

The Golden Lily: A Bloodlines Novel

By Richelle Mead

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The thrilling second installment in Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* spinoff series--and a #1 New York Times Bestseller--now in paperback

Sydney Sage is an Alchemist, one of a group of humans who dabble in magic and serve to bridge the worlds of humans and vampires. They protect vampire secrets—and human lives.

Sydney would love to go to college, but instead, she's been sent into hiding at a posh boarding school in Palm Springs, California—tasked with protecting Moroi princess Jill Dragomir from assassins who want to throw the Moroi court into civil war. Formerly in disgrace, Sydney is now praised for her loyalty and obedience, and held up as the model of an exemplary Alchemist.

But the closer she grows to Jill, Eddie, and especially Adrian, the more she finds herself questioning her age-old Alchemist beliefs, her idea of family, and the sense of what it means to truly belong. Her world becomes even more complicated when magical experiments show Sydney may hold the key to prevent becoming Strigoi—the fiercest vampires, the ones who don't die. But it's her fear of being just that—special, magical, powerful—that scares her more than anything. Equally daunting is her new romance with Brayden, a cute, brainy guy who seems to be her match in every way. Yet, as perfect as he seems, Sydney finds herself being drawn to someone else—someone forbidden to her.

When a shocking secret threatens to tear the vampire world apart, Sydney's loyalties are suddenly tested more than ever before. She wonders how she's supposed to strike a balance between the principles and dogmas she's been taught, and what her instincts are now telling her.

Should she trust the Alchemists—or her heart?

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The Golden Lily: A Bloodlines Novel By Richelle Mead Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #53526 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Razorbill
- Published on: 2013-01-08
- Released on: 2013-01-08
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.30" h x 1.20" w x 5.50" l, .95 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 448 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Richelle Mead is the author of the international #1 bestselling Vampire Academy series and its spinoff series, Bloodlines. A lifelong reader, Richelle has always had a particular fascination with mythology and folklore. When she can actually tear herself away from books (either reading or writing them), she enjoys bad reality TV, traveling, trying interesting cocktails, and shopping for dresses to wear on tour. She is a self-professed coffee addict, works in her pajamas, and has a passion for all things wacky and humorous. Originally from Michigan, Richelle now lives in Seattle, Washington, where she is hard at work on her next Bloodlines novel. Visit www.RichelleMead.com to find out more.

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For my beautiful son,
who was born the day I finished this.

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CHAPTER 1

MOST PEOPLE WOULD FIND being led into an underground bunker on a stormy night scary. Not me.

Things I could explain away and define with data didn't frighten me. That was why I kept silently reciting facts to myself as I descended deeper and deeper below street level. The bunker was a relic of the Cold War, built as protection in a time when people thought nuclear missiles were around every corner. On the surface, the building claimed to house an optical supply store. That was a front. Not scary at all. And the storm? Simply a natural phenomenon of atmospheric fronts clashing. And really, if you were going to worry about getting hurt in a storm, then going underground was actually pretty smart.

So, no. This seemingly ominous journey didn't frighten me in the least. Everything was built on reasonable facts and logic. I could deal with that. It was the *rest* of my job I had a problem with.

And really, maybe that was why stormy underground trips didn't faze me. When you spent most of your days living among vampires and half vampires, ferrying them to get blood, and keeping their existence secret from the rest of the world… well, it kind of gave you a unique perspective on life. I'd witnessed bloody vampire battles and seen magical feats that defied every law of physics I knew. My life was a constant struggle to hold back my terror of the unexplainable and try desperately to find a way to explain it.

"Watch your step," my guide told me as we went down yet another flight of concrete stairs. Everything I'd seen so far was concrete—the walls, floor, and ceiling. The gray, rough surface absorbed the fluorescent light that attempted to illuminate our way. It was dreary and cold, eerie in its stillness. The guide seemed to guess my thoughts. "We've made modifications and expansions since this was originally built. You'll see once we reach the main section."

Sure enough. The stairs finally opened up to a corridor with several closed doors lining the sides. The decor was still concrete, but all the doors were modern, with electronic locks displaying either red or green lights.

He led me to the second door on the right, one with a green light, and I found myself entering a perfectly normal lounge, like the kind of break room you'd find in any modern office. Green carpet covered the floor, like some wistful attempt at grass, and the walls were a tan that gave the illusion of warmth. A puffy couch and two chairs sat on the opposite side of the room, along with a table scattered with magazines. Best of all, the room had a counter with a sink—and a coffee maker.

"Make yourself at home," my guide told me. I was guessing he was close to my age, eighteen, but his patchy attempts at growing a beard made him seem younger. "They'll come for you shortly."

My eyes had never left the coffee maker. "Can I make some coffee?"

"Sure," he said. "Whatever you like."

He left, and I practically ran to the counter. The coffee was pre-ground and looked as though it might very well have been here since the Cold War as well. As long as it was caffeinated, I didn't care. I'd taken a red-eye flight from California, and even with part of the day to recover, I still felt sleepy and bleary-eyed. I set the coffee maker going and then paced the room. The magazines were in haphazard piles, so I straightened them into neat stacks. I couldn't stand disorder.

I sat on the couch and waited for the coffee, wondering yet again what this meeting could be about. I'd spent a good part of my afternoon here in Virginia reporting to a couple of Alchemist officials about the status of my current assignment. I was living in Palm Springs, pretending to be a senior at a private boarding school in order to keep an eye on Jill Mastrano Dragomir, a vampire princess forced into hiding. Keeping her alive meant keeping her people out of civil war—something that would definitely tip humans off to the supernatural world that lurked beneath the surface of modern life. It was a vital mission for the Alchemists, so I wasn't entirely surprised they'd want an update. What surprised me was that they couldn't have just done it over the phone. I couldn't figure out what other reason would bring me to this facility.

The coffee maker finished. I'd only set it to make three cups, which would probably be enough to get me through the evening. I'd just filled my Styrofoam cup when the door opened. A man entered, and I nearly dropped the coffee.

"Mr. Darnell," I said, setting the pot back on the burner. My hands trembled. "It—it's nice to see you again, sir."

"You too, Sydney," he said, forcing a stiff smile. "You've certainly grown up."

"Thank you, sir," I said, unsure if that was a compliment.

Tom Darnell was my father's age and had brown hair laced with silver. There were more lines in his face since the last time I'd seen him, and his blue eyes had an uneasy look that I didn't usually associate with him. Tom Darnell was a high-ranking official among the Alchemists and had earned his position through decisive action and a fierce work ethic. He'd always seemed larger than life when I was younger, fiercely confident and awe-inspiring. Now, he seemed to be afraid of me, which made no sense. Wasn't he angry? After all, I was the one responsible for his son being arrested and locked away by the Alchemists.

