for sparing her from having to listen to the argument, but she didn't have what it took to express it.

"You're welcome," the nurse said, almost as if she'd read Della's mind.

Della opened her eyes. The nurse stood over her.

Blinking, Della tried to focus, but then something weird happened. She could see...something on the woman's forehead. Weird crap. Like lines and stuff, like some kind of computer-jumbled pattern. She blinked hard and slowly opened her eyes again. It helped. The odd stuff was gone.

Della went to push up and realized something else that was gone. The cut on her hand. How had it healed so fast?

The nurse smiled. "Has anyone talked to you yet?"

Della forced herself to reach for the large cup on the hospital table. "About drinking my water. Yeah."

"No, about what's happening to you." The nurse took the cup from Della's hand. "Don't drink anything. It'll make you sicker."

"Sicker? Have they figured out what's wrong?"

The door swished open and a doctor walked in. He moved to the side of her bed and stared down at her.

"Does she know?" he asked the nurse.

"Know what?" Della blurted out.

"I don't think so." The nurse ignored Della's question.

"Know what?" she asked again.

"Her parents aren't live carriers?" the doctor asked.

"No," the nurse answered.

"Would you stop talking about me like I'm not here?"

The doctor met her gaze. "Sorry. I know this is hard." The intensity of his stare disturbed her. For some reason, everything about him disturbed her. Which was odd. She didn't normally instantly dislike people. It generally took at least fifteen minutes and a good reason.

She started to close her eyes, and bam, the weird crap appeared on the doc's forehead.

The doctor growled, a real growl. Della recalled the gang members doing—

"Someone knows." The doctor nodded back to the door.

The hospital door swung open so hard, it slammed against the wall and sounded as if it took out a chunk out of the plastered wall. Della glanced up, but the doctor blocked her view.

"What the hell are you doing to her?" Chan stopped on the other side of the bed.

"Shit," Della said. "It's happening again." And when she glanced at the nurse that crazy thing was on her forehead again. It was as if Della could see inside the nurse's head like in some cheesy B-rated movie. She could see the front of her...brain. Yup, it looked like a brain, only it wasn't just wrinkled. It had strange-looking zigzaggy lines, a cross between bad modern art and ancient hieroglyphics.

"What's happening?" the nurse asked.

"I'm...seeing ghosts." Della had to force herself to stop staring at the woman's brain. She looked at Chan and now he had something on his forehead, too. Only his brain looked different.

"We're trying to help her," the doctor answered Chan.

Della's breath caught. "Can you see him, too?"

Chan snarled at the doctor, exposing his teeth, and she recalled the insane talk about vampires earlier.

"She doesn't need your kind of help, Werewolf!"

"Did you do this to her?" the doctor asked. "Are you the one who infected her?"

"Yes," Chan seethed. "But I didn't know she was bleeding, and if you must know, I didn't have a choice. It was snatch her up and get her out of the alley or let you dogs kill her!"

The doctor frowned. "Have you at least explained it to her?"

"I tried," Chan said. "She's not buying it."

"Buying what?" Della asked, blinking furiously, trying to get the crap off everyone's forehead. "He's dead," she snapped.

"We have to get her out of the hospital before Phase Two hits," the nurse said.

Phase what? Nothing was making sense now.

The doctor looked at Della. "Look, your cousin isn't dead. He's...a vampire and thanks to his carelessness, like it or not, you're about to become one, too."

Della's head started to pound again.

"I have to go," Chan said. "Her parents are coming up in the elevator."

"Wait." The doctor said to Chan, "If I get her released, will you see her through this?"

"I don't need anyone's help!" Della insisted.

"Of course, I will," Chan said. "She's my cousin."

The nurse looked back at Della. "When the turn is complete, I want you to call this woman." She handed Della a card. When Della didn't take it, the nurse placed it in her hand.

"Call who?" Chan asked as he backed toward the door.

"Holliday Brandon. She's the director of the Shadow Falls Camp. She can help."

"Oh, hell no! Della's not going to that stupid camp to get brainwashed by the government."

The nurse's shoulders tightened. "They don't brainwash anyone. They'll help her decide what's best for her."

"I know what's best for her. She's going to come live with me."

Live with Chan? Della struggled to keep up with the crazy conversation. Then she heard the elevator bell ding as if it were right outside her door.

"And fake her death, like you did? That's why she thinks you're a ghost, right?" The nurse shook her head. "Is that really what you want for her? To have to walk away from her entire life, her family?"

Chan didn't answer. Della only saw a blur appear where he'd stood. The door swung back open and caused another chunk of plaster to rain down on the floor. The doctor and nurse looked back at Della with pity, sympathy. Della scowled at them.

"The nurse's right," the doctor said. "Call Shadow Falls. Trust your cousin to help get you through the next few days, but after that, don't believe everything he tells you. You look like a smart girl. Make up your own mind. With proper planning, we can live normal lives."

"We?" Della asked.

"Supernaturals," he said and pointed to his chest. "Werewolf." He motioned to the nurse. "Fae. And you're vampire. There are others, but you'll learn about them in time."

Della slumped back onto the pillow. "So it's official?" she muttered.

"What's official?" the nurse asked.

"I've lost my mind."

"You need to eat and drink something," Della's mother said and handed her a cup with steam billowing above the rim.

Della had been out of the hospital for a day. Her head pounded like a mofo, her body hurt like the worse case of flu she'd ever had. And mentally she was slipping. Her assessment no longer hinged on the fact that she saw Chan. It hinged on the fact that she was this close to believing him. She was turning into a vampire. And, according to Chan, the first two days were a stroll down Easy Street in flip-flops compared to what the next two would be.

She pulled the cup of hot tea to her lips, pretended to drink, hoping to appease her mom. The nurse, and then Chan, had told her that eating or drinking anything would make things worse. Oh, Della hadn't taken them at their word. Nope. She had to go prove it.

She'd never heard of anyone puking up a vital organ, but odds were she was missing a lung right now. Thank God, she had two.

"Lee called again," her mom said, straightening Della's covers.

"Is he coming over?" Della managed to ask, torn between wanting to see him, and not wanting him to see

her like this. Upchucking a lung didn't leave one looking their best.

"I told him he could, but he said his mom was worried you might be infectious."

"She never liked me." Della closed her eyes.

"Why would you say that?" Her mom stood up.

Because I'm half-white. "I don't know," Della lied and opened her eyes. "Because I'm too ballsy."

Her mom squeezed Della's hand. "You are too ballsy. Too independent. Too stubborn. A lot like your dad. But I love him, too." She brushed Della's bangs from her brow.

When her mom left, Chan stepped out of the closet. He edged up against the bed. "You're about to hit Phase Three."

"How do you know?" she asked and oh, damn but every nerve ending in her body seemed to scream. If this was Phase Three, she didn't like it one damn bit!

"Your heart rate is increasing," he said.

Della pushed her head back into the pillow and muttered some ugly words.

"Listen to me, Della. This is very important. When your parents come in here, you have to act normal. Whatever happens, we can't let them take you back to the hospital."

