“Richelle Mead’s Vampire Academy is the obvious heir to the *Twilight* throne.”
—The Daily Beast

“A Fang-tasy [to] sink your teeth into.”
—InTouch Weekly

“The undead answer to *Harry Potter* . . .”
—The Arizona Republic

“The perfect antidote to *Twilight*”
—MTV.com

“With social angst that every teenager can appreciate and sexual tension, *Vampire Academy* leaves *Stephenie Meyer’s Twilight* looking like a children’s book.”
—VOYA
Vampire Academy
Vampire Academy

Richelle Mead
One

I FELT HER FEAR BEFORE I heard her screams.

Her nightmare pulsed into me, shaking me out of my own dream, which had had something to do with a beach and some hot guy rubbing suntan oil on me. Images—hers, not mine—tumbled through my mind: fire and blood, the smell of smoke, the twisted metal of a car. The pictures wrapped around me, suffocating me, until some rational part of my brain reminded me that this wasn’t my dream.

I woke up, strands of long, dark hair sticking to my forehead.

Lissa lay in her bed, thrashing and screaming. I bolted out of mine, quickly crossing the few feet that separated us.

“Liss,” I said, shaking her. “Liss, wake up.”

Her screams dropped off, replaced by soft whimpers. “Andre,” she moaned. “Oh God.”

I helped her sit up. “Liss, you aren’t there anymore. Wake up.”

After a few moments, her eyes fluttered open, and in the dim lighting, I could see a flicker of consciousness start to take over. Her frantic breathing slowed, and she leaned into me, resting her head against my shoulder. I put an arm around her and ran a hand over her hair.
“It’s okay,” I told her gently. “Everything’s okay.”
“I had that dream.”
“Yeah. I know.”

We sat like that for several minutes, not saying anything else. When I felt her emotions calm down, I leaned over to the nightstand between our beds and turned on the lamp. It glowed dimly, but neither of us really needed much to see by. Attracted by the light, our housemate’s cat, Oscar, leapt up onto the sill of the open window.

He gave me a wide berth—animals don’t like dhampirs, for whatever reason—but jumped onto the bed and rubbed his head against Lissa, purring softly. Animals didn’t have a problem with Moroi, and they all loved Lissa in particular. Smiling, she scratched his chin, and I felt her calm further.

“When did we last do a feeding?” I asked, studying her face. Her fair skin was paler than usual. Dark circles hung under her eyes, and there was an air of frailty about her. School had been hectic this week, and I couldn’t remember the last time I’d given her blood. “It’s been like . . . more than two days, hasn’t it? Three? Why didn’t you say anything?”

She shrugged and wouldn’t meet my eyes. “You were busy. I didn’t want to—”

“Screw that,” I said, shifting into a better position. No wonder she seemed so weak. Oscar, not wanting me any closer, leapt down and returned to the window, where he could watch at a safe distance. “Come on. Let’s do this.”

“Rose—“
“Come on. It’ll make you feel better.”

I tilted my head and tossed my hair back, baring my neck. I saw her hesitate, but the sight of my neck and what it offered proved too powerful. A hungry expression crossed her face, and her lips parted slightly, exposing the fangs she normally kept hidden while living among humans. Those fangs contrasted oddly with the rest of her features. With her pretty face and pale blond hair, she looked more like an angel than a vampire.

As her teeth neared my bare skin, I felt my heart race with a mix of fear and anticipation. I always hated feeling the latter, but it was nothing I could help, a weakness I couldn’t shake.

Her fangs bit into me, hard, and I cried out at the brief flare of pain. Then it faded, replaced by a wonderful, golden joy that spread through my body. It was better than any of the times I’d been drunk or high. Better than sex—or so I imagined, since I’d never done it. It was a blanket of pure, refined pleasure, wrapping me up and promising everything would be right in the world. On and on it went. The chemicals in her saliva triggered an endorphin rush, and I lost track of the world, lost track of who I was.

Then, regretfully, it was over. It had taken less than a minute.

She pulled back, wiping her hand across her lips as she studied me. “You okay?”

“I . . . yeah.” I lay back on the bed, dizzy from the blood loss. “I just need to sleep it off. I’m fine.”

Her pale, jade-green eyes watched me with concern. She
stood up. “I’m going to get you something to eat.”

My protests came awkwardly to my lips, and she left before I could get out a sentence. The buzz from her bite had lessened as soon as she broke the connection, but some of it still lingered in my veins, and I felt a goofy smile cross my lips. Turning my head, I glanced up at Oscar, still sitting in the window.

“You don’t know what you’re missing,” I told him.

His attention was on something outside. Hunkering down into a crouch, he puffed out his jet-black fur. His tail started twitching.

My smile faded, and I forced myself to sit up. The world spun, and I waited for it to right itself before trying to stand. When I managed it, the dizziness set in again and this time refused to leave. Still, I felt okay enough to stumble to the window and peer out with Oscar. He eyed me warily, scooted over a little, and then returned to whatever had held his attention.

A warm breeze—unseasonably warm for a Portland fall—played with my hair as I leaned out. The street was dark and relatively quiet. It was three in the morning, just about the only time a college campus settled down, at least somewhat. The house in which we’d rented a room for the past eight months sat on a residential street with old, mismatched houses. Across the road, a streetlight flickered, nearly ready to burn out. It still cast enough light for me to make out the shapes of cars and buildings. In our own yard, I could see the silhouettes of trees and bushes.
And a man watching me.

I jerked back in surprise. A figure stood by a tree in the yard, about thirty feet away, where he could easily see through the window. He was close enough that I probably could have thrown something and hit him. He was certainly close enough that he could have seen what Lissa and I had just done.

The shadows covered him so well that even with my heightened sight, I couldn’t make out any of his features, save for his height. He was tall. Really tall. He stood there for just a moment, barely discernible, and then stepped back, disappearing into the shadows cast by the trees on the far side of the yard. I was pretty sure I saw someone else move nearby and join him before the blackness swallowed them both.

 Whoever these figures were, Oscar didn’t like them. Not counting me, he usually got along with most people, growing upset only when someone posed an immediate danger. The guy outside hadn’t done anything threatening to Oscar, but the cat had sensed something, something that put him on edge.

Something similar to what he always sensed in me.

Icy fear raced through me, almost—but not quite—eradicating the lovely bliss of Lissa’s bite. Backing up from the window, I jerked on a pair of jeans that I found on the floor, nearly falling over in the process. Once they were on, I grabbed my coat and Lissa’s, along with our wallets. Shoving my feet into the first shoes I saw, I headed out the door.

Downstairs, I found her in the cramped kitchen, rummaging through the refrigerator. One of our housemates, Jeremy,
Richelle Mead

sat at the table, hand on his forehead as he stared sadly at a calculus book. Lissa regarded me with surprise.

“You shouldn’t be up.”

“We have to go. Now.”

Her eyes widened, and then a moment later, understanding clicked in. “Are you . . . really? Are you sure?”


An idea came to mind. “Liss, get his car keys.”

He looked back and forth between us. “What are you—”

Lissa unhesitatingly walked over to him. Her fear poured into me through our psychic bond, but there was something else too: her complete faith that I would take care of everything, that we would be safe. Like always, I hoped I was worthy of that kind of trust.

She smiled broadly and gazed directly into his eyes. For a moment, Jeremy just stared, still confused, and then I saw the thrall seize him. His eyes glazed over, and he regarded her adoringly.

“We need to borrow your car,” she said in a gentle voice. “Where are your keys?”

He smiled, and I shivered. I had a high resistance to compulsion, but I could still feel its effects when it was directed at another person. That, and I’d been taught my entire life that using it was wrong. Reaching into his pocket, Jeremy handed over a set of keys hanging on a large red key chain.

“Thank you,” said Lissa. “And where is it parked?”
“Down the street,” he said dreamily. “At the corner. By Brown.” Four blocks away.

“Thank you,” she repeated, backing up. “As soon as we leave, I want you to go back to studying. Forget you ever saw us tonight.”

He nodded obligingly. I got the impression he would have walked off a cliff for her right then if she’d asked. All humans were susceptible to compulsion, but Jeremy appeared weaker than most. That came in handy right now.

“Come on,” I told her. “We’ve got to move.”

We stepped outside, heading toward the corner he’d named. I was still dizzy from the bite and kept stumbling, unable to move as quickly as I wanted. Lissa had to catch hold of me a few times to stop me from falling. All the time, that anxiety rushed into me from her mind. I tried my best to ignore it; I had my own fears to deal with.

“Rose . . . what are we going to do if they catch us?” she whispered.

“They won’t,” I said fiercely. “I won’t let them.”

“But if they’ve found us—”

“They found us before. They didn’t catch us then. We’ll just drive over to the train station and go to L.A. They’ll lose the trail.”

I made it sound simple. I always did, even though there was nothing simple about being on the run from the people we’d grown up with. We’d been doing it for two years, hiding wherever we could and just trying to finish high school. Our
senior year had just started, and living on a college campus had seemed safe. We were so close to freedom.

She said nothing more, and I felt her faith in me surge up once more. This was the way it had always been between us. I was the one who took action, who made sure things happened—sometimes recklessly so. She was the more reasonable one, the one who thought things out and researched them extensively before acting. Both styles had their uses, but at the moment, recklessness was called for. We didn’t have time to hesitate.

Lissa and I had been best friends ever since kindergarten, when our teacher had paired us together for writing lessons. Forcing five-year-olds to spell *Vasilisa Dragomir* and *Rosemarie Hathaway* was beyond cruel, and we’d—or rather, *I’d*—responded appropriately. I’d chucked my book at our teacher and called her a fascist bastard. I hadn’t known what those words meant, but I’d known how to hit a moving target.

Lissa and I had been inseparable ever since.

“Do you hear that?” she asked suddenly.

It took me a few seconds to pick up what her sharper senses already had. Footsteps, moving fast. I grimaced. We had two more blocks to go.

“We’ve got to run for it,” I said, catching hold of her arm.

“But you can’t—”

“Run.”

It took every ounce of my willpower not to pass out on the sidewalk. My body didn’t want to run after losing blood or
while still metabolizing the effects of her saliva. But I ordered my muscles to stop their bitching and clung to Lissa as our feet pounded against the concrete. Normally I could have out-run her without any extra effort—particularly since she was barefoot—but tonight, she was all that held me upright.

The pursuing footsteps grew louder, closer. Black stars danced before my eyes. Ahead of us, I could make out Jeremy’s green Honda. Oh God, if we could just make it—

Ten feet from the car, a man stepped directly into our path. We came to a screeching halt, and I jerked Lissa back by her arm. It was him, the guy I’d seen across the street watching me. He was older than us, maybe mid-twenties, and as tall as I’d figured, probably six-six or six-seven. And under different circumstances—say, when he wasn’t holding up our desperate escape—I would have thought he was hot. Shoulder-length brown hair, tied back in a short ponytail. Dark brown eyes. A long brown coat—a duster, I thought it was called.