"I appreciate you coming all the way out here," he added, once a few moments of awkward silence had passed. "I know it's a long round-trip, especially on a weekend."

"It's no problem at all, sir," I said, hoping I sounded confident. "I'm happy to help with… whatever you need." I still wondered what exactly that could be.

He studied me for a few seconds and gave a curt nod. “You’re very dedicated,” he said. “Just like your father.”

I made no response. I knew that comment *had* been intended as a compliment, but I didn’t really take it that way.

Tom cleared his throat. “Well, then. Let’s get this out of the way. I really don’t want to inconvenience you any more than is necessary.”

Again, I got that nervous, deferential vibe. Why would he be so conscientious of my feelings? After what I’d done to his son, Keith, I would’ve expected rage or accusations. Tom opened the door for me and gestured me through.

“Can I bring my coffee, sir?”

“Of course.”

He took me back into the concrete corridor, toward more of the closed doors. I clutched my coffee like a security blanket, far more frightened than I’d been when first entering this place. Tom came to a stop a few doors down, in front of one with a red light, but hesitated before opening it.

“I want you to know… that what you did was incredibly brave,” he said, not meeting my eyes. “I know you and Keith were—are—friends, and it couldn’t have been easy to turn him in. It shows just how committed you are to our work—something that’s not always easy when personal feelings are involved.”

Keith and I weren’t friends now or then, but I supposed I could understand Tom’s mistake. Keith had lived with my family for a summer, and later, he and I had worked together in Palm Springs. Turning him in for his crimes hadn’t been difficult for me at all. I’d actually enjoyed it. Seeing the stricken look on Tom’s face, though, I knew I couldn’t say anything like that.

I swallowed. “Well. Our work is important, sir.”

He gave me a sad smile. “Yes. It certainly is.”

The door had a security keypad. Tom punched in a series of about ten digits, and the lock clicked in acceptance. He pushed the door open, and I followed him inside. The stark room was dimly lit and had three other people in it, so I didn’t initially notice what else the room contained. I knew immediately that the others were Alchemists. There was no other reason they’d be in this place otherwise. And, of course, they possessed the telltale signs that would have identified them to me even on a busy street. Business attire in nondescript colors. Golden lily tattoos shining on their left cheeks. It was part of the uniformity we all shared. We were a secret army, lurking in the shadows of our fellow humans.

The three of them were all holding clipboards and staring at one of the walls. That was when I noticed what this room’s purpose was. A window in the wall looked through to another room, one much more brightly lit than this one.

And Keith Darnell was in that room.

He darted up to the glass separating us and began beating on it. My heart raced, and I took a few frightened steps back, certain he was coming after me. It took me a moment to realize he couldn’t actually see me. I relaxed slightly. Very slightly. The window was a one-way mirror. He pressed his hands to the glass, glancing frantically back and forth at the faces he knew were there but couldn’t see.

“Please, please,” he cried. “Let me out. Please let me out of here.”

Keith looked a little scragglier than the last time I’d seen him. His hair was unkempt and appeared as though it hadn’t been cut in our month apart. He wore a plain gray jumpsuit, the kind you saw on prisoners or mental patients, that reminded me of the concrete in the hall. Most noticeable of all was the desperate, terrified look in his eyes—or rather, eye. Keith had lost one of his eyes in a vampire attack that I had secretly helped orchestrate. None of the Alchemists knew about it, just as none of them knew about how Keith had raped my older sister Carly. I doubted Tom Darnell would’ve praised me for my “dedication” if he’d known about my sideline revenge act. Seeing the state Keith was in now, I felt a little bad for him—and especially bad for Tom, whose face was filled with raw pain. I still didn’t feel bad about what I’d done to Keith, however. Not the arrest or the eye. Put simply, Keith Darnell was a bad person.

“I’m sure you recognize Keith,” said one of the Alchemists with a clipboard. Her gray hair was wound into a tight, neat bun.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

I was saved from any other response when Keith beat at the glass with renewed fury. “Please! I’m serious! Whatever you want. I’ll do anything. I’ll say anything. I’ll *believe* anything. Just please don’t send me back there!”

Both Tom and I flinched, but the other Alchemists watched with clinical detachment and scrawled a few notes on their clipboards. The bun woman glanced back up at me as though there’d been no interruption. “Young Mr. Darnell has been spending some time in one of our Re-education Centers. An unfortunate action—but a necessary one. His trafficking in illicit goods was certainly bad, but his collaboration with vampires is unforgiveable. Although he *claims* to have no attachment to them… well, we really can’t be certain. Even if he is telling the truth, there’s also the possibility that this transgression might expand into something more—not just a collaboration with the Moroi, but also the Strigoi. Doing what we’ve done keeps him from that slippery slope.”

“It’s really for his own good,” said the third clipboard-wielding Alchemist. “We’re doing him a favor.”

A sense of horror swept over me. The whole point of the Alchemists was to keep the existence of vampires secret from humans. We believed vampires were unnatural creatures who should have nothing to do with humans like us. What was a particular concern were the Strigoi—evil, killer vampires—who could lure humans into servitude with promises of immortality. Even the peaceful Moroi and their half human counterparts, the dhampirs, were regarded with suspicion. We worked with those latter two groups a lot, and even though we’d been taught to regard them with disdain, it was an inevitable fact that some Alchemists not only grew close to Moroi and dhampirs… but actually started to like them.

The crazy thing was—despite his crime of selling vampire blood—Keith was one of the last people I’d think of when it came to getting too friendly with vampires. He’d made his dislike of them perfectly obvious to me a number of times. Really, if anyone deserved to be accused of attachment to vampires…

… well, it would be me.

One of the other Alchemists, a man with mirrored sunglasses hanging artfully off his collar, took up the lecture. “You, Miss Sage, have been a remarkable example of someone able to work extensively with *them* and keep your objectivity. Your dedication has not gone unnoticed by those above us.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said uneasily, wondering how many times I’d hear “dedication” brought up tonight. This

was a far cry from a few months ago, when I'd gotten in trouble for helping a dhampir fugitive escape. She'd later been proven innocent, and my involvement had been written off as "career ambition."

"And," continued Sunglasses, "considering your experience with Mr. Darnell, we thought you would be an excellent person to give us a statement."

I turned my attention back at Keith. He'd been pounding and shouting pretty much non-stop this whole time. The others had managed to ignore him, so I tried as well.

"A statement on what, sir?"

"We're considering whether or not to return him to Re-education," explained Gray Bun. "He's made excellent progress there, but some feel it's best to be safe and make sure any chance of vampire attachment is eradicated."

If Keith's current behavior was "excellent progress," I couldn't imagine what poor progress looked like.