"Why not?" she asked and moaned.

"There's too much blood there. You might lose it. Even the smell of blood might send you over the edge. The first feeds have to be controlled feeds."

Another pain wracked her body and she bit her lip to keep from screaming. "Can I die from this?" She bunched up a fistful of blanket and squeezed. She hated being scared. Hated it because it was a sign of weakness.

His black eyes met hers. "Yeah."

Another sharp pain exploded in her head. "Am I going to die?" Her thoughts shot to Lee. She wanted him to be here to hold her. If she died, she wanted to see him one last time. Then her thoughts shot to her little sister, Joy. Della had sworn to be there for her, to make sure no one ever bullied Joy, like they had her. For some crazy reason, Della knew her sister wasn't as strong as she was.

"No, you're not going to die," Chan said, but Della saw the doubt in his eyes. "You're too hardheaded. Hardheaded Della can't die. You hear me? You can't die, Della. You're going to be strong."

Two days later, Della slowly drifted awake. She'd slept fitfully for most of the past forty-eight hours. She recalled sitting up and pretending to eat when her parents came in, so she wouldn't get stuck going back to the hospital. And she remembered talking to Chan a few times. But she'd been so feverish and out of it that her memory was still hazy. She opened her eyes and quickly slapped her hand over them to block the sun spilling through her window. "Stop that," she seethed.

"Who are you talking to?" Chan asked.

"The sun!" she growled and nearly cut her tongue on her teeth.

"It pisses me off, too. We're night people now. But it's about to go down." Chan must have lowered the blinds, because the burning brightness faded. He continued talking. "As soon as your parents go to bed, we're going out. I need to educate you."

"Educate me in what?"

"Your new life."

She moved her hand from her eyes and looked around. The first thing she saw was the flowers. Red roses. Lee? Yes, she recalled her mother bringing them in and reading her the card. Lee said he loved her.

She smiled and realized she didn't hurt. Not her head. Not her gut. In fact, she felt...good. Strong. She felt more alive than ever.

"I'm well!" She stretched out her arms and did a little bed dance.

"Yeah, you made it. Scared me for a while there, but?"

"Where's my cell?" She wanted to call Lee.

"In the drawer, so I wouldn't have to listen to all the beeping. Your lover boy is worried about you."

Right then, all their talk about vampirism ran through her head. Did she really believe? And if she didn't, how could she explain Chan? She pushed it out of her mind, and decided to enjoy not feeling like day-old dog poop for a few seconds before traveling down that road. A road she somehow knew was going to cause her a lot of pain.

Sitting on the side of the bed, she remembered Chan propping her up on pillows and telling her to fake being okay, every time he heard her parents walking up the stairs. She couldn't remember how well she'd done, but probably not too badly because they never bundled her up to take her to the hospital.

She stood, stretched, and looked down at the chair positioned by the bed. And bam, she was slammed with the memory of Joy, her little sister stepping inside the room. She'd held Della's hand and cried. Cried silently because even her sister knew how her dad hated weakness. Joy's words played like sad music in Della's head. *"Please don't die, Della. You're supposed to help me, help me learn to be strong like you."*

A big ache filled Della's chest. She was so glad she hadn't died and let Joy down.

Looking at the window, she had a vague memory of...standing on the roof.

"Did we go somewhere?"

"Yeah, you were getting cabin fever—needed to sort of test your wings. You did good, too."

Suddenly, she recalled moving at amazing speeds and feeling the wind in her face. What was real?

Her stomach growled. "I'm starved," she muttered.

Chan pointed to a big plastic cup with a straw. "You didn't finish your breakfast."

She reached for the drink and sipped. A thousand different flavors exploded in her mouth. Berries, dark chocolate, tangy melon. Flavors she didn't even recognize, but somehow knew she couldn't live without now that she had sampled them.

"What is this?" She licked her lips and immediately started drinking again.

His right brow arched. "It's what you'll be living on from now on. Blood."

She almost gagged, then stopped herself. She'd bitten her tongue before. "Blood doesn't taste like this." She yanked the top off and stared at...at what looked like blood.

"How can..."

"Nothing will taste like it did before. Don't you remember gagging on the chicken soup your mom brought you?"

She looked at her cousin and vaguely remembered trying to eat the soup. "Tell me you're lying."

"Sorry. Everything is different now. No use in me trying to sugarcoat things. Just accept it."

She stared down at the thick red substance in her cup. "This can't be real."

"It's as real as it gets."

"Oh, God!" She put the cup on her nightstand and stared at it. "What kind of blood?"

"AB negative. O is better, but I couldn't find any."

"That's...that's human blood?" Her stomach churned.

He nodded. "Animal isn't nearly as good. But you'll learn about that in time. I have a lot to teach you."

She cupped a hand over her mouth and stared at the cup. But even as the thought of drinking blood sickened her, even as a part of her vowed not to become this monster, her mouth watered for another taste, another swallow.

She hadn't ever known real hunger or thirst, but this...the feeling that said if she didn't finish what was in that cup right now she might die, had to be the closest thing she'd ever experienced.

Chan went to grab the cup. Before she knew what she was doing she lunged, knocked him across the room, and grabbed the cup.

He laughed. "I figured as much."

She finished the drink, and looked up at Chan. "I need more."

"I know. Right after you turn, you're ravenous. I think I put down fifteen pints my few first days. But you're going to have to wait until after your parents go to bed."

"I want it now," she hissed, not even recognizing her own voice.

"They didn't card me?" Della said, following Chan into the club several hours later. The place was dark, lit up by only a few candles, but amazingly she didn't have much trouble seeing. Or hearing. Noise, crowd noise, the chattering of different conversations, and people shifting in their chairs, came at her from every direction, but somehow she could shut out the parts of it that she didn't want to listen to. However, the ambience didn't stem from the noise or the lighting. Energy vibrated in the place. Della felt it, felt it feeding her, like some forbidden drug.

"The only card you need for this place is right here." He touched her forehead.

Immediately, Della remembered the weird things she'd been seeing on everyone's forehead. She grabbed his arm. "What is that? The forehead thing?"

He grinned. "It's your ID. All supernaturals have the ability to read brain patterns, and eventually you'll learn to tell who is what. And if you concentrate just a little bit you can get behind their shields and know if they're friend or foe."

He pointed across the room. "Look at the guy in the green shirt. Tighten your eyes, and stare at his forehead and tell me what you see."

At first all Della saw was his forehead and then... "I see...swirly lines."

"Now look at my pattern. 'Do you see the similarities?'" Chan asked.

"Yes. But they're not identical," she said.

"Not identical, but he's vampire. Brain patterns are like tracks in the snow, sooner or later, you'll be able to know what kind of animal made that print."

She nodded and glanced around the room.

"Look at that big guy's pattern, the guy in the black coat," he said.

She did. The pattern was completely different. Horizontal lines and...

"Now look deeper. Keep staring. Open your mind."

She concentrated and what she saw was black and dark and gave off the impression of danger. She took a step back.