But his hotness was irrelevant now. He was only an obstacle keeping Lissa and me away from the car and our freedom. The footsteps behind us slowed, and I knew our pursuers had caught up. Off to the sides, I detected more movement, more people closing in. God. They’d sent almost a dozen guardians to retrieve us. I couldn’t believe it. The queen herself didn’t travel with that many.

Panicked and not entirely in control of my higher reasoning, I acted out of instinct. I pressed up to Lissa, keeping her behind me and away from the man who appeared to be the leader.
“Leave her alone,” I growled. “Don’t touch her.”

His face was unreadable, but he held out his hands in what was apparently supposed to be some sort of calming gesture, like I was a rabid animal he was planning to sedate.

“I’m not going to—”

He took a step forward. Too close.

I attacked him, leaping out in an offensive maneuver I hadn’t used in two years, not since Lissa and I had run away. The move was stupid, another reaction born of instinct and fear. And it was hopeless. He was a skilled guardian, not a novice who hadn’t finished his training. He also wasn’t weak and on the verge of passing out.

And man, was he fast. I’d forgotten how fast guardians could be, how they could move and strike like cobras. He knocked me off as though brushing away a fly, and his hands slammed into me and sent me backwards. I don’t think he meant to strike that hard—probably just intended to keep me away—but my lack of coordination interfered with my ability to respond. Unable to catch my footing, I started to fall, heading straight toward the sidewalk at a twisted angle, hip-first. It was going to hurt. A lot.

Only it didn’t.

Just as quickly as he’d blocked me, the man reached out and caught my arm, keeping me upright. When I’d steadied myself, I noticed he was staring at me—or, more precisely, at my neck. Still disoriented, I didn’t get it right away. Then, slowly, my free hand reached up to the side of my throat and
lightly touched the wound Lissa had made earlier. When I pulled my fingers back, I saw slick, dark blood on my skin. Embarrassed, I shook my hair so that it fell forward around my face. My hair was thick and long and completely covered my neck. I'd grown it out for precisely this reason.

The guy’s dark eyes lingered on the now-covered bite a moment longer and then met mine. I returned his look defiantly and quickly jerked out of his hold. He let me go, though I knew he could have restrained me all night if he’d wanted. Fighting the nauseating dizziness, I backed toward Lissa again, bracing myself for another attack. Suddenly, her hand caught hold of mine. “Rose,” she said quietly. “Don’t.”

Her words had no effect on me at first, but calming thoughts gradually began to settle in my mind, coming across through the bond. It wasn’t exactly compulsion—she wouldn’t use that on me—but it was effectual, as was the fact that we were hopelessly outnumbered and outclassed. Even I knew struggling would be pointless. The tension left my body, and I sagged in defeat.

Sensing my resignation, the man stepped forward, turning his attention to Lissa. His face was calm. He swept her a bow and managed to look graceful doing it, which surprised me considering his height. “My name is Dimitri Belikov,” he said. I could hear a faint Russian accent. “I’ve come to take you back to St. Vladimir’s Academy, Princess.”
My hatred notwithstanding, I had to admit Dimitri Beli-whatever was pretty smart. After they’d carted us off to the airport to and onto the Academy’s private jet, he’d taken one look at the two of us whispering and ordered us separated.

“Don’t let them talk to each other,” he warned the guardian who escorted me to the back of the plane. “Five minutes together, and they’ll come up with an escape plan.”

I shot him a haughty look and stormed off down the aisle. Never mind the fact we had been planning escape.

As it was, things didn’t look good for our heroes—or heroines, rather. Once we were in the air, our odds of escape dropped further. Even supposing a miracle occurred and I did manage to take out all ten guardians, we’d sort of have a problem in getting off the plane. I figured they might have parachutes aboard somewhere, but in the unlikely event I’d be able to operate one, there was still that little issue of survival, seeing as we’d probably land somewhere in the Rocky Mountains.

No, we weren’t getting off this plane until it landed in backwoods Montana. I’d have to think of something then, something that involved getting past the Academy’s magical wards and ten times as many guardians. Yeah. No problem.
Although Lissa sat at the front with the Russian guy, her fear sang back to me, pounding inside my head like a hammer. My concern for her cut into my fury. They couldn’t take her back there, not to that place. I wondered if Dimitri might have hesitated if he could feel what I did and if he knew what I knew. Probably not. He didn’t care.

As it was, her emotions grew so strong that for a moment, I had the disorienting sensation of sitting in her seat—in her skin even. It happened sometimes, and without much warning, she’d pull me right into her head. Dimitri’s tall frame sat beside me, and my hand—her hand—gripped a bottle of water. He leaned forward to pick up something, revealing six tiny symbols tattooed on the back of his neck: molnija marks. They looked like two streaks of jagged lightning crossing in an X symbol. One for each Strigoi he’d killed. Above them was a twisting line, sort of like a snake, that marked him as a guardian. The promise mark.

Blinking, I fought against her and shifted back into my own head with a grimace. I hated when that happened. Feeling Lissa’s emotions was one thing, but slipping into her was something we both despised. She saw it as an invasion of privacy, so I usually didn’t tell her when it happened. Neither of us could control it. It was another effect of the bond, a bond neither of us fully understood. Legends existed about psychic links between guardians and their Moroi, but the stories had never mentioned anything like this. We fumbled through it as best we could.
Near the end of the flight, Dimitri walked back to where I sat and traded places with the guardian beside me. I pointedly turned away, staring out the window absentmindedly.

Several moments of silence passed. Finally, he said, “Were you really going to attack all of us?”

I didn’t answer.

“Doing that . . . protecting her like that—it was very brave.” He paused. “Stupid, but still brave. Why did you even try it?”

I glanced over at him, brushing my hair out of my face so I could look him levelly in the eye. “Because I’m her guardian.” I turned back toward the window.

After another quiet moment, he stood up and returned to the front of the jet.

When we landed, Lissa and I had no choice but to let the commandos drive us out to the Academy. Our car stopped at the gate, and our driver spoke with guards who verified we weren’t Strigoi about to go off on a killing spree. After a minute, they let us pass on through the wards and up to the Academy itself. It was around sunset—the start of the vampiric day—and the campus lay wrapped in shadows.

It probably looked the same, sprawling and gothic. The Moroi were big on tradition; nothing ever changed with them. This school wasn’t as old as the ones back in Europe, but it had been built in the same style. The buildings boasted elaborate, almost churchlike architecture, with high peaks and stone carvings. Wrought iron gates enclosed small gardens and doorways here and there. After living on a college cam-
pus, I had a new appreciation for just how much this place resembled a university more than a typical high school.

We were on the secondary campus, which was divided into lower and upper schools. Each was built around a large open quadrangle decorated with stone paths and enormous, century-old trees. We were going toward the upper school’s quad, which had academic buildings on one side, while dhampir dormitories and the gym sat opposite. Moroi dorms sat on one of the other ends, and opposite them were the administrative buildings that also served the lower school. Younger students lived on the primary campus, farther to the west.

Around all the campuses was space, space, and more space. We were in Montana, after all, miles away from any real city. The air felt cool in my lungs and smelled of pine and wet, decaying leaves. Overgrown forests ringed the perimeters of the Academy, and during the day, you could see mountains rising up in the distance.

As we walked into the main part of the upper school, I broke from my guardian and ran up to Dimitri.

“Hey, Comrade.”

He kept walking and wouldn’t look at me. “You want to talk now?

“Are you taking us to Kirova?”

“Headmistress Kirova,” he corrected. On the other side of him, Lissa shot me a look that said, Don’t start something.

“Headmistress. Whatever. She’s still a self-righteous old bit—”
My words faded as the guardians led us through a set of doors—straight into the commons. I sighed. Were these people really so cruel? There had to be at least a dozen ways to get to Kirova’s office, and they were taking us right through the center of the commons.

And it was breakfast time.

Novice guardians—dhampirs like me—and Moroi sat together, eating and socializing, faces alight with whatever current gossip held the Academy’s attention. When we entered, the loud buzz of conversation stopped instantly, like someone had flipped a switch. Hundreds of sets of eyes swiveled toward us.

I returned the stares of my former classmates with a lazy grin, trying to get a sense as to whether things had changed. Nope. Didn’t seem like it. Camille Conta still looked like the prim, perfectly groomed bitch I remembered, still the self-appointed leader of the Academy’s royal Moroi cliques. Off to the side, Lissa’s gawky near-cousin Natalie watched with wide eyes, as innocent and naive as before.

And on the other side of the room . . . well, that was interesting. Aaron. Poor, poor Aaron, who’d no doubt had his heart broken when Lissa left. He still looked as cute as ever—maybe more so now—with those same golden looks that complemented hers so well. His eyes followed her every move. Yes. Definitely not over her. It was sad, really, because Lissa had never really been all that into him. I think she’d gone out with him simply because it seemed like the expected thing to do.
But what I found most interesting was that Aaron had apparently found a way to pass the time without her. Beside him, holding his hand, was a Moroi girl who looked about eleven but had to be older, unless he’d become a pedophile during our absence. With plump little cheeks and blond ringlets, she looked like a porcelain doll. A very pissed off and evil porcelain doll. She gripped his hand tightly and shot Lissa a look of such burning hatred that it stunned me. What the hell was that all about? She was no one I knew. Just a jealous girlfriend, I guessed. I’d be pissed too if my guy was watching someone else like that.

Our walk of shame mercifully ended, though our new setting—Headmistress Kirova’s office—didn’t really improve things. The old hag looked exactly like I remembered, sharp-nosed and gray-haired. She was tall and slim, like most Moroi, and had always reminded me of a vulture. I knew her well because I’d spent a lot of time in her office.

Most of our escorts left us once Lissa and I were seated, and I felt a little less like a prisoner. Only Alberta, the captain of the school’s guardians, and Dimitri stayed. They took up positions along the wall, looking stoic and terrifying, just as their job description required.

Kirova fixed her angry eyes on us and opened her mouth to begin what would no doubt be a major bitch session. A deep, gentle voice stopped her.

“Vasilisa.”

Startled, I realized there was someone else in the room.
I hadn’t noticed. Careless for a guardian, even a novice one. With a great deal of effort, Victor Dashkov rose from a corner chair. Prince Victor Dashkov. Lissa sprang up and ran to him, throwing her arms around his frail body.

“Uncle,” she whispered. She sounded on the verge of tears as she tightened her grip.

With a small smile, he gently patted her back. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you safe, Vasilisa.” He looked toward me. “And you too, Rose.”

I nodded back, trying to hide how shocked I was. He’d been sick when we left, but this—this was horrible. He was Natalie’s father, only about forty or so, but he looked twice that age. Pale. Withered. Hands shaking. My heart broke watching him. With all the horrible people in the world, it didn’t seem fair that this guy should get a disease that was going to kill him young and ultimately keep him from becoming king.