Sunglasses readied his pen over his clipboard. "Based on what you witnessed in Palm Springs, Miss Sage, what is your opinion of Mr. Darnell's state of mind when it comes to vampires? Was the bonding you witnessed severe enough to warrant further precautionary measures?" Presumably, "further precautionary measures" meant more Re-education.

While Keith continued to bang away, all eyes in my room were on me. The clipboard Alchemists looked thoughtful and curious. Tom Darnell was visibly sweating, watching me with fear and anticipation. I supposed it was understandable. I held his son's fate in my hands.

Conflicting emotions warred within me as I regarded Keith. I didn't just dislike him—I hated him. And I didn't hate many people. I couldn't forget what he'd done to Carly. Likewise, the memories of what he'd done to others and me in Palm Springs were still fresh in my mind. He'd slandered me and made my life miserable in an effort to cover up his blood scam. He'd also horribly treated the vampires and dhampirs we were in charge of looking after. It made me question who the real monsters were.

I didn't know exactly what happened at Re-education Centers. Judging from Keith's reaction, it was probably pretty bad. There was a part of me that would have loved to tell the Alchemists to send him back there for years and never let him see the light of day. His crimes deserved severe punishment—and yet, I wasn't sure they deserved *this* particular punishment.

"I think… I think Keith Darnell is corrupt," I said at last. "He's selfish and immoral. He has no concern for others and hurts people to further his own ends. He's willing to lie, cheat, and steal to get what he wants." I hesitated before continuing. "But… I don't think he's been blinded to what vampires are. I don't think he's too close to them or in danger of falling in with them in the future. That being said, I also don't think he should be allowed to do Alchemist work for the foreseeable future. Whether that would mean locking him up or just putting him on probation is up to you. His past actions show he doesn't take our missions seriously, but that's because of selfishness. Not because of an unnatural attachment to *them*. He… well, to be blunt, is just a bad person."

Silence met me, save for the frantic scrawling of pens as the clipboard Alchemists made their notes. I dared a glance at Tom, afraid of what I'd see after completely trashing his son. To my astonishment, Tom looked… relieved. And grateful. In fact, he seemed on the verge of tears. Catching my eye, he mouthed, *Thank you*. Amazing. I had just proclaimed Keith to be a horrible human being in every way possible. But none of that mattered to his father, so long as I didn't accuse Keith of being in league with vampires. I could've called

Keith a murderer, and Tom would have probably still been grateful if it meant Keith wasn't chummy with the enemy.

It bothered me and again made me wonder who the real monsters were in all of this. The group I'd left back in Palm Springs was a hundred times more moral than Keith.

"Thank you, Miss Sage," said Gray Bun, finishing up her notes. "You've been extremely helpful, and we'll take this into consideration as we make our decision. You may go now. If you step into the hall, you'll find Zeke waiting to take you out."

It was an abrupt dismissal, but that was typical of Alchemists. Efficient. To the point. I gave a polite nod of farewell and one last glance at Keith before opening the door. As soon as it shut behind me, I found the hallway mercifully silent. I could no longer hear Keith.

Zeke, as it turned out, was the Alchemist who had originally led me in. "All set?" he asked.

"So it seems," I said, still a bit stunned over what had just taken place. I knew now that my earlier debriefing on the Palm Springs situation had simply been a convenience for the Alchemists. I'd been in the area, so why not have an in-person meeting? It hadn't been essential. This—seeing Keith—had been the real purpose of my cross-country trip.

As we walked back down the hallway, something caught my attention that I hadn't noticed before. One of the doors had a fair amount of security on it—more so than the room I'd just been in. Along with the lights and keypad, there was also a card reader. At the top of the door was a deadbolt that locked from outside. Nothing fancy, but it was clearly meant to keep whatever was behind the door inside.

I stopped in spite of myself and studied the door for a few moments. Then, I kept walking, knowing better than to say anything. Good Alchemists didn't ask questions.

Zeke, seeing my gaze, came to a halt. He glanced at me, then the door, and then back at me. "Do you want… do you want to see what's in there?" His eyes darted quickly to the door we'd emerged from. He was low-ranking, I knew, and clearly feared getting in trouble with the others. At the same time, there was an eagerness that suggested he was excited about the secrets he kept, secrets he couldn't share with others. I was a safe outlet.

"I guess it depends on what's in there," I said.

"It's the reason for what we do," he said mysteriously. "Take a look, and you'll understand why our goals are so important."

Deciding to risk it, he flashed a card over the reader and then punched in another long code. A light on the door turned green, and he slid open the deadbolt. I'd half-expected another dim room, but the light was so bright inside, it almost hurt my eyes. I put a hand up to my forehead to shield myself.

"It's a type of light therapy," Zeke explained apologetically. "You know how people in cloudy regions have sun lamps? Same kind of rays. The hope is that it'll make people like *him* a little more human again—or at least discourage them from thinking they're Strigoi."

At first, I was too dazzled to figure out what he meant. Then, across the empty room, I saw a jail cell. Large metal bars covered the entrance, which was locked with another card reader and keypad. It seemed like overkill when I caught sight of the man inside. He was older than me, mid-twenties if I had to guess, and had

a disheveled appearance that made Keith look neat and tidy. The man was gaunt and curled up in a corner, arms draped over his eyes against the light. He wore handcuffs and feet cuffs and clearly wasn't going anywhere. At our entrance, he dared a peek at us and then uncovered more of his face.

A chill ran through me. The man was human, but his expression was as cold and evil as any Strigoi I'd ever seen. His gray eyes were predatory. Emotionless, like the kinds of murderers who had no sense of empathy for other people.

"Have you brought me dinner?" he asked in a raspy voice that had to be faked. "A nice young girl, I see. Skinnier than I'd like, but I'm sure her blood is still succulent."

"Liam," said Zeke with a weary patience. "You know where your dinner is." He pointed to an untouched tray of food in the cell that looked like it had gone cold long ago. Chicken nuggets, green beans, and a sugar cookie. "He almost never eats anything," Zeke explained to me. "It's why he's so thin. Keeps insisting on blood."

"What… what *is* he?" I asked, unable to take my eyes off of Liam. It was a silly question, of course. Liam was clearly human, and yet… there was something about him that wasn't right.

"A corrupt soul who wants to be Strigoi," said Zeke. "Some guardians found him serving those monsters and delivered him to us. We've tried to rehabilitate him but with no luck. He keeps going on and on about how great the Strigoi are and how he'll get back to them one day and make us pay. In the meantime, he does his best to pretend he's one of them."