He laughed. "It's okay. He's not going to hurt you. Not here, anyway. But meet him in a dark alley, and who knows."

"I wasn't scared," she insisted, but she knew it was a lie and she heard her own heartbeat speed up as if punctuating the fib.

"You should be. He's Werewolf and not someone you want to associate with."

Della remembered. "The doctor. He was a werewolf and he didn't seem...bad."

"They are all bad." He looked around. "There's a fae, the pretty brunette in the pink dress. Well, she's half fae, half human."

Della tightened her brows and recalled the pattern of the nurse in the hospital. "I think I sort of understand. But if these people don't get along, how come they come to the same bar? And why would they work together?"

"Because some supers think we should live as one big happy family. Like humans who want to live alongside lions. And I admit I've had my fair share of fun toying with a few breeds." He wiggled his brows.

"Especially humans. It's fun to play with our food."

Della took a step back. "You're human. How can you..."

"I told you earlier, I'm not going to sugarcoat it. I'm not human anymore. Neither are you. You need to start looking at humans as prey because that's all they are for us."

Della put a hand over her mouth. "The blood earlier, you didn't...hurt anyone."

"Got it from a blood bank." He glanced away, almost too quickly, as if he were lying. "Oh, see the little guy in the black shirt? Check his pattern out, but...if he looks this way, glance away, quick."

Emotions swirled around Della's chest. She stared at Chan.

"Look at him, Della. This is important. You need to know this shit."

"Why?"

"Because he's a shapeshifter. You need to be able to recognize them so you can stay clear of them. They are one pissed-off breed. All that changing forms messes with their psyche. Most of them would just as soon kill you as speak to you in passing."

Her emotions were again swarming in her chest.

"Don't worry," Chan said. "Where you're going to live, you won't—"

Della recalled vague snippets of conversation about leaving her family. She couldn't do that. "Chan, I..."
"I'm taking you back to Utah with me. It's a vampire community. I'm actually thinking about joining a gang, and if you want to, we both can—"

She shook her head. "Even if I wanted to go with you, my parents would never let me go."

"Which is another reason we're here. There's a guy here, a mortician, he's going to help us fake your death. How do you wanna go, car crash? Maybe you fall and hit your head when you get out of the tub. He's really good."

Della stood there staring at him, the dark candlelit atmosphere making it seem surreal. Instantly, she remembered how Chan's parents had been devastated at his funeral, how his little sister and hers had cried. How Della had wanted to cry, but her daddy kept looking at her and reminding her she had to be strong.

"No," she said to Chan. "I won't do this."

"You don't have a choice."

"No!"

And just like that, Chan disgusted her. She had to get away from him. Away from everything he was telling her. She shoved him hard. Harder than she intended to. She saw him fly across the room. She didn't wait to see him land, or even to see if he was okay. She took off, darting between tables until she saw a door and ran for it. That room was even darker—only two or three candles were placed on a bar. She darted away from the light, hoping to hide, hoping to lose herself in the crowd.

Suddenly a guy grabbed her by her forearms. "Slow down, sweetcakes. You okay?"

Sweetcakes? She looked at him, but with tears in her eyes, her vision wasn't quite focused. Suddenly his forehead opened up and she saw his pattern. She didn't know what he was, but when she looked deeper, she got a sleazy feeling.

He leaned closer. His breath smelled like onions. "I ordered this for me, but I think you need it more." He placed a warm shot glass in her hand.

She was about to drop it away when the smell hit her. The exotic flavors. She brought the glass to her lips and swallowed it in one gulp. It was better than any alcohol she'd ever tasted. Even better than the blood she'd drunk earlier.

"What was that?" She licked her lips to collect the last taste.

"O negative. Freshly drained." The guy smiled. "My name's Marshal. How about we go back to my place? I got some of this stuff at home, too."

The seediness of his presence suddenly overwhelmed her. "Ever heard of statutory rape, you pervert?" Della seethed, realizing the guy was older than her dad.

"Need some help?" asked a girl who suddenly stood beside them. Dressed goth, her eyes brightened a gold color. Della tightened her brows to read the girl's brain pattern, and decided she was most likely a werewolf. The girl grabbed the man.

The man shoved the girl down and grabbed Della. Della lost it and tossed him across the room the way she had Chan, then she took off for another door, but not before looking back and seeing the girl who'd helped her give her the thumbs-up. Della couldn't help but wonder if Chan was wrong about werewolves.

"Don't believe everything he tells you. You look like a smart girl. Make up your own mind." The doctor's words played in her head, but she didn't have time to think. She heard the dirty old man spouting out orders to someone to find her and bring her back so he could teach her a lesson.

She'd learned enough lessons for one day, Della thought. She ran faster, knocking over tables and chairs, and occasionally the chairs weren't empty. "Sorry. Sorry," she said as she went, moving through the dark, crowded spaces. She smelled beer, and heard the clinking sound of ice swirling in drinks. The club was like an old house, a lot of cubbyholes and tiny rooms filled with card tables for people to group together. The interior felt as if someone had just kept building on, creating an almost mazelike atmosphere. She moved aimlessly, through one door, then another, or maybe it wasn't so aimlessly.

She followed something. She just didn't know what it was until...until she did know. The smell.

Blood.

She entered another room, and three men lay stretched out on beds, needles in their arms and blood being drained from their bodies.

Her first thought was that they were being forced to give up their life-sustaining substance; her second thought was... Yum. Her stomach grumbled and she licked her lips. Then her last thought sickened her. She took a step back, afraid of the urges vibrating through her body, but then the smell entered her senses and her mouth watered.

"If you're wanting to buy it, you'll have to go to the bar," said one of the men. "We work for Tony and we'll get our ass burned if we start selling by the pints in here. But if you want to take one of our cards, we can talk later."

Della watched as one man got up, pulled a needle out of his own arm, and sealed off the bag with some kind of plastic clamp. But the ripe smell of all those exotic flavors filled the room. She watched as he put the blood on a metal tray.

"Hungry, aren't you?" he asked and he smiled at her. She tightened her eyes and saw he had a pattern similar to the nurse. Was he fae?

She inhaled, the smell again filling her nose. Realizing they offered to sell her the blood later, she concluded that they obviously weren't being forced to give up blood. Somehow that made her desire for it less hideous.

Her heart raced. Her stomach grumbled and she dove over the man, her only goal, her only desire to get her hands on that bag of blood.

She got it. The other men stood up from their beds. The needles were yanked from their arms, blood spilling on the floor, as they stood. She hissed at them, thinking they would attack, but they all backed up, as if she frightened them. She knew she frightened herself. The deep, angry sounds parting her lips were unlike any sound she'd ever made.

Moving backward, she found the doorknob and made it outside the door, but a loud ear-pinching noise filled her head. Alarms. She held the plastic bag of blood close to her chest and ducked between crowded tables. Heads turned and followed her every move. She realized that perhaps the others were like her and could probably smell the blood. But she still didn't care. She needed this. Had to have it.