Although not technically her uncle—the Moroi used family terms very loosely, especially the royals—Victor was a close friend of Lissa’s family and had gone out of his way to help her after her parents had died. I liked him; he was the first person I was happy to see here.

Kirova let them have a few more moments and then stiffly drew Lissa back to her seat.

Time for the lecture.

It was a good one—one of Kirova’s best, which was saying something. She was a master at them. I swear that was the only reason she’d gone into school administration, because
I had yet to see any evidence of her actually liking kids. The rant covered the usual topics: responsibility, reckless behavior, self-centeredness. . . . Bleh. I immediately found myself spacing out, alternatively pondering the logistics of escaping through the window in her office.

But when the tirade shifted to me—well, that was when I tuned back in.

“You, Miss Hathaway, broke the most sacred promise among our kind: the promise of a guardian to protect a Moroi. It is a great trust. A trust that you violated by selfishly taking the princess away from here. The Strigoi would love to finish off the Dragomirs; you nearly enabled them to do it.”

“Rose didn’t kidnap me.” Lissa spoke before I could, her voice and face calm, despite her uneasy feelings. “I wanted to go. Don’t blame her.”

Ms. Kirova tsked at us both and paced the office, hands folded behind her narrow back.

“Miss Dragomir, you could have been the one who orchestrated the entire plan for all I know, but it was still her responsibility to make sure you didn’t carry it out. If she’d done her duty, she would have notified someone. If she’d done her duty, she would have kept you safe.”

I snapped.

“I did do my duty!” I shouted, jumping up from my chair. Dimitri and Alberta both flinched but left me alone since I wasn’t trying to hit anyone. Yet. “I did keep her safe! I kept her safe when none of you”—I made a sweeping gesture around
the room—“could do it. I took her away to protect her. I did what I had to do. You certainly weren’t going to.”

Through the bond, I felt Lissa trying to send me calming messages, again urging me not to let anger get the best of me. Too late.

Kirova stared at me, her face blank. “Miss Hathaway, forgive me if I fail to see the logic of how taking her out of a heavily guarded, magically secured environment is protecting her. Unless there’s something you aren’t telling us?”

I bit my lip.

“I see. Well, then. By my estimation, the only reason you left—aside from the novelty of it, no doubt—was to avoid the consequences of that horrible, destructive stunt you pulled just before your disappearance.”

“No, that’s not—”

“And that only makes my decision that much easier. As a Moroi, the princess must continue on here at the Academy for her own safety, but we have no such obligations to you. You will be sent away as soon as possible.”

My cockiness dried up. “I...what?”

Lissa stood up beside me. “You can’t do that! She’s my guardian.”

“She is no such thing, particularly since she isn’t even a guardian at all. She’s still a novice.”

“But my parents—”

“I know what your parents wanted, God rest their souls, but things have changed. Miss Hathaway is expendable. She
doesn’t deserve to be a guardian, and she will leave.”

I stared at Kirova, unable to believe what I was hearing. “Where are you going to send me? To my mom in Nepal? Did she even know I was gone? Or maybe you’ll send me off to my father?”

Her eyes narrowed at the bite in that last word. When I spoke again, my voice was so cold, I barely recognized it. “Or maybe you’re going to try to send me off to be a blood whore. Try that, and we’ll be gone by the end of the day.”

“Miss Hathaway,” she hissed, “you are out of line.”

“They have a bond.” Dimitri’s low, accented voice broke the heavy tension, and we all turned toward him. I think Kirova had forgotten he was there, but I hadn’t. His presence was way too powerful to ignore. He still stood against the wall, looking like some sort of cowboy sentry in that ridiculous long coat of his. He looked at me, not Lissa, his dark eyes staring straight through me. “Rose knows what Vasilisa is feeling. Don’t you?”

I at least had the satisfaction of seeing Kirova caught off guard as she glanced between us and Dimitri. “No . . . that’s impossible. That hasn’t happened in centuries.”

“It’s obvious,” he said. “I suspected as soon as I started watching them.”

Neither Lissa nor I responded, and I averted my eyes from his. “That is a gift,” murmured Victor from his corner. “A rare and wonderful thing.”

“The best guardians always had that bond,” added Dimitri. “In the stories.”
Kirova’s outrage returned. “Stories that are centuries old,” she exclaimed. “Surely you aren’t suggesting we let her stay at the Academy after everything she’s done?”

He shrugged. “She might be wild and disrespectful, but if she has potential—”

“Wild and disrespectful?” I interrupted. “Who the hell are you anyway? Outsourced help?”

“Guardian Belikov is the princess’s guardian now,” said Kirova. “Her sanctioned guardian.”

“You got cheap foreign labor to protect Lissa?”

That was pretty mean of me to say—particularly since most Moroi and their guardians were of Russian or Romanian descent—but the comment seemed cleverer at the time than it really was. And it wasn’t like I was one to talk. I might have been raised in the U.S., but my parents were foreign-born. My dhampir mother was Scottish—red-haired, with a ridiculous accent—and I’d been told my Moroi dad was Turkish. That genetic combination had given me skin the same color as the inside of an almond, along with what I liked to think were semi-exotic desert-princess features: big dark eyes and hair so deep brown that it usually looked black. I wouldn’t have minded inheriting the red hair, but we take what we get.

Kirova threw her hands up in exasperation and turned to him. “You see? Completely undisciplined! All the psychic bonds and very raw potential in the world can’t make up for that. A guardian without discipline is worse than no guard-
“So teach her discipline. Classes just started. Put her back in and get her training again.”

“Impossible. She’ll still be hopelessly behind her peers.”

“No, I won’t,” I argued. No one listened to me.

“Then give her extra training sessions,” he said.

They continued on while the rest of us watched the exchange like it was a Ping-Pong game. My pride was still hurt over the ease with which Dimitri had tricked us, but it occurred to me that he might very well keep me here with Lissa. Better to stay at this hellhole than be without her.

Through our bond, I could feel her trickle of hope.

“Who’s going to put in the extra time?” demanded Kirova.

“You?”

Dimitri’s argument came to an abrupt stop. “Well, that’s not what I—”

Kirova crossed her arms with satisfaction. “Yes. That’s what I thought.”

Clearly at a loss, he frowned. His eyes flicked toward Lissa and me, and I wondered what he saw. Two pathetic girls, looking at him with big, pleading eyes? Or two runaways who’d broken out of a high-security school and swiped half of Lissa’s inheritance?

“Yes,” he said finally. “I can mentor Rose. I’ll give her extra sessions along with her normal ones.”

“And then what?” retorted Kirova angrily. “She goes unpunished?”
“Find some other way to punish her,” answered Dimitri. “Guardian numbers have gone down too much to risk losing another. A girl, in particular.”

His unspoken words made me shudder, reminding me of my earlier statement about “blood whores.” Few dhampir girls became guardians anymore.

Victor suddenly spoke up from his corner. “I’m inclined to agree with Guardian Belikov. Sending Rose away would be a shame, a waste of talent.”

Ms. Kirova stared out her window. It was completely black outside. With the Academy’s nocturnal schedule, morning and afternoon were relative terms. That, and they kept the windows tinted to block out excess light.

When she turned back around, Lissa met her eyes. “Please, Ms. Kirova. Let Rose stay.”

Oh, Lissa, I thought. Be careful. Using compulsion on another Moroi was dangerous—particularly in front of witnesses. But Lissa was only using a tiny bit, and we needed all the help we could get. Fortunately, no one seemed to realize what was happening.

I don’t even know if the compulsion made a difference, but finally, Kirova sighed.

“If Miss Hathaway stays, here’s how it will be.” She turned to me. “Your continued enrollment at St. Vladimir’s is strictly probationary. Step out of line once, and you’re gone. You will attend all classes and required trainings for novices your age. You will also train with Guardian Belikov in every spare
moment you have—before and after classes. Other than that, you are banned from all social activities, except meals, and will stay in your dorm. Fail to comply with any of this, and you will be sent . . . away.”

I gave a harsh laugh. “Banned from all social activities? Are you trying to keep us apart?” I nodded toward Lissa. “Afraid we’ll run away again?”

“I’m taking precautions. As I’m sure you recall, you were never properly punished for destroying school property. You have a lot to make up for.” Her thin lips tightened into a straight line. “You are being offered a very generous deal. I suggest you don’t let your attitude endanger it.”

I started to say it wasn’t generous at all, but then I caught Dimitri’s gaze. It was hard to read. He might have been telling me he believed in me. He might have been telling me I was an idiot to keep fighting with Kirova. I didn’t know.

Looking away from him for the second time during the meeting, I stared at the floor, conscious of Lissa beside me and her own encouragement burning in our bond. At long last, I exhaled and glanced back up at the headmistress.

“Fine. I accept.”
ENDING US STRAIGHT TO CLASS after our meeting seemed beyond cruel, but that’s exactly what Kirova did. Lissa was led away, and I watched her go, glad the bond would allow me to keep reading her emotional temperature.

They actually sent me to one of the guidance counselors first. He was an ancient Moroi guy, one I remembered from before I’d left. I honestly couldn’t believe he was still around. The guy was so freaking old, he should have retired. Or died.

The visit took all of five minutes. He said nothing about my return and asked a few questions about what classes I’d taken in Chicago and Portland. He compared those against my old file and hastily scrawled out a new schedule. I took it sullenly and headed out to my first class.

1st Period  Advanced Guardian Combat Techniques
2nd Period  Bodyguard Theory and Personal Protection 3
3rd Period  Weight Training and Conditioning
4th Period  Senior Language Arts (Novices)
            —Lunch—
5th Period  Animal Behavior and Physiology
6th Period  Precalculus
7th Period  Moroi Culture 4
8th Period  Slavic Art
Ugh. I’d forgotten how long the Academy’s school day was. Novices and Moroi took separate classes during the first half of the day, which meant I wouldn’t see Lissa until after lunch—if we had any afternoon classes together. Most of them were standard senior classes, so I felt my odds were pretty good. Slavic art struck me as the kind of elective no one signed up for, so hopefully they’d stuck her in there too.

Dimitri and Alberta escorted me to the guardians’ gym for first period, neither one acknowledging my existence. Walking behind them, I saw how Alberta wore her hair in a short, pixie cut that showed her promise mark and molniya marks. A lot of female guardians did this. It didn’t matter so much for me now, since my neck had no tattoos yet, but I didn’t want to ever cut my hair.

She and Dimitri didn’t say anything and walked along almost like it was any other day. When we arrived, the reactions of my peers indicated it was anything but. They were in the middle of setting up when we entered the gym, and just like in the commons, all eyes fell on me. I couldn’t decide if I felt like a rock star or a circus freak.

All right, then. If I was going to be stuck here for a while, I wasn’t going to act afraid of them all anymore. Lissa and I had once held this school’s respect, and it was time to remind everyone of that. Scanning the staring, openmouthed novices, I looked for a familiar face. Most of them were guys. One caught
my eye, and I could barely hold back my grin.