"Oh," said Liam, with a sly smile, "I *will* be one of them. They will reward my loyalty and suffering. They will awaken me, and I will become powerful beyond your miniscule mortal dreams. I will live forever and come for you—all of you. I will feast on your blood and savor every drop. You Alchemists pull your strings and think you control everything. You delude yourselves. You control nothing. You *are* nothing."

"See?" said Zeke, shaking his head. "Pathetic. And yet, this is what could happen if we didn't do the job we did. Other humans could become like him—selling their souls for the hollow promise of immortality." He made the Alchemist sign against evil, a small cross on his shoulder, and I found myself echoing it. "I don't like being in here, but sometimes… sometimes it's a good reminder of why we have to keep the Moroi and the others in the shadows. Of why we can't let ourselves be taken in by them."

I knew in the back of my mind that there was a huge difference in the way Moroi and Strigoi interacted with humans. Still, I couldn't formulate any arguments while in front of Liam. He had me too dumbstruck—and afraid. It was easy to believe every word the Alchemists said. This was what we were fighting against. This was the nightmare we couldn't allow to happen.

I didn't know what to say, but Zeke didn't seem to expect much.

"Come on. Let's go." To Liam, he added, "And you'd better eat that food because you aren't getting any more until morning. I don't care how cold and hard it is."

Liam's eyes narrowed. "What do I care about human food when soon I'll be drinking the nectar of the gods? Your blood will be warm on my lips, yours and your pretty girl's." He began to laugh then, a sound far more disturbing than any of Keith's screams.

That laughter continued as Zeke led me out of the room. The door shut behind us, and I found myself standing in the hall, numbed. Zeke regarded me with concern.

“I’m sorry… I probably shouldn’t have shown you that.”

I shook my head slowly. “No… you were right. It’s good for us to see. To understand what we’re doing. I always knew… but I didn’t expect anything like that.”

I tried to shift my thoughts back to everyday things and wipe that horror from my mind. I looked down at my coffee. It was untouched and had grown lukewarm. I grimaced.

“Can I get more coffee before we go?” I needed something normal. Something human.

“Sure.”

Zeke led me back to the lounge. The pot I’d made was still hot. I dumped out my old coffee and poured some new. As I did, the door burst open, and a distraught Tom Darnell came in. He seemed surprised to see anyone here and pushed past us, sitting on the couch and burying his face in his hands. Zeke and I exchanged uncertain looks.

“Mr. Darnell,” I began. “Are you okay?”

He didn’t answer me right away. He kept his face covered, his body shaking with silent sobs. I was about to leave when he looked up at me, though I got the feeling he wasn’t actually *seeing* me. “They decided,” he said. “They decided about Keith.”

“Already?” I asked, startled. Zeke and I had only spent about five minutes with Liam.

Tom nodded morosely. “They’re sending him back… back to Re-education.”

I couldn’t believe it. “But I… but I told them! I told them he’s not in league with vampires. He believes what… the rest of us believe. It was his choices that were bad.”

“I know. But they said we can’t take the risk. Even if Keith seems like he doesn’t care about them—even if *believes* he doesn’t—the fact remains he still set up a deal with one. They’re worried that willingness to go into that kind of partnership might subconsciously influence him. Best to take care of things now. They’re… they’re probably right. This is for the best.”

That image of Keith pounding on the glass and begging not to go back flashed through my mind. “I’m sorry, Mr. Darnell.”

Tom’s distraught gaze focused on me a little bit more. “Don’t apologize, Sydney. You’ve done so much… so much for Keith. Because of what you told them, they’re going to reduce his time in Re-education. That means so much to me. Thank you.”

My stomach twisted. Because of me, Keith had lost an eye. Because of me, Keith had gone to Re-education in the first place. Again, the sentiment came to me: he deserved to suffer in some way, but he didn’t deserve *this*.

“They were right about you,” Tom added. He was trying to smile but failing. “What a stellar example you are. So dedicated. Your father must be so proud. I don’t know how you live with those creatures every day and still keep your head about you. Other Alchemists could learn a lot from you. You understand what responsibility and duty are.”

Since I’d flown out of Palm Springs yesterday, I’d actually been thinking a lot about the group I’d left

behind—when the Alchemists weren't distracting me with prisoners, of course. Jill, Adrian, Eddie, and even Angeline… frustrating at times, but in the end, they were people I'd grown to know and care about. Despite all the running around they made me do, I'd missed that motley group almost the instant I left California. Something inside me seemed empty when they weren't around.

Now, feeling that way confused me. Was I blurring the lines between friendship and duty? If Keith had gotten in trouble for one small association with a vampire, how much worse was I? And how close were any of us to becoming like Liam?

Zeke's words rang inside my head: *We can't let ourselves be taken in by them.*

And what Tom had just said: *You understand what responsibility and duty are.*

He was watching me expectantly, and I managed a smile as I pushed down all my fears. "Thank you, sir," I said. "I do what I can."

CHAPTER 2

I DIDN'T SLEEP THAT NIGHT. Part of it was simply the time change. My flight back to Palm Springs was scheduled for six in the morning—which was three in the morning in the time zone my body still thought it was in. Sleeping seemed pointless.

And, of course, there was the teeny-tiny fact that it was kind of hard to relax after everything I'd witnessed over at the Alchemist bunker. If I wasn't envisioning Liam's freaky eyes, then I was replaying the constant warnings I'd heard about those who got too close to vampires.

It didn't help the situation that I had an inbox full of messages from the gang in Palm Springs. Normally, I checked my e-mail automatically on my phone when I was out and about. Now, in my hotel room, staring at the various messages, I found myself filled with doubt. Were these truly professional? Were they too friendly? Did they blur the lines of Alchemist protocol? After seeing what had happened to Keith, it was more obvious than ever that it didn't take much to get in trouble with my organization.

One message was from Jill, with a subject line reading: *Angeline… sigh.* This wasn't a surprise to me, and I didn't bother reading it yet. Angeline Dawes, a dhampir recruited to be Jill's roommate and provide an extra layer of security, had had a little trouble fitting into Amberwood. She was always in trouble for something, and I knew whatever it was this time, there was nothing I could do about it right now.

Another message was from Angeline herself. I also didn't read it. The subject was: READ THIS! SO FUNNY! Angeline had only recently discovered e-mail. She had not, so it seemed, discovered how to turn off the caps-lock key. She also had no discrimination when it came to forwarding jokes, financial scams, or virus warnings. And speaking of that last one… we'd had to finally install child protection software on her laptop, in order to block her from certain websites and ads. That had come after she'd accidentally downloaded four viruses.