Suddenly, she felt someone grab her arm and yank her across the room. She fought, but her attacker's strength matched her own. The alarms kept ringing, she heard people running away from her and some toward her. Whoever had her continued to pull her across the room. She glanced up and didn't see a door, no way to escape. Would she die here because she'd stolen blood? She tried to pull away, but couldn't. And then they crashed through a window, shards of glass fell around her, and in seconds they were flying.

"That was so stupid," Chan said. "You so could have gotten us killed."

She closed her eyes tight, preventing her weakness from showing, but on the inside, where it counted the most, the tears fell. What was happening to her? What kind of monster had she become?

In a matter of minutes, she and Chan stood outside her house. Normally, he landed on the roof and they crawled in her bedroom window. Not this time. She clutched the blood to her chest as if it were a precious stone.

"If you want it, you'd better drink now," he said, his frustration evident from his posture to his tone. "Your parents are up and pissed."

The bag of blood in her hand was still warm. Somehow its scent leaked out of the plastic and filled her nose. Della looked back at her house. "How do you know they're up?"

"Focus. Your sensitive hearing should already be working."

She looked up at her bedroom window. "I can't hear..." And suddenly she could. Her mom cried and her dad muttered about how he planned to find a good drug rehab. She stared back at Chan. "I'm not using drugs?"

"Yeah, but you're doing things you've never done, so they just assume. My parents did the same thing." He sighed. "But it doesn't matter what they think."

"It does to me," Della snapped back.

He shook his head. "Can't you see how impossible living here will be? It's not like you can keep your blood supply in the fridge. You're not going to fit into their lifestyle now."

She shook her head. "I can't... I can't walk away from... Lee. I can't leave my sister. She needs me." And whether she wanted to admit it or not, she loved her parents, too.

"Hardheaded Della," he muttered. "I should have known you'd have to find it out for yourself. So go...walk in there with your blood and see if you can explain it." He threw up his hands as if exasperated. "I'm leaving. Going back to Utah. How are you going to get blood tomorrow or the next day? You can't live with humans anymore. You can't."

"They're my family," she said.

"Not anymore. I'm your family. Other vampires are your family. You'll see. You don't belong here."

She looked down at the bag of blood. Her hands shook. Her chest hurt with emotion.

"Ah, screw it," Chan said and the fury in his eyes faded. "Give me the blood. I'll bring it to you later. Go deal with your parents. But I'm telling you, I can't hang around here to supply you with blood forever. Sooner or later, you're going to have to leave them. You'll see. I don't care how hardheaded you are, sooner or later, you're going to have to accept my help."

Della refused to cry. No matter how harsh, how bitter her father's words were. She sat there on the sofa, her chin held high, taking the insults. Each one hurt a little bit more. But damn it to hell and back. She wouldn't cry. Her father continued, telling her how *she was a disappointment to him and his family legacy. How she'd brought shame down on her family name. How he would never be able to stand proud in public again.*

"Go to your room and think about what you have done!" he finally demanded.

She left. She couldn't get away from him, or her mom, fast enough. Her mom had stood stone-faced and let him say those horrible things. All of it a lie. She wasn't taking drugs, or selling her body to different men to feed her obsession. She'd given her body to one, Lee, whom she loved, who loved her. When she got to her room and slammed the door, she tried to swallow the shame, the anger, the fury that filled her throat.

Then the sweet smell of roses filled her nose. Her gaze shot to the arrangement. Suddenly, all she could think about was Lee. She needed him to hold her, to tell her it would all be okay. Rushing to the window, she flung it open and stared down at the grass two stories below. She stood on the edge for several seconds, unsure how she did this, but desperation made her jump.

Landing on her feet without feeling any of the impact of the jump, she took a deep breath and started to run. At first, it was slow, then faster and faster still. Soon she wasn't even sure her feet touched the ground. As the wind whipped her hair around her face, Della formed a new plan.

She didn't have to go live with Chan in Utah; she and Lee could get their own place. They had talked about it already. They would work part time and go to school. They could do this.

In less than five minutes, she stood in front of Lee's house. She saw his window, it was dark. Of course it was dark, it was two in the morning, but she didn't care. She leapt up, grabbing hold of his ledge, and then she forced the window up. Thankfully, it wasn't locked.

When she climbed inside, Lee sat up. He blinked, stared at her with his dark brown eyes, and then he ran a hand through his hair. "Della?"

She moved closer. "I... I had to see you. I missed you."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You mom said the doctors didn't know what was wrong with you."

"They didn't, but I'm well now and I've been thinking... I want to be with you. I want to get our own apartment like we talked about."

He stared at her, his hair mussed. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and he looked good. Sexy. She moved to the edge of the bed.

"How did you...get inside?" He looked back at the window.

"It was unlocked."

"But it's the second-story window." He scratched his head.

She sat down beside him. "I love you, Lee. I want to be with you, always." She reached out to touch him. His skin was so hot, felt so good. She just wanted to lie down beside him, have him hold her.

He flinched and pulled away. "You're cold. *Really* cold."

His words brought back something Chan had said when she'd been half out of it. Something about her body temperature changing, about how she couldn't let her parents take her temperature anymore.

"What's wrong with you?" he said, scooting away. "You must still be sick."

"No," Della said. "I'm fine, I'm just... I mean..." What did she mean? Was she going to tell Lee the truth? "I'm not contagious," she said.

"What did you have?" He eased away, when all she wanted to do was to get closer. She wanted him to hold her, to kiss her and make her forget everything that happened these last few days. He raked a hand through his black hair. "You should probably go. If you get caught here, you know how it will look."

"It will look as if we're sleeping together. Which we are. And I don't care if people know anymore."

She put her hand on his shoulder.

"But I do care," he said. "Don't touch me." He pushed her hand away. "I... I'm sorry, but I don't like how you feel right now. Something feels...off about you. It's hard to explain, but you just seem really weird right now. I think you should go home and talk to your parents, get the help you need."

It hit her then. Hit her like an eighteen-wheeler without brakes. Lee would never like how she felt. If he was afraid of some kind of flu, how would he feel about her being Vampire? About her drinking blood?

Tears filled her throat, but like the daughter her father had raised her to be, she didn't let a single tear fill her eyes. "I see." She stood up.

"See what?" he asked.

She moved to the window and swore she wouldn't look back, but she couldn't help it. She turned and met his eyes. For some reason, she suddenly saw something in Lee that she hadn't seen before. She saw her father. And yet... "I love you. I will always love you." And with that she jumped out of his upstairs window. She heard him call her name, and pull back the covers.

But she was gone before his feet touched the floor.

When she got back to her room, she sat on the edge of her bed. Her stomach growled, her mouth watered, and she knew she needed...blood. Where was Chan? Had he taken her O negative pint for himself? Had he abandoned her? She jumped up and went to the mirror and stared at herself. Her eyes were no longer dark brown, but golden. Bright hot yellow as if something inside her burned. And yet she was cold. Too cold for Lee? She noticed her two canines were...sharp.