“Hey Mason, wipe the drool off your face. If you’re going to think about me naked, do it on your own time.”

A few snorts and snickers broke the awed silence, and Mason Ashford snapped out of his haze, giving me a lopsided smile. With red hair that stuck up everywhere and a smattering of freckles, he was nice-looking, though not exactly hot. He was also one of the funniest guys I knew. We’d been good friends back in the day.

“This is my time, Hathaway. I’m leading today’s session.”

“Oh yeah?” I retorted. “Huh. Well, I guess this is a good time to think about me naked, then.”

“It’s always a good a time to think about you naked,” added someone nearby, breaking the tension further. Eddie Castile. Another friend of mine.

Dimitri shook his head and walked off, muttering something in Russian that didn’t sound complimentary. But as for me . . . well, just like that, I was one of the novices again. They were an easygoing bunch, less focused on pedigree and politics than the Moroi students.

The class engulfed me, and I found myself laughing and seeing those I’d nearly forgotten about. Everyone wanted to know where we’d been; apparently Lissa and I had become legends. I couldn’t tell them why we’d left, of course, so I offered up a lot of taunts and wouldn’t-you-like-to-knows that served just as well.

The happy reunion lasted a few more minutes before
the adult guardian who oversaw the training came over and scolded Mason for neglecting his duties. Still grinning, he barked out orders to everyone, explaining what exercises to start with. Uneasily, I realized I didn’t know most of them.

“Come on, Hathaway,” he said, taking my arm. “You can be my partner. Let’s see what you’ve been doing all this time.”

An hour later, he had his answer.

“Not practicing, huh?”

“Ow,” I groaned, momentarily incapable of normal speech. He extended a hand and helped me up from the mat he’d knocked me down on—about fifty times.

“I hate you,” I told him, rubbing a spot on my thigh that was going to have a wicked bruise tomorrow.

“You’d hate me more if I held back.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I agreed, staggering along as the class put the equipment back.

“You actually did okay.”

“What? I just had my ass handed to me.”

“Well, of course you did. It’s been two years. But hey, you’re still walking. That’s something.” He grinned mockingly.

“Did I mention I hate you?”

He flashed me another smile, which quickly faded to something more serious. “Don’t take this the wrong way. . . . I mean, you really are a scrapper, but there’s no way you’ll be able to take your trials in the spring—”

“They’re making me take extra practice sessions,” I explained. Not that it mattered. I planned on getting Lissa and
me out of here before these practices really became an issue. “I’ll be ready.”

“Extra sessions with who?”

“That tall guy. Dimitri.”

Mason stopped walking and stared at me. “You’re putting in extra time with Belikov?”

“Yeah, so what?”

“So the man is a god.”

“Exaggerate much?” I asked.

“No, I’m serious. I mean, he’s all quiet and antisocial usually, but when he fights . . . wow. If you think you’re hurting now, you’re going to be dead when he’s done with you.”

Great. Something else to improve my day.

I elbowed him and went on to second period. That class covered the essentials of being a bodyguard and was required for all seniors. Actually, it was the third in a series that had started junior year. That meant I was behind in this class too, but I hoped protecting Lissa in the real world had given me some insight.

Our instructor was Stan Alto, whom we referred to simply as “Stan” behind his back and “Guardian Alto” in formal settings. He was a little older than Dimitri, but not nearly as tall, and he always looked pissed off. Today, that look intensified when he walked into the classroom and saw me sitting there. His eyes widened in mock surprise as he circled the room and came to stand beside my desk.

“What’s this? No one told me we had a guest speaker here
today. Rose Hathaway. What a privilege! How very generous of you to take time out of your busy schedule and share your knowledge with us.”

I felt my cheeks burning, but in a great show of self-control, I stopped myself from telling him to fuck off. I’m pretty sure my face must have delivered that message, however, because his sneer increased. He gestured for me to stand up.

“Well, come on, come on. Don’t sit there! Come up to the front so you can help me lecture the class.”

I sank into my seat. “You don’t really mean—”

The taunting smile dried up. “I mean exactly what I say, Hathaway. Go to the front of the class.”

A thick silence enveloped the room. Stan was a scary instructor, and most of the class was too awed to laugh at my disgrace quite yet. Refusing to crack, I strode up to the front of the room and turned to face the class. I gave them a bold look and tossed my hair over my shoulders, earning a few sympathetic smiles from my friends. I then noticed I had a larger audience than expected. A few guardians—including Dimitri—lingered in the back of the room. Outside the Academy, guardians focused on one-on-one protection. Here, guardians had a lot more people to protect and they had to train the novices. So rather than follow any one person around, they worked shifts guarding the school as a whole and monitoring classes.

“So, Hathaway,” said Stan cheerfully, strolling back up to the front with me. “Enlighten us about your protective tech-
niques.”

“My . . . techniques?”

“Of course. Because presumably you must have had some sort of plan the rest of us couldn’t understand when you took an underage Moroi royal out of the Academy and exposed her to constant Strigoi threats.”

It was the Kirova lecture all over again, except with more witnesses.

“We never ran into any Strigoi,” I replied stiffly.

“Obviously,” he said with a snicker. “I already figured that out, seeing as how you’re still alive.”

I wanted to shout that maybe I could have defeated a Strigoi, but after getting beat up in the last class, I now suspected I couldn’t have survived an attack by Mason, let alone an actual Strigoi.

When I didn’t say anything, Stan started pacing in front of the class.

“So what’d you do? How’d you make sure she stayed safe? Did you avoid going out at night?”

“Sometimes.” That was true—especially when we’d first run away. We’d relaxed a little after months went by with no attacks.

“Sometimes,” he repeated in a high-pitched voice, making my answer sound incredibly stupid. “Well then, I suppose you slept during the day and stayed on guard at night.”

“Er . . . no.”

“No? But that’s one of the first things mentioned in the
chapter on solo guarding. Oh wait, you wouldn’t know that because you weren’t here.”

I swallowed back more swear words. “I watched the area whenever we went out,” I said, needing to defend myself.

“Oh? Well that’s something. Did you use Carnegie’s Quadrant Surveillance Method or the Rotational Survey?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Ah. I’m guessing you used the Hathaway Glance-Around-When-You-Remember-To Method.”

“No!” I exclaimed angrily. “That’s not true. I watched her. She’s still alive, isn’t she?”

He walked back up to me and leaned toward my face. “Because you got lucky.”

“Strigoi aren’t lurking around every corner out there,” I shot back. “It’s not like what we’ve been taught. It’s safer than you guys make it sound.”

“Safer? Safer? We are at war with the Strigoi!” he yelled. I could smell coffee on his breath, he was so close. “One of them could walk right up to you and snap your pretty little neck before you even noticed him—and he’d barely break a sweat doing it. You might have more speed and strength than a Moroi or a human, but you are nothing, nothing, compared to a Strigoi. They are deadly, and they are powerful. And do you know what makes them more powerful?”

No way was I going to let this jerk make me cry. Looking away from him, I tried to focus on something else. My eyes rested on Dimitri and the other guardians. They were watch-
ing my humiliation, stone-faced.

“Moroi blood,” I whispered.

“What was that?” asked Stan loudly. “I didn’t catch it.”

I spun back around to face him. “Moroi blood! Moroi blood makes them stronger.”

He nodded in satisfaction and took a few steps back. “Yes. It does. It makes them stronger and harder to destroy. They’ll kill and drink from a human or dhampir, but they want Moroi blood more than anything else. They seek it. They’ve turned to the dark side to gain immortality, and they want to do whatever they can to keep that immortality. Desperate Strigoi have attacked Moroi in public. Groups of Strigoi have raided academies exactly like this one. There are Strigoi who have lived for thousands of years and fed off generations of Moroi. They’re almost impossible to kill. And that is why Moroi numbers are dropping. They aren’t strong enough—even with guardians—to protect themselves. Some Moroi don’t even see the point of running anymore and are simply turning Strigoi by choice. And as the Moroi disappear . . .”

“. . . so do the dhampirs,” I finished.

“Well,” he said, licking sprayed spit off his lips. “It looks like you learned something after all. Now we’ll have to see if you can learn enough to pass this class and qualify for your field experience next semester.”

Ouch. I spent the rest of that horrible class—in my seat, thankfully—replaying those last words in my mind. The senior-year field experience was the best part of a novice’s
education. We’d have no classes for half a semester. Instead, we’d each be assigned a Moroi student to guard and follow around. The adult guardians would monitor us and test us with staged attacks and other threats. How a novice passed that field experience was almost as important as all the rest of her grades combined. It could influence which Moroi she got assigned to after graduation.

And me? There was only one Moroi I wanted.

Two classes later, I finally earned my lunch escape. As I stumbled across campus toward the commons, Dimitri fell into step beside me, not looking particularly godlike—unless you counted his godly good looks.

“I suppose you saw what happened in Stan’s class?” I asked, not bothering with titles.

“Yes.”

“And you don’t think that was unfair?”

“Was he right? Do you think you were fully prepared to protect Vasilisa?”

I looked down at the ground. “I kept her alive,” I mumbled.

“How did you do fighting against your classmates today?”

The question was mean. I didn’t answer and knew I didn’t need to. I’d had another training class after Stan’s, and no doubt Dimitri had watched me get beat up there too.

“If you can’t fight them—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I snapped.

He slowed his long stride to match my pain-filled one.
“You’re strong and fast by nature. You just need to keep yourself trained. Didn’t you play any sports while you were gone?”

“Sure,” I shrugged. “Now and then.”

“You didn’t join any teams?”

“Too much work. If I’d wanted to practice that much, I’d have stayed here.”

He gave me an exasperated look. “You’ll never be able to really protect the princess if you don’t hone your skills. You’ll always be lacking.”

“I’ll be able to protect her,” I said fiercely.

“You have no guarantees of being assigned to her, you know—for your field experience or after you graduate.” Dimitri’s voice was low and unapologetic. They hadn’t given me a warm and fuzzy mentor. “No one wants to waste the bond—but no one’s going to give her an inadequate guardian either. If you want to be with her, then you need to work for it. You have your lessons. You have me. Use us or don’t. You’re an ideal choice to guard Vasilisa when you both graduate—if you can prove you’re worthy. I hope you will.”

“Lissa, call her Lissa,” I corrected. She hated her full name, much preferring the Americanized nickname.

He walked away, and suddenly, I didn’t feel like such a badass anymore.

By now, I’d burned up a lot of time leaving class. Most everyone else had long since sprinted inside the commons for lunch, eager to maximize their social time. I’d almost made it back there myself when a voice under the door’s overhang
called to me.

“Rose?”

Peering in the voice’s direction, I caught sight of Victor Dashkov, his kind face smiling at me as he leaned on a cane near the building’s wall. His two guardians stood nearby at a polite distance.

“Mr. Dash—er, Your Highness. Hi.”