It was the last e-mail in my inbox that gave me pause. It was from Adrian Ivashkov, the only person in our group who wasn't posing as a student at Amberwood Preparatory School. Adrian was a twenty-one-year-old Moroi, so it would have been kind of a stretch passing him off in high school. Adrian was along because he and Jill had a psychic bond that had been inadvertently created when he'd used his magic to save her life. All Moroi wielded some type of elemental magic, and his was spirit—a mysterious element tied to the mind and healing. The bond allowed Jill to see Adrian's thoughts and emotions, which was troubling to both of them. His staying near her helped them work out some of the bond's kinks. Also, Adrian had nothing better to do.

His message's subject was: SEND HELP IMMEDIATELY. Unlike Angeline, Adrian knew the rules of capitalization and was simply going for dramatic effect. I also knew that if I had any doubts about which of my messages related to my job, this was hands-down the most nonprofessional one in the set. Adrian wasn't my responsibility. Yet, I clicked the message anyway.

Day 24. Situation is growing worse. My captors continue to find new and horrific ways to torture me. When not working, Agent Scarlet spends her days examining fabric swatches for bridesmaid dresses and going on about how in love she is. This usually causes Agent Boring Borscht to regale us with stories of Russian weddings that are even more boring than his usual ones. My attempts at escape have been thwarted thus far. Also, I am out of cigarettes. Any assistance or tobacco products you can send will be greatly appreciated.

—Prisoner 24601

I began smiling in spite of myself. Adrian sent me some kind of message like this nearly every day. This summer, we had learned that those who were forcibly turned Strigoi could be turned back with the use of spirit. It was still a tricky, complicated process… made more so by the fact that there were so few spirit users. Even more recent events had suggested that those restored from being Strigoi could never be turned again. That had electrified Alchemists and Moroi alike. If there was some magical way to prevent Strigoi conversion, freaks like Liam would no longer be a problem.

That was where Sonya Karp and Dimitri Belikov came in—or, as Adrian called them in his angst-filled letters, "Agent Scarlet" and "Agent Boring Borscht." Sonya was a Moroi; Dimitri was a dhampir. Both had once been Strigoi and had been saved by spirit magic. The two of them had come to Palm Springs last month to work with Adrian in a sort of think tank to figure out what might protect against Strigoi turning. It was an extremely important task, one that could have huge ramifications if successful. Sonya and Dimitri were some of the hardest working people I knew—which didn't always mesh with Adrian's style.

A lot of their work involved slow, painstaking experiments—many involving Eddie Castile, a dhampir who was also undercover at Amberwood. He was serving as the control subject since, unlike Dimitri, Eddie was a dhampir untouched by spirit or a Strigoi history. There wasn't much I could do to help Adrian with his frustration over his research group—and he knew it. He just liked playing up the drama and venting to me. Mindful of what was essential and nonessential in the Alchemist world, I was on the verge of deleting the message, but…

One thing made me hesitate. Adrian had signed his e-mail with a reference to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. It was a book about the French Revolution that was so thick, it could easily double as a weapon. I had read it in both French and English. Considering Adrian had once gotten bored while reading a particularly long menu, I had a hard time imagining he'd read the Hugo book in any language. So how did he know the reference? *It doesn't matter, Sydney*, a stern Alchemist voice said inside my head. *Delete it. It's irrelevant. Adrian's literary knowledge* (*or lack thereof*) *is no concern of yours.*

But I couldn't do it. I *had* to know. This was the kind of detail that would drive me crazy. I wrote back with a quick message: *How do you know about 24601? I refuse to believe you read the book. You saw the musical, right*?

I hit send and received a response back from him almost immediately: *SparkNotes*.

Typical. I laughed out loud and immediately felt guilty. I shouldn't have responded. This was my personal e-mail account, but if the Alchemists ever felt the need to investigate me, they'd have no qualms about accessing it. This kind of thing was damning, and I deleted the e-mail exchange—not that it mattered. No data was ever truly lost.

By the time I landed in Palm Springs at seven the next morning, it was painfully obvious that I had surpassed my body's limits to subsist on caffeine. I was too exhausted. No amount of coffee would help anymore. I nearly fell asleep at the airport's curb, waiting for my ride. When it arrived, I didn't notice until I heard my name called.

Dimitri Belikov jumped out of a blue rental car and strode toward me, grabbing hold of my suitcase before I could utter a word. A few nearby women stopped talking to stare at him admiringly. I got to my feet. "You don't have to do that," I said, even though he was already loading my suitcase into the trunk.

"Of course I do," he said, his words lightly touched with a Russian accent. He gave me a small smile. "You looked like you were asleep."

"I should be so lucky," I said, getting into the passenger side. Even if I'd been wide awake, I knew Dimitri would've taken my suitcase anyway. That's how he was, a lost remnant of chivalry in the modern world, ever-ready to help others.

That was only one of the many striking things about Dimitri. His looks alone were certainly enough to make many halt in their tracks. He had dark brown hair pulled back into a short ponytail, with matching brown eyes that seemed mysterious and alluring. He was tall, too—about 6′7″—rivaling some Moroi. Dhampirs were indistinguishable from humans to me, so even I could admit that he scored pretty high on the attractiveness scale.

There was also an energy around him that you couldn't help but be affected by. He was always on alert, always ready for the unexpected. I'd never seen his guard down. He was constantly ready to strike. He was dangerous, no question, and I was comforted that he was on our side. I always felt safe around him—and a little wary.

"Thanks for the ride," I added. "I could've called a taxi." Even as I spoke, I knew my words were as useless as when I'd told him he didn't need to help me with my bag.

"It's no problem," he assured me, driving toward suburban Palm Springs. He wiped sweat off his brow and somehow made that look attractive. Even this early in the morning, the heat was beginning to build. "Sonya insisted. Besides, no experiments today."

I frowned at that. Those experiments and the amazing potential they represented to prevent the creation of more Strigoi were vastly important. Dimitri and Sonya knew that and were dedicated to the cause—especially on weekends, when Adrian and Eddie didn't have classes—which made this news so puzzling. My own work ethic had a hard time understanding why there'd be no research happening on a Sunday.

"Adrian?" I guessed. Maybe he wasn't "in the mood" for research today.

"Partially," said Dimitri. "We're also missing our control subject. Eddie said he had some conflict and couldn't make it."

My frown deepened. "What conflict could Eddie have?"

Eddie was intensely dedicated too. Adrian sometimes called him mini-Dimitri. Although Eddie was going to high school and completing assignments just like me, I knew he'd drop any homework in an instant to help out with the greater good. I could think of only one thing that would take precedence over helping find a "cure" for being Strigoi. My heart suddenly raced.

“Is Jill okay?” She had to be. Someone would have told me, right? Eddie’s main purpose in Palm Springs—and mine—was to keep her safe. If she was in danger, it would trump everything else.

“She’s fine,” said Dimitri. “I talked to her this morning. I’m not sure what’s going on, but Eddie wouldn’t be away without good reason.”