Her pulse raced and she heard Chan's words bounce around her head. "*You can't live with humans anymore. You don't belong here.*"

Her chest ached and this time she did cry. Tears crawled down her cheeks. Accepting what she had to do, she grabbed her suitcase and tossed in a few things. When Chan got here, she would be ready. Then, realizing she couldn't leave without...without at least seeing her family one more time, she tiptoed out of her room and headed down the stairs. Her parents' door was closed, but she eased it open just a bit. Just enough to see them one last time. Her mother was asleep on her father's chest. Her mother might not like her father's pride, but she still loved him. She loved him because down deep she knew that her father had forsaken his pride to marry a white woman. In truth, he loved her mom more than his pride.

Her throat tightened as she silently closed the door. Then she moved back up the stairs, but instead of moving toward her room, she went to Joy's room. The door wasn't closed. She stepped inside and moved to the edge of the bed. Her sister rolled over and opened her eyes.

"You feeling better?" she asked.

"Yeah." Della tried to keep her voice from shaking.

Joy smiled that sleepy smile of hers that made her look younger than ten. "I told Mom you wouldn't die, because you wouldn't leave me. You'd never leave me." She dropped down on her pillow and drifted back to sleep.

Tears filled Della's eyes and the pain of knowing she'd never see her sister again made her heart break. She got up and walked out of the room. She closed the door and saw her packed bag. She'd left the window open, hoping Chan would see it and come back. A breeze entered. It felt...colder. Unnaturally cold. Chills tiptoed up her spine.

Something fluttering across the wood floor caught Della's eye. She looked down at the card. She picked it up and saw the name *Holiday Brandon* scribbled across the card. Below the name was a telephone number and the words SHADOWS FALLS CAMP.

Vaguely, she remembered the doctor and nurse telling her she could call someone, someone who could help her decide the right thing to do. But she couldn't call a stranger and ask for help. Or could she?

Her thoughts went to her sister and Della reached for her phone and dialed.

"Shadow Falls Camp," a woman answered. Della couldn't speak. "Is someone there?" asked the sleepy voice. "Who is this?"

Another stream of tears silently slipped down Della's cheek. "My name is Della Tsang and I need help."

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BORN AT MIDNIGHT

Available March 2011 From St. Martin's Griffin

Chapter One

"This isn't funny!" her father yelled.

No, it wasn't, Kylie Galen thought as she leaned into the refrigerator to find something to drink. In fact, it was so not funny she wished she could crawl in beside the mustard and moldy hot dogs, shut the door, and not hear the angry voices spewing from the living room.

Her parents were at it again.

Not that it would go on much longer, she thought as the mist of the fridge seeped out the door.

Today was the day.

Kylie's throat tightened. She swallowed a lump of raw emotion and refused to cry.

Today had to be the suckiest day of her life. And she'd had some pretty sucky days lately, too. Acquiring a stalker, Trey breaking up with her, and her parents announcing their divorce—yup, sucky pretty much covered it. It was no wonder her night terrors had returned full force.

"What have you done with my underwear?" Her father's growl spilled into the kitchen, snuck under the refrigerator door, and bounced around the hot dogs.

His underwear? Kylie pressed a cold diet soda can to her forehead.

"Why would I do anything with your underwear?" her mother asked in her oh-so-nonchalant voice. That was her mom all right, nonchalant. Cold as ice.

Kylie's gaze shot out the kitchen window to the patio where she'd seen her mom earlier. There, a pair of her dad's tightywhities dangled half out of the smoldering grill.

Just great. Her mother had barbecued her father's shorts. That's it. Kylie was never eating anything cooked on that grill again.

Fighting tears, she shoved the diet soda back on the rack, shut the fridge, and moved into the doorway. Maybe if they saw her, they'd stop acting like juveniles and let her be the kid again.

Her dad stood in the middle of the room, a pair of underwear clutched in his fist. Her mom sat on the sofa, calmly sipping hot tea.

"You need psychological help," her father yelled at her mom.

Two points for her dad, Kylie thought. Her mom did need help. So why was Kylie the one who had to sit on a shrink's sofa two days a week?

Why was her dad—the man everyone swore Kylie had wrapped around her little finger—going to move out today and leave her behind?

She didn't blame her dad for wanting to leave her mom, aka the Ice Queen. But why wasn't he taking Kylie with him? Another lump rose in her throat.

Dad swung around and saw her, then shot back into the bedroom, obviously to pack the rest of his things—minus his underwear, which at this moment sent up smoke signals from the backyard grill.

Kylie stood there, staring at her mom, who sat reading over work files as if it were any other day.

The framed photographs of Kylie and her father that hung over the sofa caught her attention and tears stung her eyes. The pictures had been taken on their annual father and daughter trips.

"You've got to do something," Kylie pleaded.

"Do what?" her mom asked.

"Change his mind. Tell him you're sorry you grilled his shorts." *That you're sorry you've got ice water running through your veins.* "I don't give a flip what you do, just don't let him go."

"You don't understand." And just like that, her mom, void of any emotion, shifted her attention back to her papers.

Right then, her dad, suitcase in his hand, shot through the living room. Kylie went after him and followed him out the door into Houston's stifling afternoon heat.

"Take me with you," she begged, not caring if he saw her tears. Maybe the tears would help. There'd been a time when crying got her whatever she wanted from him. "I don't eat much," she sniffled, giving humor a shot.

He shook his head but, unlike her mom, at least he had emotion in his eyes. "You don't understand."

You don't understand. "Why do y'all always say that? I'm sixteen years old. If I don't understand, then explain it to me. Tell me the big secret and get it over with."

He stared down at his feet as if this were a test and he'd penned the answers on the toes of his shoes.

Sighing, he looked up. "Your mom...she needs you."

"Needs me? Are you kidding? She doesn't even want me." *And neither do you.* The realization caused Kylie's breath to catch in her lungs. He really didn't want her.

She wiped a tear from her cheek and that's when she saw him again. Not her dad, but Soldier Dude, aka her very own stalker. Standing across the street, he wore the same army duds as before. He looked as if he'd just walked out of one of those Gulf War movies her mom loved. Only instead of shooting at things or being blown up, he stood frozen in one spot and stared right at Kylie with sad, yet very scary eyes.

She'd noticed him stalking her a few weeks ago. He'd never spoken to her and she hadn't spoken to him. But the day she pointed him out to her mom, and Mom hadn't seen him...well, that's when Kylie's world slid off its axis. Her mom thought she was making it up to get attention, or worse. With the worse being that Kylie was losing her grip on reality. Sure, the night terrors that had tormented her when she was a kid had returned, worse than ever. Her mom said the shrink could help her work through them, but how could she do that when Kylie didn't even remember them? She only knew they were bad. Bad enough to have her wake up screaming.

Kylie wanted to scream now. Wanted to scream for her dad to turn around and look—to prove that she hadn't lost her mind. At the very least, maybe if her dad actually saw her stalker, her parents would let her off from seeing the shrink. It wasn't fair.

But life wasn't fair, as her mom had reminded her more than once.