I caught myself just in time, having nearly forgotten Moroi royal terms. I hadn’t used them while living among humans. The Moroi chose their rulers from among twelve royal families. The eldest in the family got the title of “prince” or “princess.” Lissa had gotten hers because she was the only one left in her line.

“How was your first day?” he asked.

“Not over yet.” I tried to think of something conversational. “Are you visiting here for a while?”

“I’ll be leaving this afternoon after I say hello to Natalie. When I heard Vasilisa—and you—had returned, I simply had to come see you.”

I nodded, not sure what else to say. He was more Lissa’s friend than mine.

“I wanted to tell you . . .” He spoke hesitantly. “I understand the gravity of what you did, but I think Headmistress Kirova failed to acknowledge something. You did keep Vasilisa safe all this time. That is impressive.”

“Well, it’s not like I faced down Strigoi or anything,” I said. “But you faced down some things?”
“Sure. The school sent psi-hounds once.”
“Remarkable.”
“Not really. Avoiding them was pretty easy.”

He laughed. “I’ve hunted with them before. They aren’t that easy to evade, not with their powers and intelligence.” It was true. Psi-hounds were one of many types of magical creatures that wandered the world, creatures that humans never knew about or else didn’t believe they’d really seen. The hounds traveled in packs and shared a sort of psychic communication that made them particularly deadly to their prey—as did the fact that they resembled mutant wolves. “Did you face anything else?”

I shrugged. “Little things here and there.”
“Remarkable,” he repeated.
“Lucky, I think. It turns out I’m really behind in all this guardian stuff.” I sounded just like Stan now.
“You’re a smart girl. You’ll catch up. And you also have your bond.”

I looked away. My ability to “feel” Lissa had been such a secret for so long, it felt weird to have others know about it.

“The histories are full of stories of guardians who could feel when their charges were in danger,” Victor continued. “I’ve made a hobby of studying up on it and some of the ancient ways. I’ve heard it’s a tremendous asset.”

“I guess.” I shrugged. What a boring hobby, I thought, imagining him poring over prehistoric histories in some dank library covered in spiderwebs.
Victor tilted his head, curiosity all over his face. Kirova and the others had had the same look when we’d mentioned our connection, like we were lab rats. “What is it like—if you don’t mind me asking?”

“It’s . . . I don’t know. I just sort of always have this hum of how she feels. Usually it’s just emotions. We can’t send messages or anything.” I didn’t tell him about slipping into her head. That part of it was hard even for me to understand.

“But it doesn’t work the other way? She doesn’t sense you?”

I shook my head.

His face shone with wonder. “How did it happen?”

“I don’t know,” I said, still glancing away. “Just started two years ago.”

He frowned. “Near the time of the accident?”

Hesitantly, I nodded. The accident was not something I wanted to talk about, that was for sure. Lissa’s memories were bad enough without my own mixing into them. Twisted metal. A sensation of hot, then cold, then hot again. Lissa screaming over me, screaming for me to wake up, screaming for her parents and her brother to wake up. None of them had, only me. And the doctors said that was a miracle in itself. They said I shouldn’t have survived.

Apparently sensing my discomfort, Victor let the moment go and returned to his earlier excitement.

“I can still barely believe this. It’s been so long since this
has happened. If it did happen more often . . . just think what it could do for the safety of all Moroi. If only others could experience this too. I’ll have to do more research and see if we can replicate it with others.”

“Yeah.” I was getting impatient, despite how much I liked him. Natalie rambled a lot, and it was pretty clear which parent she’d inherited that quality from. Lunch was ticking down, and although Moroi and novices shared afternoon classes, Lissa and I wouldn’t have much time to talk.

“Perhaps we could—” He started coughing, a great, seizing fit that made his whole body shake. His disease, Sandovsky’s Syndrome, took the lungs down with it while dragging the body toward death. I cast an anxious look at his guardians, and one of them stepped forward. “Your Highness,” he said politely, “you need to go inside. It’s too cold out here.”

Victor nodded. “Yes, yes. And I’m sure Rose here wants to eat.” He turned to me. “Thank you for speaking to me. I can’t emphasize how much it means to me that Vasilisa is safe—and that you helped with that. I’d promised her father I’d look after her if anything happened to him, and I felt like quite the failure when you left.”

A sinking sensation filled my stomach as I imagined him wracked with guilt and worry over our disappearance. Until now, I hadn’t really thought about how others might have felt about us leaving.

We made our goodbyes, and I finally arrived inside the school. As I did, I felt Lissa’s anxiety spike. Ignoring the pain
in my legs, I picked up my pace into the commons.

And nearly ran right into her.

She didn’t see me, though. Neither did the people standing with her: Aaron and that little doll girl. I stopped and listened, just catching the end of the conversation. The girl leaned toward Lissa, who seemed more stunned than anything else.

“It looks to me like it came from a garage sale. I thought a precious Dragomir would have standards.” Scorn dripped off the word Dragomir.

Grabbing Doll Girl by the shoulder, I jerked her away. She was so light, she stumbled three feet and nearly fell.

“She does have standards,” I said, “which is why you’re done talking to her.”
WE DIDN’T HAVE THE ENTIRE commons’ attention this time, thank God, but a few passing people had stopped to stare.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” asked Doll Girl, blue eyes wide and sparkling with fury. Up close now, I was able to get a better look at her. She had the same slim build as most Moroi but not the usual height, which was partly what made her look so young. The tiny purple dress she wore was gorgeous—reminding me that I was indeed dressed in thrift-shop wear—but closer inspection led me to think it was a designer knockoff.

I crossed my arms across my chest. “Are you lost, little girl? The elementary school’s over on west campus.”

A pink flush spread over her cheeks. “Don’t you ever touch me again. You screw with me, and I’ll screw you right back.”

Oh man, what an opening that was. Only a head shake from Lissa stopped me from unleashing any number of hilarious comebacks. Instead, I opted for simple brute force, so to speak.

“And if you mess with either of us again, I’ll break you in half. If you don’t believe me, go ask Dawn Yarrow about what
I did to her arm in ninth grade. You were probably at nap time when it happened.”

The incident with Dawn hadn’t been one of my finer moments. I honestly hadn’t expected to break any bones when I shoved her into a tree. Still, the incident had given me a dangerous reputation, in addition to my smartass one. The story had gained legendary status, and I liked to imagine that it was still being told around campfires late at night. Judging from the look on this girl’s face, it was.

One of the patrolling staff members strolled by right then, casting suspicious eyes at our little meeting. Doll Girl backed off, taking Aaron’s arm. “Come on,” she said.

“Hey, Aaron,” I said cheerfully, remembering he was there. “Nice to see you again.”

He gave me a quick nod and an uneasy smile, just as the girl dragged him off. Same old Aaron. He might be nice and cute, but aggressive he was not.

I turned to Lissa. “You okay?” She nodded. “Any idea who I just threatened to beat up?”

“Not a clue.” I started to lead her toward the lunch line, but she shook her head at me. “Gotta go see the feeders.”

A funny feeling settled over me. I’d gotten so used to being her primary blood source that the thought of returning to the Moroi’s normal routine seemed strange. In fact, it almost bothered me. It shouldn’t have. Daily feedings were part of a Moroi’s life, something I hadn’t been able to offer her while living on our own. It had been an inconvenient situation, one that left me
weak on feeding days and her weak on the days in between. I should have been happy she would get some normality.

I forced a smile. “Sure.”

We walked into the feeding room, which sat adjacent to the cafeteria. It was set up with small cubicles, dividing the room’s space in an effort to offer privacy. A dark-haired Moroi woman greeted us at the entrance and glanced down at her clipboard, flipping through the pages. Finding what she needed, she made a few notes and then gestured for Lissa to follow. Me she gave a puzzled look, but she didn’t stop me from entering.

She led us to one of the cubicles where a plump, middle-aged woman sat leafing through a magazine. She looked up at our approach and smiled. In her eyes, I could see the dreamy, glazed-over look most feeders had. She’d probably neared her quota for the day, judging from how high she appeared to be.

Recognizing Lissa, her smile grew. “Welcome back, Princess.”

The greeter left us, and Lissa sat down in the chair beside the woman. I sensed a feeling of discomfort in her, a little different from my own. This was weird for her too; it had been a long time. The feeder, however, had no such reservations. An eager look crossed her face—the look of a junkie about to get her next fix.

Disgust poured into me. It was an old instinct, one that had been drilled in over the years. Feeders were essential to Moroi life. They were humans who willingly volunteered to be a regular blood source, humans from the fringes of society who
gave their lives over to the secret world of the Moroi. They were well cared for and given all the comforts they could need. But at the heart of it, they were drug users, addicts to Moroi saliva and the rush it offered with each bite. The Moroi—and guardians—looked down on this dependency, even though the Moroi couldn’t have survived otherwise unless they took victims by force. Hypocrisy at its finest.

The feeder tilted her head, giving Lissa full access to her neck. Her skin there was marked with scars from years of daily bites. The infrequent feedings Lissa and I had done had kept my neck clear; my bite marks never lasted more than a day or so.

Lissa leaned forward, fangs biting into the feeder’s yielding flesh. The woman closed her eyes, making a soft sound of pleasure. I swallowed, watching Lissa drink. I couldn’t see any blood, but I could imagine it. A surge of emotion grew in my chest: longing. Jealousy. I averted my eyes, staring at the floor. Mentally, I scolded myself.

*What's wrong with you? Why should you miss it? You only did it once every day. You aren't addicted, not like this. And you don't want to be.*

But I couldn’t help myself, couldn’t help the way I felt as I recalled the bliss and rush of a vampire’s bite.

Lissa finished and we returned to the commons, moving toward the lunch line. It was short, since we only had fifteen minutes left, and I strolled up and began to load my plate with french fries and some rounded, bite-size objects that looked
vaguely like chicken nuggets. Lissa only grabbed a yogurt. Moroi needed food, as dhampirs and humans did, but rarely had an appetite after drinking blood.

“So how’d classes go?” I asked.

She shrugged. Her face was bright with color and life now. “Okay. Lots of stares. A lot of stares. Lots of questions about where we were. Whispering.”

“Same here,” I said. The attendant checked us out, and we walked toward the tables. I gave Lissa a sidelong glance. “You okay with that? They aren’t bothering you, are they?”

“No—it’s fine.” The emotions coming through the bond contradicted her words. Knowing I could feel that, she tried to change the subject by handing me her class schedule. I looked it over.

1st Period Russian 2
2nd Period American Colonial Literature
3rd Period Basics of Elemental Control
4th Period Ancient Poetry
—Lunch—
5th Period Animal Behavior and Physiology
6th Period Advanced Calculus
7th Period Moroi Culture 4
8th Period Slavic Art

“Nerd,” I said. “If you were in Stupid Math like me, we’d have the same afternoon schedule.” I stopped walking. “Why are you in elemental basics? That’s a sophomore class.”
She eyed me. “Because seniors take specialized classes.”