“I suppose not,” I murmured, still concerned.

“You worry as much as me,” teased Dimitri. “I didn’t think that was possible.”

“It’s my job to worry. I always have to make sure everyone’s okay.”

“Sometimes it’s not a bad thing to make sure you’re okay too. You might find it actually helps others.”

I scoffed. “Rose always joked about your ‘Zen Master Wisdom.’ Am I getting a taste of it? If so, I can see why she was helpless against your charms.”

This earned me one of Dimitri’s rare, genuine laughs. “I think so. If you ask her, she’ll claim it was the staking and decapitation. But I’m sure it was the Zen wisdom that won her in the end.”

My answering smile immediately melted into a yawn. It was amazing that I could joke with a dhampir. I used to have panic attacks being in the same room with them or Moroi. Slowly, over the last six months, my anxiety had begun to ease up. I’d never shake the feeling of “otherness” I got from all of them, but I’d come a long way. Part of me knew it was a good thing that I still drew that line between them and humans, but it was also good to be flexible in order to make my job smoother. *Not too flexible*, that inner Alchemist voice warned.

“Here we are,” said Dimitri, pulling up in front of my dorm at Amberwood Prep. If he’d noticed my shift in mood, he didn’t say so. “You should get some rest.”

“I’ll try,” I said. “But I need to find out what’s going on with Eddie first.”

Dimitri’s face turned all-business. “If you can find him, you should bring him over tonight, and we can see about getting a little work done. Sonya would love it. She has some new ideas.”

I nodded, reminding myself that that was the kind of standard we needed to adhere to. Work, work, work. We had to remember our higher goals. “I’ll see what I can do.”

I thanked him again and then headed inside, filled with resolve to carry out my mission. So, it was a bit disappointing when my lofty goals were shattered so quickly.

“Miss Melrose?”

I turned immediately at the sound of the last name I’d assumed here at Amberwood. Mrs. Weathers, our plump, elderly dorm matron, was hurrying over to me. Her face was lined with worry, which couldn’t bode well.

“I’m so glad you’re back,” she said. “I trust you had a good family visit?”

“Yes, ma’am.” If by “good,” she meant “terrifying and unsettling.”

Mrs. Weathers beckoned me over to her desk. “I need to talk to you about your cousin.”

I held back a grimace as I recalled Jill's e-mail. Cousin Angeline. All of us attending Amberwood were doing so under fake family connections. Jill and Eddie were my siblings. Angeline was our cousin. It helped explain why we were always together and getting involved with each other's business.

I sat down with Mrs. Weathers and thought longingly of my bed. "What's happened?" I asked.

Mrs. Weathers sighed. "Your cousin is having trouble with our dress code."

That was a surprise. "But we have uniforms, ma'am."

"Of course," she said. "But not outside of classes."

That was true. I was in khaki dress pants and a green short-sleeved blouse, along with a small gold cross I always wore. I did a mental rundown of Angeline's wardrobe, trying to recall if I'd ever seen anything concerning about it. Probably the most appalling part was its quality. Angeline had come from the Keepers, a mixed community of humans, Moroi, and dhampirs who lived in the Appalachian Mountains. Along with a lack of electricity and plumbing, the Keepers chose to make a lot of their clothing or at least wear it into threads.

"Friday night, I saw her wearing the most appallingly short jean shorts," continued Mrs. Weathers with a shudder. "I immediately chastised her, and she told me they were the only way she could be comfortable in the heat outside. I gave her a warning and advised she find more appropriate attire. Saturday, she appeared in the same shorts *and* a tank top that was totally indecent. That was when I suspended her to the dorm for the rest of the weekend."

"I'm sorry, ma'am," I said. Really, I had no idea what else to say. I'd spent the weekend caught up in the epic battle to save humanity, and now… jean shorts?

Mrs. Weathers grew hesitant. "I know… well, I know this isn't really anything you should be involved in. It's a parental matter. But, seeing as how you're so responsible and look out for the rest of your family…"

I sighed. "Yes, ma'am. I'll take care of it. Thank you for not taking more severe action against her."

I went upstairs, my small suitcase growing heavier with each step. When I reached the second floor, I stopped, unsure what to do. One more floor would take me to my room. This floor would take me to "Cousin Angeline." Reluctantly, I turned into the second floor hall, knowing the sooner this was dealt with, the better.

"Sydney!" Jill Mastrano opened the dorm room's door, her light green eyes shining with joy. "You're back."

"So it seems," I said, following her inside. Angeline was there as well, lounging on her bed with a textbook. I was pretty sure that was the first time I'd ever seen her study, but the house arrest probably limited her recreational options.

"What did the Alchemists want?" asked Jill. She sat cross-legged on her own bed and began absentmindedly playing with the strands of her curly, light brown hair.

I shrugged. "Paperwork. Boring stuff. Sounds like things were a little more exciting here." That was delivered with a pointed look at Angeline.

The dhampir girl jumped off her bed, face furious and blue eyes flashing. "It wasn't my fault! That Weathers woman was completely out of line!" she exclaimed, a slight southern drawl in her words.

A quick scan of Angeline showed nothing too concerning. Her jeans were threadbare but decent, as was her T-shirt. Even her mop of strawberry blonde hair was tame for a change, tied back in a ponytail.

“What on earth did you wear that got her so upset then?” I asked.

Scowling, Angeline went to her dresser and produced a pair of jean shorts with the most ragged hem I’d ever seen. I thought they’d unravel before my eyes. They were also so short that I wouldn’t have been surprised if they showed underwear when she wore them.

“Where did you get those?”

Angeline almost looked proud. “I made them.”

“With what, a hacksaw?”

“I had two pairs of jeans,” she said pragmatically. “It was so hot out, I figured I might as well turn one into shorts.”

“She used a knife from the cafeteria,” said Jill helpfully.

“Couldn’t find the scissors,” explained Angeline.

My bed. Where was my bed?

“Mrs. Weathers mentioned something about an indecent shirt too,” I said.

“Oh,” said Jill. “That was mine.”

I felt my eyebrows rise. “What? I know you don’t own anything ‘indecent.”’ Before Angeline had come along a month ago, Jill and I had been roommates.

“It’s not,” agreed Jill. “Except, it’s not really Angeline’s size.”

I glanced between the two girls and understood. Jill was tall and slim, like most Moroi, with a figure much coveted among human fashion designers, a figure I would’ve killed to have. Jill had even done some modeling. With that figure came a modest chest. Angeline’s chest… was not so modest. If she wore a tank top in Jill’s size, I imagined the shirt’s structural integrity would indeed be stretched to indecent limits.

“Jill wears that tank top all the time and doesn’t get in trouble,” said Angeline defensively. “I figured there wouldn’t be a problem if I borrowed it.”