Nevertheless, when Kylie looked back, he was gone. Not Soldier Dude, but her dad. She turned toward the driveway and saw him shoving his suitcase in the backseat of his red convertible Mustang. Mom had never liked that car, but Dad loved it.

Kylie ran to the car. "I'll make Grandma talk to Mom. She'll fix..." No sooner had the words escaped Kylie's lips than she remembered the other major sucky event she'd had plopped into her life.

She couldn't run to Grandma to fix her problems anymore. Because Grandma was dead. Gone. The vision

of Nana lying cold in the casket filled Kylie's head and another lump crawled up her throat.

Her dad's expression morphed into parental concern, the same look that had landed Kylie at the shrink's office three weeks ago.

"I'm fine. I just forgot." Because remembering hurt too much. She felt a lone tear roll down her cheek.

Dad moved in and hugged her. The embrace lasted even longer than his usual hugs, but it ended too soon. How could she let him go? How could he leave her?

His arm dropped from around her and he physically set her back. "I'm just a phone call away, Pumpkin."

Swiping at her tears, hating her watery weakness, she watched her dad's red convertible get smaller as it buzzed down the street. Wanting to be alone in her room, she started to run inside. Then she remembered and looked back across the street to see if Soldier Dude had pulled his usual disappearing act.

Nope. He was still there, staring, stalking. Scaring the bejeebies out of her and making her angry at the same time. He was the reason she had to see a shrink.

Then Mrs. Baker, her elderly neighbor, toddled out to get her mail. She smiled at Kylie but not once did the old librarian glance at Soldier Dude taking up residence on her front lawn, even when he stood less than two feet from her.

Weird.

So weird it sent an unnatural chill tiptoeing down Kylie's spine, the same kind of chill Kylie had gotten at Nana's funeral.

What the hell was going on?

Chapter Two

An hour later, Kylie walked down the stairs with her backpack and purse over her shoulder.

Her mom met her in the entryway. "Are you okay?"

How could I be okay? "I'll live," Kylie answered. More than she could say about Grandma. Right then, Kylie had a vision of the bright purple lipstick the funeral home had put on her grandmother. *Why didn't you take that off of me?* Kylie could almost hear Nana asking.

Weirded out by the thought, Kylie looked back at her mother.

Her mom stared at Kylie's backpack and her worry wrinkle appeared between her eyes. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"You said I could spend the night with Sara. Or were you too busy grilling Dad's shorts to remember?"

Her mom ignored the grilled-shorts comment. "What are you two going to do tonight?"

"Mark Jameson is having an end-of-school party." Not that Kylie felt like celebrating the event. Thanks to Trey dumping her and her parents divorcing, Kylie's whole summer was headed for the toilet. And the way things were going, someone was going to walk by and flush it.

"Are his parents going to be there?" Mom raised one dark eyebrow.

Kylie flinched emotionally, but physically didn't blink. "Aren't they always?"

Okay, so she lied. Normally she didn't go to Mark Jameson's parties for that very reason, but blast it, look where being good had gotten her. She deserved to have some fun, didn't she?

Besides, hadn't her mom lied when her dad asked about his underwear?

"What if you have another dream?" Her mom touched Kylie's arm.

A quick touch. That's all Kylie ever got from her mom these days. No long hugs like her dad gave. No mother/daughter trips. Just aloofness and quick touches. Even when Nana, her mom's mom, died, Kylie's mom hadn't hugged her and Kylie had really needed a hug then. But it had been her dad who'd pulled her into his arms and let her smear mascara on his suit coat. And now Dad and all his suit coats were gone.

Drawing in a gulp of oxygen, Kylie clutched her purse. "I warned Sara I might wake up screaming bloody murder. She said she'd stake me in the heart with a wooden cross and make me go back to bed."

"Maybe you should hide the stakes before you go to sleep." Her mother attempted to smile.

"I will." For one brief second, Kylie worried about leaving her mom alone on the day her dad had left. But who was she kidding? Her mom would be fine. Nothing ever bothered the Ice Queen.

Before walking out, Kylie peered out the window to make sure she wouldn't be assaulted by a guy wearing army duds.

Deeming the yard to be free of stalkers, Kylie ran out the door, hoping that tonight's party would help her forget just how badly her life sucked.

"Here. You don't have to drink it, just hold it." Sara Jetton pushed a beer into Kylie's hands and ran off.

Sharing elbow room with at least thirty kids, all packed into Mark Jameson's living room and talking at once, Kylie clutched the ice-cold bottle. Glancing around at the crowd, she recognized most of them from school. The doorbell rang again. Obviously, this was the place to be tonight. And according to every other kid at her high school, it was. Jameson, a senior whose parents never seemed to care what he did, held some of the wildest parties in town.

Ten minutes later, Sara still MIA, the party shifted into full swing. Too bad Kylie didn't feel like swinging along with them. She frowned at the bottle in her hand.

Someone bumped into her shoulder, causing the beer to splash on her chest and run down in the V of her white blouse. "Crap."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the responsible bumper said.

Kylie looked up into John's soft brown eyes and tried to smile. Hey, being nice to a cute guy, who'd been asking about her at school made trying to smile easy. But the fact that John had been friends with Trey kept the thrill down to a minimum.

"It's okay," she said.

"I'll get you another." As if nervous, he shot off.

"It's really okay," Kylie called after him, but between the music and the hum of voices, he didn't hear her.

The doorbell rang again. A few kids shifted around and gave Kylie a view of the door. More specifically,

the shift gave her a view of Trey walking inside. Beside him—or she should say plastered against him—sashayed his new slutty girlfriend.

“Great.” She swung around, wishing she could teleport herself to Tahiti, or back home would be even better—especially if her dad would be there.

Through a back window, she spotted Sara on the patio and Kylie darted outside to join her.

Sara looked up. She must have read the panic on Kylie’s face, because she came running over to her. “What happened?”

“Trey and his screw toy are here.”

Sara frowned. “So, you look hot. Go flirt with some guys and make him sorry.”

Kylie rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to stay here and watch Trey and what’s her name making out.”

“Were they already making out?” Sara asked.

“Not yet, but get one beer in Trey and all he’ll think about is getting into a girl’s panties. I know because I used to be the girl in the panties.”

“Chill.” Sara pointed back at the table. “Gary brought margaritas. Have one and you’ll feel fine.”

Kylie bit her lip to keep from screaming that she wouldn’t feel fine. Her life had toilet-bound stamped all over it.

“Hey.” Sara nudged her. “We both know all you’d have to do to get Trey back is to grab him and take him upstairs. He’s still crazy about you. He found me before I left school today and asked about you.”

“Did you know he was going to be here?” Betrayal started unraveling the little sanity she had left.

“Not for sure. But chill.”

Chill? Kylie stared at her best friend and realized how different they’d become these last six months. It wasn’t just Sara’s need to party or the fact that she’d given up virginhood. Okay, so maybe it was those two things, but it seemed like more.

More as in Kylie had a sneaking suspicion that Sara longed to rush Kylie to join the partying-non-virgin ranks. Could Kylie help it if beer tasted like dog piss to her? Or if the idea of having sex didn’t appeal?