We fell silent at that. All Moroi wielded elemental magic. It was one of the things that differentiated living vampires from Strigoi, the dead vampires. Moroi viewed magic as a gift. It was part of their souls and connected them to the world.

A long time ago, they had used their magic openly, averting natural disasters and helping with things like food and water production. They didn’t need to do that as much anymore, but the magic was still in their blood. It burned in them and made them want to reach out to the earth and wield their power. Academies like this existed to help Moroi control the magic and learn how to do increasingly complex things with it. Students also had to learn the rules that surrounded magic, rules that had been in place for centuries and were strictly enforced.

All Moroi had a small ability in each element. When they got to be around our age, students “specialized” when one element grew stronger than the others: earth, water, fire, or air. Not specializing was like not going through puberty.

And Lissa . . . well, Lissa hadn’t specialized yet.

“Is Ms. Carmack still teaching that? What she’d say?”

“She says she’s not worried. She thinks it’ll come.”

“Did you—did you tell her about—”

Lissa shook her head. “No. Of course not.”

We let the subject drop. It was one we thought about a lot but rarely spoke of.

We started moving again, scanning the tables as we
decided where to sit. A few pairs of eyes looked up at us with blatant curiosity.

“Lissa!” came a nearby voice. Glancing over, we saw Natalie waving at us. Lissa and I exchanged looks. Natalie was sort of Lissa’s cousin in the way Victor was sort of her uncle, but we’d never hung out with her all that much.

Lissa shrugged and headed in that direction. “Why not?”

I followed reluctantly. Natalie was nice but also one of the most uninteresting people I knew. Most royals at the school enjoyed a kind of celebrity status, but Natalie had never fit in with that crowd. She was too plain, too uninterested in the politics of the Academy, and too clueless to really navigate them anyway.

Natalie’s friends eyed us with a quiet curiosity, but she didn’t hold back. She threw her arms around us. Like Lissa, she had jade-green eyes, but her hair was jet black, like Victor’s had been before his disease grayed it.

“You’re back! I knew you would be! Everyone said you were gone forever, but I never believed that. I knew you couldn’t stay away. Why’d you go? There are so many stories about why you left!” Lissa and I exchanged glances as Natalie prattled on. “Camille said one of you got pregnant and went off to have an abortion, but I knew that couldn’t be true. Someone else said you went off to hang out with Rose’s mom, but I figured Ms. Kirova and Daddy wouldn’t have been so upset if you’d turned up there. Did you know we might get to be roommates? I was talking to . . .”

On and on she chatted, flashing her fangs as she spoke. I
smiled politely, letting Lissa deal with the onslaught until Natalie asked a dangerous question.

“What’d you do for blood, Lissa?”

The table regarded us questioningly. Lissa froze, but I immediately jumped in, the lie coming effortlessly to my lips.

“Oh, it’s easy. There are a lot of humans who want to do it.”

“Really?” asked one of Natalie’s friends, wide-eyed.

“Yup. You find ’em at parties and stuff. They’re all looking for a fix from something, and they don’t really get that a vampire’s doing it: most are already so wasted they don’t remember anyway.” My already vague details dried up, so I simply shrugged in as cool and confident a way as I could manage. It wasn’t like any of them knew any better. “Like I said, it’s easy. Almost easier than with our own feeders.”

Natalie accepted this and than launched into some other topic. Lissa shot me a grateful look.

Ignoring the conversation again, I took in the old faces, trying to figure out who was hanging out with whom and how power had shifted within the school. Mason, sitting with a group of novices, caught my eye, and I smiled. Near him, a group of Moroi royals sat, laughing over something. Aaron and the blond girl sat there too.

“Hey, Natalie,” I said, turning around and cutting her off. She didn’t seem to notice or mind. “Who’s Aaron’s new girlfriend?”

“Huh? Oh. Mia Rinaldi.” Seeing my blank look, she asked, “Don’t you remember her?”

“Should I? Was she here when we left?”
“She’s always been here,” said Natalie. “She’s only a year younger than us.”

I shot a questioning look at Lissa, who only shrugged.

“Why is she so pissed off at us?” I asked. “Neither of us know her.”

“I don’t know,” answered Natalie. “Maybe she’s jealous about Aaron. She wasn’t much of anybody when you guys left. She got really popular really fast. She isn’t royal or anything, but once she started dating Aaron, she—”

“Okay, thanks,” I interrupted. “It doesn’t really—”

My eyes lifted up from Natalie’s face to Jesse Zeklos’s, just as he passed by our table. Ah, Jesse. I’d forgotten about him. I liked flirting with Mason and some of the other novices, but Jesse was in an entirely different category. You flirted with the other guys simply for the sake of flirting. You flirted with Jesse in the hopes of getting semi-naked with him. He was a royal Moroi, and he was so hot, he should have worn a WARNING: FLAMMABLE sign. He met my eyes and grinned.

“Hey Rose, welcome back. You still breaking hearts?”

“Are you volunteering?”

His grin widened. “Let’s hang out sometime and find out. If you ever get parole.”

He kept walking, and I watched him admiringly. Natalie and her friends stared at me in awe. I might not be a god in the Dimitri sense, but with this group, Lissa and I were gods—or at least former gods—of another nature.

“Oh my gawd,” exclaimed one girl. I didn’t remember her
name. “That was Jesse.”

“Yes,” I said, smiling. “It certainly was.”

“I wish I looked like you,” she added with a sigh.

Their eyes fell on me. Technically, I was half-Moroi, but my looks were human. I’d blended in well with humans during our time away, so much so that I’d barely thought about my appearance at all. Here, among the slim and small-chested Moroi girls, certain features—meaning my larger breasts and more defined hips—stood out. I knew I was pretty, but to Moroi boys, my body was more than just pretty: it was sexy in a risqué way. Dhampirs were an exotic conquest, a novelty all Moroi guys wanted to “try.”

It was ironic that dhampirs had such an allure here, because slender Moroi girls looked very much like the super-skinny runway models so popular in the human world. Most humans could never reach that “ideal” skinniness, just as Moroi girls could never look like me. Everyone wanted what she couldn’t have.

Lissa and I got to sit together in our shared afternoon classes but didn’t do much talking. The stares she’d mentioned certainly did follow us, but I found that the more I talked to people, the more they warmed up. Slowly, gradually, they seemed to remember who we were, and the novelty—though not the intrigue—of our crazy stunt wore off.

Or maybe I should say, they remembered who I was.
Because I was the only one talking. Lissa stared straight ahead, listening but neither acknowledging nor participating in my attempts at conversation. I could feel anxiety and sadness pouring out of her.

“All right,” I told her when classes finally ended. We stood outside the school, and I was fully aware that in doing so, I was already breaking the terms of my agreement with Kirova. “We’re not staying here,” I told her, looking around the campus uneasily. “I’m going to find a way to get us out.”

“You think we could really do it a second time?” Lissa asked quietly.

“Absolutely.” I spoke with certainty, again relieved she couldn’t read my feelings. Escaping the first time had been tricky enough. Doing it again would be a real bitch, not that I couldn’t still find a way.

“You really would, wouldn’t you?” She smiled, more to herself than to me, like she’d thought of something funny. “Of course you would. It’s just, well . . .” She sighed. “I don’t know if we should go. Maybe—maybe we should stay.”

I blinked in astonishment. “What?” Not one of my more eloquent answers, but the best I could manage. I’d never expected this from her.

“I saw you, Rose. I saw you talking to the other novices during class, talking about practice. You miss that.”

“It’s not worth it,” I argued. “Not if . . . not if you . . .” I couldn’t finish, but she was right. She’d read me. I had missed the other novices. Even some of the Moroi. But there was more
to it than just that. The weight of my inexperience, how much I’d fallen behind, had been growing all day.

“It might be better,” she countered. “I haven’t had as many . . . you know, things happening in a while. I haven’t felt like anyone was following or watching us.”

I didn’t say anything to that. Before we’d left the Academy, she’d always felt like someone was following her, like she was being hunted. I’d never seen evidence to support that, but I had once heard one of our teachers go on and on about the same sort of thing. Ms. Karp. She’d been a pretty Moroi, with deep auburn air and high cheekbones. And I was pretty sure she’d been crazy.

“You never know who’s watching,” she used to say, walking briskly around the classroom as she shut all the blinds. “Or who’s following you. Best to be safe. Best to always be safe.” We’d snickered amongst ourselves because that’s what students do around eccentric and paranoid teachers. The thought of Lissa acting like her bothered me.

“What’s wrong?” Lissa asked, noticing that I was lost in thought.

“Huh? Nothing. Just thinking.” I sighed, trying to balance my own wants with what was best for her. “Liss, we can stay, I guess . . . but there are a few conditions.”

This made her laugh. “A Rose ultimatum, huh?”

“I’m serious.” Words I didn’t say very much. “I want you to stay away from the royals. Not like Natalie or anything, but you know, the others. The power players. Camille. Carly. That group.”
Her amusement turned to astonishment. “Are you serious?”
“Sure. You never liked them anyway.”
“You did.”
“No. Not really. I liked what they could offer. All the parties and stuff.”
“And you can go without that now?” She looked skeptical.
“Sure. We did in Portland.”
“Yeah, but that was different.” Her eyes stared off, not really focused on any one thing. “Here . . . here I’ve got to be a part of that. I can’t avoid it.”
“The hell you do. Natalie stays out of that stuff.”
“Natalie isn’t going to inherit her family’s title,” she retorted. “I’ve already got it. I’ve got to be involved, start making connections. Andre—”
“Liss,” I groaned. “You aren’t Andre.” I couldn’t believe she was still comparing herself to her brother.
“He was always involved in all that stuff.”
“Yeah, well,” I snapped back, “he’s dead now.”
Her face hardened. “You know, sometimes you aren’t very nice.”
“You don’t keep me around to be nice. You want nice, there are a dozen sheep in there who would rip each other’s throats to get in good with the Dragomir princess. You keep me around to tell you the truth, and here it is: Andre’s dead. You’re the heir now, and you’re going to deal with it however you can. But for now, that means staying away from the other royals. We’ll just lie low. Coast through the middle. Get
involved in that stuff again, Liss, and you’ll drive yourself . . .”

“Crazy?” she supplied when I didn’t finish.

Now I looked away. “I didn’t mean . . .”

“It’s okay,” she said, after a moment. She sighed and touched my arm. “Fine. We’ll stay, and we’ll keep out of all that stuff. We’ll ‘coast through the middle’ like you want. Hang out with Natalie, I guess.”

To be perfectly honest, I didn’t want any of that. I wanted to go to all the royal parties and wild drunken festivities like we’d done before. We’d kept out of that life for years until Lissa’s parents and brother died. Andre should have been the one to inherit her family’s title, and he’d certainly acted like it. Handsome and outgoing, he’d charmed everyone he knew and had been a leader in all the royal cliques and clubs that existed on campus. After his death, Lissa had felt it was her family duty to take his place.