My head was starting to hurt. Still, I supposed this was better than the time Angeline had been caught making out with a guy in the boys’ bathroom. “Well. This is easily fixed. We can go—well, I can go since you’re stuck here—and get you some clothes *in your size* tonight.”

“Oh,” Angeline said, suddenly turning more upbeat, “you don’t have to. Eddie’s handling it.”

If not for Jill nodding along, I would’ve thought it was a joke. “Eddie? Eddie’s buying you clothes?”

Angeline sighed happily. “Isn’t that nice of him?”

Nice? No, but I understood why Eddie would do it. Getting decent clothes for Angeline was the last thing he

probably wanted to do, but he would do it. Like me, he understood duty. And now I could guess why Eddie had canceled the experiments—and been vague about his reasons for doing so.

I immediately took out my cell phone and called him. He answered right away, like always. I was certain he was never more than three feet from his phone at all times. “Hello, Sydney. Glad you’re back.” He paused. “You *are* back, right?”

“Yeah, I’m with Jill and Angeline. I understand you’ve been doing some shopping.”

He groaned. “Don’t get me started. I just walked into my room.”

“You want to swing by with your purchases? I need the car back anyway.”

There was a moment’s hesitation. “Would you mind coming over here? As long as Jill’s okay. She *is* okay, right? She doesn’t need me? Because if she does—”

“She’s fine.” His dorm wasn’t far, but I’d been hoping for a quick nap. Nonetheless, I found myself agreeing, just like I always did. “Okay. I’ll meet you in the lobby in about fifteen minutes?”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Sydney.”

As soon as I disconnected, Angeline asked excitedly, “Is Eddie coming over?”

“I’m going to him,” I said.

Her face fell. “Oh. Well, I guess it doesn’t matter since I have to stay here anyway. I can’t wait until I’m free to train again. I’d like to get some more one-on-one time with him.” I hadn’t realized how focused Angeline was on her training. In fact, she seemed really excited about the prospect of it.

I left their room and was surprised to find Jill right behind me once the door shut. Her eyes were wide and anxious. “Sydney… I’m sorry.”

I regarded her curiously, wondering now if she’d done something. “For what?”

She gestured toward the door. “For Angeline. I should have done better at keeping her out of trouble.”

I almost smiled. “That’s not your job.”

“Yeah, I know…” She glanced down, letting some of her long hair fall forward. “But still. I know I should be more like you. Instead, I’ve just been… you know. Having fun.”

“You’re entitled to it,” I said, trying to ignore the subtle commentary on me.

“I should still be more responsible,” she argued.

“You are responsible,” I assured her. “Especially compared to Angeline.” My family had a cat back in Utah that I was pretty sure was more responsible than Angeline.

Jill’s face brightened, and I left her so that I could return the suitcase to my room. Angeline’s arrival and my work in busting Keith had earned me my own private room in the dorm, something I treasured. Inside it, everything was quiet and orderly. My perfect world. The one place that the chaos of my life couldn’t touch. The neatly made bed was asking to be slept in. Begging, really. *Soon*, I promised it. *I hope*.

Amberwood Prep was divided into three campuses, East (where the girls were housed), West (where the boys were), and Central (containing all the academic buildings). A shuttle bus ran between them on a regular schedule, or brave souls could walk between them in the heat. I usually didn't mind the temperatures, but walking seemed like a lot of work today. So, I took the shuttle to West Campus and tried to stay awake.

The lobby of the boys' dorm was a lot like my own, people coming and going to either catch up on academic work or simply enjoy the Sunday off. I glanced around, but Eddie wasn't here yet.

"Hey, Melbourne."

I turned and found Trey Juarez approaching, a grin on his tanned face. He was a senior like me and had picked up the Melbourne nickname after one of our teachers proved incapable of remembering Melrose. Honestly, with all these names, it was a wonder I knew who I was anymore.

"Hey, Trey," I said. Trey was a bona fide high school football star—but also pretty brainy, no matter how much he tried to hide it. We got along well as a result, and my help in restoring his athletic status last month had gone a long way to raise my stock in his eyes. A backpack hung on one of his shoulders. "Are you finally going to finish that chem lab write-up?"

"Yup," he said. "Me and half the cheerleading squad. You want to join us?"

I rolled my eyes. "Somehow I doubt there'll be much work going on. Besides, I'm meeting Eddie."

Trey gave an easy shrug and brushed some unruly black hair out of his eyes. "Your loss. See you tomorrow." He took a couple of steps and then glanced back at me. "Hey, are you dating anyone?"

I immediately started to say no, and then a panicked thought occurred to me. I had a tendency to take things very literally. Friends of mine here, Kristin and Julia, had been trying to train me up in the subtleties of high school social life. One of their chief lessons was that what people said wasn't always what they meant—particularly in romantic matters.

"Are you… are you asking me out?" I asked, taken aback. This was the last thing I needed right now. How should I respond? Should I say yes? Should I say no? I'd had no idea helping him with chemistry homework would be so alluring. I should've made him do it on his own.

Trey looked as startled by the thought as I was. "What? No. Of course not."

"Thank God," I said. I liked Trey, but I had no interest in dating him—or figuring out what the appropriate way to say "no" would be.

He shot me a wry look. "You don't have to look *that* relieved."

"Sorry," I said, trying to mask my embarrassment. "Why'd you ask?"

"Because I know the perfect guy for you. I'm pretty sure he's your soul mate."

We were back in familiar territory now: logic vs. lack of logic. "I don't believe in soul mates," I said. "It's statistically unreasonable that there's only one ideal person for everyone in the world." And yet, for half a moment, I wished it was kind of possible. It'd be nice to have someone who understood some of the things that went on in my head.

Trey rolled his eyes. "Okay. Not a soul mate. How about just someone you could maybe go out with once in

a while and have a nice time with?"

I shook my head. "I don't have time for anything like that." And I didn't. Keeping everything in order with the group, and pretending to be a student, was a full time job as it was.

"I'm telling you, you'd like him. He goes to a public school and just started at Spencer's." Spencer's was a coffee shop Trey worked at, an arrangement that yielded me discounts. "The other day, he was going off on unaerobic vs. aerobic respiration, and I was thinking, 'You know who this sounds like? Melbourne.'"

"It's *an*aerobic respiration," I corrected. "And it still doesn't mean I have the time. Sorry." I had to admit, I was immensely curious about how that topic would have come up between baristas, but figured it was best not to encourage Trey.

"Okay," he said. "Don't say I never tried to help you."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I assured him. "Hey, there's Eddie."

"My cue to go then. See you guys." Trey gave a mock salute to Eddie and me. "Don't forget my offer if you want a hot date, Melbourne."