Okay, that was a lie, sex appealed to her. When she and Trey had made out, Kylie had been tempted, really tempted, but then Kylie remembered her and Sara talking about how the first time should be special.

Then she recalled how Sara had given in to Brad’s “needs”—Brad who was the love of Sara’s life—yet, within two weeks of giving in, the love of Sara’s life had dumped her. What was so special about that?

Since then, Sara had dated four other guys, and she’d slept with two of them. Now, Sara had stopped talking about sex being special.

“Look, I know you’re worried about your parents,” Sara said. “But that’s why you need to just let loose and have some fun.” Sara tucked her long, brown hair behind her ear. “I’m getting you a margarita and you’re going to love it.”

Sara darted off to the table by the group of people. Kylie started to follow but her gaze slapped against Soldier Dude, looking as scary and weird as ever, standing by the group of margarita drinkers.

Kylie shot around, prepared to bolt, but she smacked right into a guy’s chest, and darn it if more beer didn’t jump out of the bottle and fall right between her boobs. “Great. My boobs are going to smell like a brewery.”

“Every guy’s dream,” the husky male voice said. “But I’m sorry.”

She recognized Trey’s voice before she did his broad shoulders or his unique masculine scent. Preparing herself for the pain that seeing him would cause, she raised her gaze. “It’s okay, John’s already done it once.”

She tried not to stare at the way Trey’s sandy brown hair fell against his brow, or the way his green eyes seemed to lure her closer, or the way his mouth tempted her to lean in and press her lips to his.

“So it’s true.” He frowned.

“What’s true?” she asked.

“That you and John have hooked up.”

Kylie considered lying. The thought that it would hurt him appealed to her. It appealed to her so much that it reminded her of the stupid games her parents played lately. Oh, no, she would not stoop to their “grown-up” level.

“I haven’t hooked up with anyone.” She turned to leave.

He caught her. His touch, the feel of his warm hand on her elbow, sent waves of pain right to her heart. And standing this close, his clean, masculine scent filled her airways. Oh God, she loved his smell.

“I heard about your grandma,” he said. “And Sara told me about your parents getting a divorce. I’m so sorry, Kylie.”

Tears threatened to crawl up her throat. Kylie was seconds away from falling against his warm chest and begging him to hold her. Nothing ever felt better than Trey’s arms around her, but then she saw the girl, Trey’s screw toy, walk outside, carrying two beers. In less than five minutes, Trey would be trying to get in her panties. And from the too-low-cut blouse and too-short skirt the girl wore, it appeared he wouldn’t have to try too hard.

“Thanks,” Kylie muttered, and went to join Sara. Luckily, Soldier Dude had decided margaritas weren’t his thing after all and left.

“Here.” Sara took the beer from Kylie’s hand and replaced it with a margarita.

The frosty glass felt unnaturally cold. Kylie leaned in and whispered, “Did you see a strange guy here a minute ago? Dressed in some funky army outfit?”

Sara’s eyebrows did their wild, wiggly thing. “How much of that beer did you drink?” Her laughter filled the night air.

Kylie wrapped her hands tighter around the cold glass, worried she seriously might be losing her mind. Adding alcohol to the situation didn’t seem like a good idea.

An hour later, when three Houston cops walked into the backyard and had everyone line up at the back gate, Kylie still had the same untouched margarita clutched in her hands.

“Come on, kids,” one of the cops said. “The sooner we move you to the precinct, the sooner we can get your parents to come get you.” That was when Kylie knew for certain that her life really had been toilet-bound—and someone had just flushed.

“Where’s Dad?” Kylie asked her mom when she stepped into the room at the police station. “I called Dad.”

I'm a phone call away, Pumpkin. Hadn't he told her that? So why wasn't he here to get Pumpkin? Her mom's green eyes tightened. "He called me."
 "I wanted Dad," Kylie insisted. No, she needed her dad, she thought, and her vision clouded with tears. She needed a hug, needed someone who would understand.
 "You don't get what you want, especially when...my God, Kylie, how could you do this?" Kylie swiped the tears from her face. "I didn't do anything. Didn't they tell you? I walked a straight line. Touched my nose and even said my ABCs backwards. I didn't do anything."
 "They found drugs there," her mother snapped.
 "I wasn't doing drugs."
 "But do you know what they didn't find there, young lady?" Her mother pointed a finger at her. "Any parents. You lied to me."
 "Maybe I'm just too much like you," Kylie said, still reeling at the thought that her dad hadn't shown up. He'd known how upset she'd been. Why hadn't he come?
 "What does that mean, Kylie?"
 "You told dad you didn't know what happened to his underwear. But you'd just flame-broiled his shorts on the grill."
 Guilt filled her mother's eyes and she shook her head. "Dr. Day is right."
 "What does my shrink have to do with tonight?" Kylie asked. "Don't tell me you called her. God, Mom, if you dare bring her down here where all my friends—"
 "No, she's not here. But it's not just about tonight." She inhaled. "I can't do this alone."
 "Do what alone?" Kylie asked, and she got this bad feeling in her stomach.
 "I'm signing you up for a summer camp."
 "What summer camp?" Kylie clutched her purse to her chest. "No, I don't want to go to any camp."
 "It's not about what you want." Her mom motioned for Kylie to walk out the door. "It's about what you need. It's a camp for kids with problems."
 "Problems? Are you freaking nuts? I don't have any problems," Kylie insisted. Well, not any a camp could fix. Somehow she suspected going to camp wouldn't bring Dad home, it wouldn't make Soldier Dude disappear, and it wouldn't win Trey back.
 "No problems? Really, then why am I at the police station at almost midnight picking up my sixteen-year-old daughter? You're going to the camp. I'm signing you up tomorrow. This isn't up for debate."
I'm not going. She kept telling herself that as they walked out of the police station.
 Her mother might be bat-shit crazy, but not her dad. He simply wouldn't let her mom send her off to a camp filled with a bunch of juvenile delinquents. He wouldn't.
 Would he?