I’d gotten to join that world with her. It was easy for me, because I didn’t really have to deal with the politics of it. I was a pretty dhampir, one who didn’t mind getting into trouble and pulling crazy stunts. I became a novelty; they liked having me around for the fun of it.

Lissa had to deal with other matters. The Dragomirs were one of the twelve ruling families. She’d have a very powerful place in Moroi society, and the other young royals wanted to get in good with her. Fake friends tried to schmooze her and get her to team up against other people. The royals could bribe and backstab in the same breath—and that was just with each other. To dhampirs
and non-royals, they were completely unpredictable.

That cruel culture had eventually taken its toll on Lissa. She had an open, kind nature, one that I loved, and I hated to see her upset and stressed by royal games. She’d grown fragile since the accident, and all the parties in the world weren’t worth seeing her hurt.

“All right then,” I said finally. “We’ll see how this goes. If anything goes wrong—anything at all—we leave. No arguments.”

She nodded.

“Rose?”

We both looked up at Dimitri’s looming form. I hoped he hadn’t heard the part about us leaving.

“You’re late for practice,” he said evenly. Seeing Lissa, he gave a polite nod. “Princess.”

As he and I walked away, I worried about Lissa and wondered if staying here was the right thing to do. I felt nothing alarming through the bond, but her emotions spiked all over the place. Confusion. Nostalgia. Fear. Anticipation. Strong and powerful, they flooded into me.

I felt the pull just before it happened. It was exactly like what had happened on the plane: her emotions grew so strong that they “sucked” me into her head before I could stop them. I could now see and feel what she did.

She walked slowly around the commons, toward the small Russian Orthodox chapel that served most of the school’s religious needs. Lissa had always attended mass regularly. Not me. I had a standing arrangement with God: I’d agree to believe in
him—barely—so long as he let me sleep in on Sundays.

But as she went inside, I could feel that she wasn’t there to pray. She had another purpose, one I didn’t know about. Glancing around, she verified that neither the priest nor any worshippers were close by. The place was empty.

Slipping through a doorway in the back of the chapel, she climbed a narrow set of creaky stairs up into the attic. Here it was dark and dusty. The only light came through a large stained-glass window that fractured the faint glow of sunrise into tiny, multicolored gems across the floor.

I hadn’t known until that moment that this room was a regular retreat for Lissa. But now I could feel it, feel her memories of how she used to escape here to be alone and to think. The anxiety in her ebbed away ever so slightly as she took in the familiar surroundings. She climbed up into the window seat and leaned her head back against its side, momentarily entranced by the silence and the light.

Moroi could stand some sunlight, unlike the Strigoi, but they had to limit their exposure. Sitting here, she could almost pretend she was in the sun, protected by the glass’s dilution of the rays.

_Breathe, just breathe,_ she told herself. _It’ll be okay. Rose will take care of everything._

She believed that passionately, like always, and relaxed further.

Then a low voice spoke from the darkness.

“You can have the Academy but not the window seat.”
She sprang up, heart pounding. I shared her anxiety, and my own pulse quickened. “Who’s there?”

A moment later, a shape rose from behind a stack of crates, just outside her field of vision. The figure stepped forward, and in the poor lighting, familiar features materialized. Messy black hair. Pale blue eyes. A perpetually sardonic smirk.

Christian Ozera.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I won’t bite. Well, at least not in the way you’re afraid of.” He chuckled at his own joke.

She didn’t find it funny. She had completely forgotten about Christian. So had I.

No matter what happened in our world, a few basic truths about vampires remained the same. Moroi were alive; Strigoi were undead. Moroi were mortal; Strigoi were immortal. Moroi were born; Strigoi were made.

And there were two ways to make a Strigoi. Strigoi could forcibly turn humans, dhampirs, or Moroi with a single bite. Moroi tempted by the promise of immortality could become Strigoi by choice if they purposely killed another person while feeding. Doing that was considered dark and twisted, the greatest of all sins, both against the Moroi way of life and nature itself. Moroi who chose this dark path lost their ability to connect with elemental magic and other powers of the world. That was why they could no longer go into the sun.

This is what had happened to Christian’s parents. They were Strigoi.
FIVE

OR RATHER, THEY HAD BEEN Strigoi. A regiment of guardians had hunted them down and killed them. If rumors were true, Christian had witnessed it all when he was very young. And although he wasn’t Strigoi himself, some people thought he wasn’t far off, with the way he always wore black and kept to himself.

Strigoi or not, I didn’t trust him. He was a jerk, and I silently screamed at Lissa to get out of there—not that my screaming did much good. Stupid one-way bond.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Taking in the sights, of course. That chair with the tarp on it is particularly lovely this time of year. Over there, we have an old box full of the writings of the blessed and crazy St. Vladimir. And let’s not forget that beautiful table with no legs in the corner.”

“Whatever.” She rolled her eyes and moved toward the door, wanting to leave, but he blocked her way.

“Well, what about you?” he taunted. “Why are you up here? Don’t you have parties to go to or lives to destroy?”

Some of Lissa’s old spark returned. “Wow, that’s hilarious. Am I like a rite of passage now? Go and see if you can piss off Lissa to prove how cool you are? Some girl I don’t even know
yelled at me today, and now I’ve got to deal with you? What does it take to be left alone?”

“Oh. So that’s why you’re up here. For a pity party.”

“This isn’t a joke. I’m serious.” I could tell Lissa was getting angry. It was trumping her earlier distress.

He shrugged and leaned casually against the sloping wall. “So am I. I love pity parties. I wish I’d brought the hats. What do you want to mope about first? How it’s going to take you a whole day to be popular and loved again? How you’ll have to wait a couple weeks before Hollister can ship out some new clothes? If you spring for rush shipping, it might not be so long.”

“Let me leave,” she said angrily, this time pushing him aside.

“Wait,” he said, as she reached the door. The sarcasm disappeared from his voice. “What . . . um, what was it like?”

“What was what like?” she snapped.

“Being out there. Away from the Academy.”

She hesitated for a moment before answering, caught off guard by what seemed like a genuine attempt at conversation. “It was great. No one knew who I was. I was just another face. Not Moroi. Not royal. Not anything.” She looked down at the floor. “Everyone here thinks they know who I am.”

“Yeah. It’s kind of hard to outlive your past,” he said bitterly.

It occurred to Lissa at that moment—and me to by default—just how hard it might be to be Christian. Most of
the time, people treated him like he didn’t exist. Like he was a ghost. They didn’t talk to or about him. They just didn’t notice him. The stigma of his parents’ crime was too strong, casting its shadow onto the entire Ozera family.

Still, he’d pissed her off, and she wasn’t about to feel sorry for him.

“Wait—is this your pity party now?”

He laughed, almost approvingly. “This room has been my pity party for a year now.”

“Sorry,” said Lissa snarkily. “I was coming here before I left. I’ve got a longer claim.”

“Squatters’ rights. Besides, I have to make sure I stay near the chapel as much as possible so people know I haven’t gone Strigoi . . . yet.” Again, the bitter tone rang out.

“I used to always see you at mass. Is that the only reason you go? To look good?” Strigoi couldn’t enter holy ground. More of that sinning-against-the-world thing.

“Sure,” he said. “Why else go? For the good of your soul?”

“Whatever,” said Lissa, who clearly had a different opinion. “I’ll leave you alone then.”

“Wait,” he said again. He didn’t seem to want her to go. “I’ll make you a deal. You can hang out here too if you tell me one thing.”

“What?” She glanced back at him.

He leaned forward. “Of all the rumors I heard about you today—and believe me, I heard plenty, even if no one actually told them to me—there was one that didn’t come up very
much. They dissected everything else: why you left, what you did out there, why you came back, the specialization, what Rose said to Mia, blah, blah, blah. And in all of that, no one, no one ever questioned that stupid story that Rose told about there being all sorts of fringe humans who let you take blood."

She looked away, and I could feel her cheeks starting to burn. "It’s not stupid. Or a story."

He laughed softly. "I’ve lived with humans. My aunt and I stayed away after my parents . . . died. It’s not that easy to find blood." When she didn’t answer, he laughed again. "It was Rose, wasn’t it? She fed you."

A renewed fear shot through both her and me. No one at school could know about that. Kirova and the guardians on the scene knew, but they’d kept that knowledge to themselves.

"Well. If that’s not friendship, I don’t know what it is," he said.

"You can’t tell anyone," she blurted out.

This was all we needed. As I’d just been reminded, feeders were vampire-bite addicts. We accepted that as part of life but still looked down on them for it. For anyone else—especially a dhampir—letting a Moroi take blood from you was almost, well, dirty. In fact, one of the kinkiest, practically pornographic things a dhampir could do was let a Moroi drink blood during sex.

Lissa and I hadn’t had sex, of course, but we’d both known what others would think of me feeding her.
“Don’t tell anyone,” Lissa repeated.

He stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and sat down on one of the crates. “Who am I going to tell? Look, go grab the window seat. You can have it today and hang out for a while. If you’re not still afraid of me.”

She hesitated, studying him. He looked dark and surly, lips curled in a sort of I’m-such-a-rebel smirk. But he didn’t look too dangerous. He didn’t look Strigoi. Gingerly, she sat back down in the window seat, unconsciously rubbing her arms against the cold.

Christian watched her, and a moment later, the air warmed up considerably.

Lissa met Christian’s eyes and smiled, surprised she’d never noticed how icy blue they were before. “You specialized in fire?”

He nodded and pulled up a broken chair. “Now we have luxury accommodations.”

I snapped out of the vision.

“Rose? Rose?”

Blinking, I focused on Dimitri’s face. He was leaning toward me, his hands gripping my shoulders. I’d stopped walking; we stood in the middle of the quad separating the upper school buildings.

“Are you all right?”

“I . . . yeah. I was . . . I was with Lissa . . .” I put a hand to my forehead. I’d never had such a long or clear experience like that. “I was in her head.”
“Her . . . head?”

“Yeah. It’s part of the bond.” I didn’t really feel like elaborating.

“Is she all right?”

“Yeah, she’s . . .” I hesitated. Was she all right? Christian Ozera had just invited her to hang out with him. Not good. There was “coasting through the middle,” and then there was turning to the dark side. But the feelings humming through our bond were no longer scared or upset. She was almost content, though still a little nervous. “She’s not in danger,” I finally said. I hoped.

“Can you keep going?”

The hard, stoic warrior I’d met earlier was gone—just for a moment—and he actually looked concerned. Truly concerned. Feeling his eyes on me like that made something flutter inside of me—which was stupid, of course. I had no reason to get all goofy, just because the man was too good-looking for his own good. After all, he was an antisocial god, according to Mason. One who was supposedly going to leave me in all sorts of pain.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

I went into the gym’s dressing room and changed into the workout clothes someone had finally thought to give me after a day of practicing in jeans and a T-shirt. Gross. Lissa hanging out with Christian troubled me, but I shoved that thought away for later as my muscles informed me they did not want to go through any more exercise today.
So I suggested to Dimitri that maybe he should let me off this time.