Chapter Three

Three days later, Kylie, suitcase in hand, stood in the YMCA parking lot where several of the camp buses picked up the juvenile delinquents. She freaking couldn't believe she was here.
 Her mom was really doing it.
 And her dad was really letting her mom do it.
 Kylie, who'd never drunk more than two sips of beer, who'd never really smoked one cigarette, let alone any pot, was about to be shipped off to some camp for troubled kids.
 Her mom reached out and touched Kylie's arm. "I think they're calling you."
 Could her mom get rid of her any faster? Kylie pulled away from her touch, so angry, so hurt she didn't know how to act anymore. She'd begged, she'd pleaded, and she'd cried, but nothing worked. She was about to head off to camp. She hated it but there was nothing she could do.
 Not offering her mom one word, and swearing not to cry in front of the dozens of other kids, Kylie stiffened her back and took off to the bus behind the woman holding the sign that read SHADOW FALLS CAMP.
 Jeez. What kind of hell hole was she being sent to?
 When Kylie stepped on the bus, the eight or nine kids already there raised their heads and stared at her. She felt an odd kind of stirring in her chest and she got those weird chills again. Never, not in all sixteen years of her life, had she wanted to turn and run away as much as she did now.
 She forced herself not to bolt, then she met the gazes of...*oh, Lordie, can you say freaks?*
 One girl had her hair dyed three different colors—pink, lime green, and jet black. Another girl wore nothing but black—black lipstick, black eye shadow, black pants, and a black long-sleeve shirt. Hadn't the goth look gone out of style? Where was this girl getting her fashion tips? Hadn't she read that colors were in? That blue was the new black?
 And then there was the boy sitting almost at the front of the bus. He had both his eyebrows pierced. Kylie leaned down to peer out the window to see if she could still see her mother. Surely, if her mom took a look at these guys, she'd know Kylie didn't belong here.
 "Take your seat," someone said, and stepped behind her.
 Kylie turned around and saw the bus driver. While Kylie hadn't noticed it earlier, she realized even the bus driver looked a little freakish. Her purple-tinted gray hair sat high on her head like a football helmet. Not that Kylie could blame her for teasing her hair up a few inches. The woman was short. Elf short. Kylie glanced down at her feet, half expecting to see a pair of pointed green boots. No green shoes.
 Then her gaze shot to the front to the bus. How was the woman going to drive the bus?
 "Come on," the woman said. "I have to have you kids there by lunch, so move it along."
 Since everyone but Kylie had taken their seats, she supposed the woman meant her. She took a step farther into the bus, feeling as if her life would never, ever be the same.
 "You can sit by me," someone said. The boy had curly blond hair, even blonder than Kylie's, but his eyes peering at her were so dark they looked black. He patted the empty seat beside him. Kylie tried not to stare, but something about the dark/light combination felt off. Then he wiggled his eyebrows, as if...as if her sitting beside him meant they might make out or something.

"That's okay." Kylie took a few steps, pulling her suitcase behind her. Her luggage caught on the row of seats where the blond boy sat and Kylie looked back to free it.

Her gaze met his and her breath caught. Blond boy now had...green eyes. Bright, very bright green eyes. How was that even possible?

She swallowed and looked at his hands, thinking that maybe he had a contact case out and had changed his lenses. No case.

He wiggled his brows again, and when she realized she was staring at him, she yanked her suitcase free.

Shaking off the chill, she moved on to the row of seats she'd chosen as her own. Before she turned to sit down, she noticed another boy in the back. Sitting by himself, he had light brown hair, parted to the side and hanging just above his dark brows and green eyes. Normal green eyes, but the dusty blue T-shirt he wore made them more noticeable.

He nodded at her. Nothing too weird, thank God. At least there was one normal person on the bus besides her.

Sitting down, she gave blond guy another glance. But he wasn't looking at her, so she couldn't see if his eye color had gone weird again. But that's when she noticed the girl with three different hair colors had something in her hands.

Kylie's breath caught again. The girl had a toad. Not a frog—a frog she could have probably handled—but a toad. A huge honking toad. What kind of a girl dyed her hair three different colors and carried a toad with her to camp? God, maybe it was one of those drug toads, the ones people licked to get high. She'd heard about them on some stupid crime show on TV but had always thought they'd made it up. She didn't know which was worse: licking a toad to get high or carrying a toad around just to be weird.

Pulling her suitcase up on the seat next to her just so no one would feel the need to join her, Kylie let out a deep sigh and looked out the window. The bus was moving, although Kylie still didn't see how the bus driver managed to reach the gas pedals.

"Do you know what they call us?" The voice came from the seat where toad girl sat.

Kylie didn't think she was talking to her, but she turned her head that way, anyway. Because the girl looked directly at her, Kylie figured she might be wrong.

"Who calls us?" Kylie asked, trying not to sound too friendly or too bitchy. The last thing she wanted was to piss these freaks off.

"The kids who go to the other camps. There's like six camps in the three-mile radius in Fallen." Using both hands she pulled her multicolored hair back and held it there for a few seconds.

That's when Kylie noticed the girl had lost her toad. And Kylie didn't see a cage or anything where she could have tucked it away.

Great. She would probably have some freak's humongous drug toad hopping into her lap before she knew it. Not that toads totally scared her or anything. She just didn't want it jumping on her.

"They call us boneheads," the girl said.

"Why?" Kylie pulled her feet up in the seat just in case a toad hopped by.

"The camp used to be called Bone Creek Camp," the girl answered. "Because of the dinosaur bones found there."

"Ha," said the blond boy. "They also call us boners."

A few laughs echoed from the other seats. "Why is that funny?" the girl wearing all black asked in a tone so deadly serious that Kylie shivered.

"You don't know what a boner is?" Blond Boy asked. "If you'll come sit beside me, I'll show you." When he turned around, Kylie got another look at his eyes. Holy mother of pearls. They were gold. A striking feline gold. Contacts, Kylie realized. He had to be wearing some kind of weird contacts that were doing that.

Goth Girl stood up as if to join the blond guy.

"Don't do it," Toad Girl, without her toad, said and stood up. Moving out into the aisle, she whispered something in Goth Girl's ear.

"Gross," Goth Girl slammed back in her seat. Then she looked over at the blond boy and pointed a black-painted fingernail at him. "You don't want to piss me off. I eat things bigger than you in the dead of night."

"Did someone say something about the dead of night?" a voice came from the back of the bus.

Kylie turned to see who'd spoken.

Another girl, one Kylie hadn't known was there, popped up from the seat. She had jet black hair and wore sunglasses almost the same color as her hair. What made her look so abnormal was her complexion. Pasty. As in pasty white.

"Do you know why they renamed the camp Shadow Falls?" Toad Girl asked.

"No," someone answered from the front of the bus.

"Because of the Native American legend that says at dusk, if you stand beneath the falls on the property, you can see the shadows of death angels dancing."

Dancing death angels? What was wrong with these people?

Kylie swung around in her seat. Was this some nightmare? Maybe part of her night terrors? She pushed deeper in her cushioned seat and tried to focus on waking herself up from the dreams the way Dr. Day had shown her.

Focus. Focus. She took in deep breaths, in through the nose, out the mouth—all the while silently chanting, *It's just a dream, it isn't real, it isn't real.*

Either she wasn't asleep or her focus had gotten on the wrong bus, and darn if she didn't wish she'd followed it onto a different bus. Still not wanting to believe her eyes, she gazed around at the others. Blond Boy looked at her, and his eyes were black again.

Creepy. Was none of this coming across completely off the normal chart to anyone else in the bus?

Turning in her seat again, she looked back at the boy she'd dubbed the most normal. His soft green eyes, eyes that reminded her of Trey's, met hers, and he shrugged. She didn't exactly know what the shrug meant, but he didn't appear all that weirded out by everything. Which in some small way made him as weird as the others.

Kylie swung back around and grabbed her phone from her purse and started texting Sara. *Help! Stuck on a bus with freaks. Total, complete freaks.*

Kylie got a text message back from Sara almost immediately. *No, you help me. I think I'm pregnant.*

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