He laughed, and I was pretty sure it was at me and not with me.

"Why is that funny?"

"Oh," he said, his smile dropping. "You were serious."

"Of course I was! Look, I’ve technically been awake for two days. Why do we have to start this training now? Let me go to bed," I whined. "It’s just one hour."

He crossed his arms and looked down at me. His earlier concern was gone. He was all business now. Tough love. "How do you feel right now? After the training you’ve done so far?"

"I hurt like hell."

"You’ll feel worse tomorrow."

"So?"

"So, better to jump in now while you still feel . . . not as bad."

"What kind of logic is that?" I retorted.

But I didn’t argue anymore as he led me into the weight room. He showed me the weights and reps he wanted me to do, then sprawled in a corner with a battered Western novel. Some god.

When I finished, he stood beside me and demonstrated a few cool-down stretches.

"How’d you end up as Lissa’s guardian?" I asked. "You weren’t here a few years ago. Were you even trained at this school?"

He didn’t answer right away. I got the feeling he didn’t
talk about himself very often. “No. I attended the one in Siberia.”

“Whoa. That’s got to be the only place worse than Montana.”

A glint of something—maybe amusement—sparked in his eyes, but he didn’t acknowledge the joke. “After I graduated, I was a guardian for a Zeklos lord. He was killed recently.” His smile dropped, his face grew dark. “They sent me here because they needed extras on campus. When the princess turned up, they assigned me to her, since I’d already be around. Not that it matters until she leaves campus.”

I thought about what he’d said before. Some Strigoi killed the guy he was supposed to have been guarding? “Did this lord die on your watch?”

“No. He was with his other guardian. I was away.”

He fell silent, his mind obviously somewhere else. The Moroi expected a lot from us, but they did recognize that the guardians were—more or less—only human. So, guardians got pay and time off like you’d get in any other job. Some hard-core guardians—like my mom—refused vacations, vowing never to leave their Moroi’s sides. Looking at Dimitri now, I had a feeling he might very well turn into one of those. If he’d been away on legitimate leave, he could hardly blame himself for what happened to that guy. Still, he probably did anyway. I’d blame myself too if something happened to Lissa.

“Hey,” I said, suddenly wanting to cheer him up, “did you
help come up with the plan to get us back? Because it was pretty good. Brute force and all that.”

He arched an eyebrow curiously. Cool. I’d always wished I could do that. “You’re complimenting me on that?”

“Well, it was a hell of a lot better than the last one they tried.”

“Last one?”

“Yeah. In Chicago. With the pack of psi-hounds.”

“This was the first time we found you. In Portland.”

I sat up from my stretches and crossed my legs. “Um, I don’t think I imagined psi-hounds. Who else could have sent them? They only answer to Moroi. Maybe no one told you about it.”

“Maybe,” he said dismissively. I could tell by his face he didn’t believe that.

I returned to the novices’ dorm after that. The Moroi students lived on the other side of the quad, closer to the commons. The living arrangements were partly based on convenience. Being here kept us novices closer to the gym and training grounds. But we also lived separately to accommodate the differences in Moroi and dhampir lifestyles. Their dorm had almost no windows, aside from tinted ones that dimmed sunlight. They also had a special section where feeders always stayed on hand. The novices’ dorm was built in a more open way, allowing for more light.

I had my own room because there were so few novices, let alone girls. The room they’d given me was small and plain,
with a twin bed and a desk with a computer. My few belongings had been spirited out of Portland and now sat in boxes around the room. I rummaged through them, pulling out a T-shirt to sleep in. I found a couple of pictures as I did, one of Lissa and me at a football game in Portland and another taken when I’d gone on vacation with her family, a year before the accident.

I set them on my desk and booted up the computer. Someone from tech support had helpfully given me a sheet with instructions for renewing my e-mail account and setting up a password. I did both, happy to discover no one had realized that this would serve as a way for me to communicate with Lissa. Too tired to write to her now, I was about to turn everything off when I noticed I already had a message. From Janine Hathaway. It was short:

*I’m glad you’re back. What you did was inexcusable.*

“Love you too, Mom,” I muttered, shutting it all down.

When I went to bed afterward, I passed out before even hitting the pillow, and just as Dimitri had predicted, I felt ten times worse when I woke up the next morning. Lying there in bed, I reconsidered the perks of running away. Then I remembered getting my ass kicked and figured the only way to prevent that from happening again was to go endure some more of it this morning.

My soreness made it all that much worse, but I survived the before-school practice with Dimitri and my subsequent classes without passing out or fainting.
At lunch, I dragged Lissa away from Natalie’s table early and gave her a Kirova-worthy lecture about Christian—particularly chastising her for letting him know about our blood arrangement. If that got out, it’d kill both of us socially, and I didn’t trust him not to tell.

Lissa had other concerns.

“You were in my head again?” she exclaimed. “For that long?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” I argued. “It just happened. And that’s not the point. How long did you hang out with him afterward?”

“Not that long. It was kind of . . . fun.”

“Well, you can’t do it again. If people find out you’re hanging out with him, they’ll crucify you.” I eyed her warily. “You aren’t, like, into him, are you?”

She scoffed. “No. Of course not.

“Good. Because if you’re going to go after a guy, steal Aaron back.” He was boring, yes, but safe. Just like Natalie. How come all the harmless people were so lame? Maybe that was the definition of safe.

She laughed. “Mia would claw my eyes out.”

“We can take her. Besides, he deserves someone who doesn’t shop at Gap Kids.”

“Rose, you’ve got to stop saying things like that.”

“I’m just saying what you won’t.”

“She’s only a year younger,” said Lissa. She laughed. “I can’t believe you think I’m the one who’s going to get us in trouble.”
Smiling as we strolled toward class, I gave her a sidelong
glance. “Aaron does look pretty good though, huh?”

She smiled back and avoided my eyes. “Yeah. Pretty good.”
“Ooh. You see? You should go after him.”
“Whatever. I’m fine being friends now.”
“Friends who used to stick their tongues down each oth-
er’s throats.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Fine.” I let my teasing go. “Let Aaron stay in the nurs-
er school. Just so long as you stay away from Christian. He’s
dangerous.”

“You’re overreacting. He’s not going Strigoi.”
“He’s a bad influence.”

She laughed. “You think I’m in danger of going Strigoi?”

She didn’t wait for my answer, instead pushing ahead to
open the door to our science class. Standing there, I uneasily
replayed her words and then followed a moment later. When
I did, I got to see royal power in action. A few guys—with gig-
gling, watching girls—were messing with a gangly-looking
Moroi. I didn’t know him very well, but I knew he was poor
and certainly not royal. A couple of his tormentors were air-
magic users, and they’d blown the papers off his desk and
were pushing them around the room on currents of air while
the guy tried to catch them.

My instincts urged me to do something, maybe go smack
one of the air users. But I couldn’t pick a fight with everyone
who annoyed me, and certainly not a group of royals—espe-
cially when Lissa needed to stay off their radar. So I could only give them a look of disgust as I walked to my desk. As I did, a hand caught my arm. Jesse.

“Hey,” I said jokingly. Fortunately, he didn’t appear to be participating in the torture session. “Hands off the merchandise.”

He flashed me a smile but kept his hand on me. “Rose, tell Paul about the time you started the fight in Ms. Karp’s class.”

I cocked my head toward him, giving him a playful smile. “I started a lot of fights in her class.”

“The one with the hermit crab. And the gerbil.”

I laughed, recalling it. “Oh yeah. It was a hamster, I think. I just dropped it into the crab’s tank, and they were both worked up from being so close to me, so they went at it.”

Paul, a guy sitting nearby whom I didn’t really know, chuckled too. He’d transferred last year, apparently, and hadn’t heard of this. “Who won?”

I looked at Jesse quizzically. “I don’t remember. Do you?”

“No. I just remember Karp freaking out.” He turned toward Paul. “Man, you should have seen this messed-up teacher we used to have. Used to think people were after her and would go off on stuff that didn’t make any sense. She was nuts. Used to wander campus while everyone was asleep.”

I smiled tightly, like I thought it was funny. Instead, I thought back to Ms. Karp again, surprised to be thinking about her for the second time in two days. Jesse was right—she had wandered campus a lot when she still worked here. It
was pretty creepy. I’d run into her once—unexpectedly.

I’d been climbing out of my dorm window to go hang out with some people. It was after hours, and we were all supposed to be in our rooms, fast asleep. Such escape tactics were a regular practice for me. I was good at them.

But I fell that time. I had a second-floor room, and I lost my grip about halfway down. Sensing the ground rush up toward me, I tried desperately to grab hold of something and slow my fall. The building’s rough stone tore into my skin, causing cuts I was too preoccupied to feel. I slammed into the grassy earth, back first, getting the wind knocked out of me.

“Bad form, Rosemarie. You should be more careful. Your instructors would be disappointed.”

Peering through the tangle of my hair, I saw Ms. Karp looking down at me, a bemused look on her face. Pain, in the meantime, shot through every part of my body.

Ignoring it as best I could, I clambered to my feet. Being in class with Crazy Karp while surrounded by other students was one thing. Standing outside alone with her was an entirely different matter. She always had an eerie, distracted gleam in her eye that made my skin break out in goose bumps.

There was also now a high likelihood she’d drag me off to Kirova for a detention. Scarier still.

Instead, she just smiled and reached for my hands. I flinched but let her take them. She *tsked* when she saw the
scrapes. Tightening her grip on them, she frowned slightly. A
tingle burned my skin, laced with a sort of pleasant buzz, and
then the wounds closed up. I had a brief sense of dizziness.
My temperature spiked. The blood disappeared, as did the
pain in my hip and leg.

Gasping, I jerked my hands away. I’d seen a lot of Moroi
magic, but never anything like that.

“What . . . what did you do?”

She gave me that weird smile again. “Go back to your
dorm, Rose. There are bad things out here. You never know
what’s following you.”

I was still staring at my hands. “But . . .”

I looked back up at her and for the first time noticed scars
on the sides of her forehead. Like nails had dug into them.
She winked. “I won’t tell on you if you don’t tell on me.”

I jumped back to the present, unsettled by the memory
of that bizarre night. Jesse, in the meantime, was telling me
about a party.

“You’ve got to slip your leash tonight. We’re going up to
that spot in the woods around eight thirty. Mark got some
weed.”

I sighed wistfully, regret replacing the chill I’d felt over the
memory of Ms. Karp. “Can’t slip that leash. I’m with my Rus-
sian jailer.”

He let go of my arm, looking disappointed, and ran a hand
through his bronze-colored hair. Yeah. Not being able to hang
out with him was a damned shame. I really would have to fix
that someday. “Can’t you ever get off for good behavior?” he joked.

I gave him what I hoped was a seductive smile as I found my seat. “Sure,” I called over my shoulder. “If I was ever good.”

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