Trey left, and Eddie shot me an astonished look. "Did Trey just ask you out?"

"No. He's just got some co-worker he wants to set me up with."

"Maybe that's not a bad idea."

"It's a terrible idea. Let's go outside."

The desert heat didn't seem to care that it was October, and I led us to a bench right by the dorm's stucco walls. Partial shade from some nearby palm trees offered mild relief. People swore the temperature would taper soon, but I'd seen no sign of change. Eddie handed me my car keys and a shopping bag from a local superstore.

"I had to guess at size," he told me. "When in doubt, I went big. Figured it was safer that way."

"Probably." I sat down on a bench and rifled through his purchases. Jeans, khakis, a few solid colored T-shirts. They were very practical, very much something a no-nonsense guy like Eddie would pick out. I approved. "The size actually looks right. Good eye. We'll have to send you out shopping more often."

"If that's what I have to do," he said, face serious. I couldn't help but laugh in surprise.

"I was joking." I put the shirts back in the bag. "I know that couldn't have been fun." Eddie's face gave nothing away. "Oh, come *on*. It's okay. You don't have to play stoic with me. I know you didn't enjoy it."

"I'm here to do a job. Doesn't matter if I enjoy it or not."

I started to protest but then thought better of it. After all, wasn't that my philosophy too? Sacrificing my own wants for higher goals? Eddie was intensely dedicated to this mission. He never backed down. I expected nothing less from him than single-minded focus.

"So, does that mean you're up for some experiments tonight?" I asked.

“Of cours—” He stopped and reconsidered. “Are Jill and Angeline coming?”

“No. Angeline’s still under house arrest.”

“Thank God,” he said with visible relief.

His reaction was probably the most surprising thing to happen today. I couldn’t imagine why Eddie would look so relieved. Aside from his guardian loyalty to Jill, he was also crazy about her. He would’ve done anything for her, even if it wasn’t his job, but refused to share his feelings with her. He thought he was unworthy of a princess. An uneasy thought occurred to me.

“Are you… are you avoiding Jill because of her and Micah?”

Micah was Eddie’s roommate, a nice guy who caused Eddie all sorts of therapy-worthy trauma because he bore so much similarity to Eddie’s dead best friend, Mason. Micah also had a weird pseudo-dating relationship with Jill. None of us were happy about it, since (aside from the Keepers) humans dating Moroi or dhampirs was strictly taboo. We’d finally decided it would be impossible to keep Jill from a social life, and she swore nothing serious or physical was going on between her and Micah. They just spent a lot of time together. And flirted incessantly. He didn’t know the truth about her, but I wondered at what point he’d want more from their relationship. Eddie kept insisting it was better for Jill to have a casual relationship with a human than one with an “unworthy” dhampir like him, but I knew it had to be torturous.

“Of course not,” said Eddie sharply. “It’s not Jill I want to avoid. It’s Angeline.”

“Angeline? What’s she done now?”

Eddie ran a hand through his hair in frustration. His was a sandy blond, not far from my own, which was a dark gold. The similarity made it easy to pass ourselves off as twins. “She won’t leave me alone! She’s always dropping these suggestive comments when I’m around… and she won’t stop staring at me. Like, you wouldn’t think that’d be creepy, but it is. She’s always watching. And I can’t avoid her because she’s with Jill a lot of the time, and I have to keep Jill safe.”

I thought back on recent interactions. “Are you sure you’re reading this right? I’ve never noticed anything.”

“That’s because you don’t notice that kind of thing,” he said. “You cannot imagine how many excuses she finds to rub up against me.”

After seeing her homemade jean shorts, I actually could imagine it. “Huh. Well, maybe I can talk to her.”

Like that, Eddie snapped back to all-business. “No. It’s my problem, my personal life. I’ll deal with it.”

“Are you sure? Because I can—”

“Sydney,” he said gently. “You’re the most responsible person I know, but this isn’t what you’re here to do. You don’t have to take care of everything and everyone.”

“I don’t mind,” I said automatically. “It *is* what I’m here for.” But even as I said it, I wondered if that was true. A bit of the anxiety from the bunker returned, making me question if what I did was truly Alchemist responsibility or the desire to help those who—against protocol—had become my friends.

“See? Now you sound just like I did earlier.” He stood up and flashed me a grin. “You want to come with me to Adrian’s? Be responsible together?”

His words were meant as a compliment, but they echoed too close to what the Alchemists had told me. And Mrs. Weathers. And Jill. Everyone thought I was so amazing, so responsible and controlled.

But if I was so amazing, then why was I always so unsure if I was doing the right thing?

CHAPTER 3

EVEN THOUGH EDDIE had told me not to worry about Angeline, the curious part of me couldn't help but prod him about it on the drive over to Adrian's apartment. "How are you going to handle it?" I asked. "Have a heart-to-heart?"

He shook his head. "Mostly I was going to simply avoid her unless absolutely necessary. Hopefully she'll lose interest."

"Well. I guess that's one method. But, I mean, you're a pretty direct person." If faced with a roomful of Strigoi, he would've walked in without hesitation. "Maybe you should try that kind of approach instead. Just confront her and tell her honestly that you're not interested."

"That's easy in theory," he said. "Not so much in person."

"Seems easy to me."

Eddie was skeptical. "That's because you've never had to do it."

Going to Adrian's was a lot easier than it once had been for me. His apartment used to belong to Keith and was also the site where a Moroi named Lee and two Strigoi had died. Those were hard memories to shake. The Alchemists had offered the apartment to me, since I'd also taken on full responsibility for Palm Springs, but I'd yielded it to Adrian. I hadn't been sure I wanted to live there, and he'd been pretty desperate for his own place. When I'd seen how happy the apartment made him, I knew I'd made the right choice.

Adrian opened the door before we'd barely had a chance to knock. "The cavalry! Thank God."

I hid a smile as Eddie and I stepped inside. The first thing that always hit me about this place was the sunny yellow paint Adrian had put up on the walls. He was convinced it helped the mood and had warned us not to question his "artistic sensibilities." The fact that the yellow clashed pretty terribly with his secondhand plaid furniture was apparently irrelevant. Or maybe I just wasn't "artistic" enough to appreciate it. Nonetheless, I actually found the erratic style comforting. It bore little resemblance to Keith's decorating, making it a *little* easier to blot out the events of that awful night. Sometimes, when I looked around the living room, my breath would catch as visions of the vicious Strigoi attack and Lee's death haunted me. Adrian's stamp on the apartment was like light chasing away the gruesome shadows of the past.

Sometimes when I was down, Adrian's personality had a similar effect.

"Nice blouse, Sage," he told me, deadpan. "It really brings out the khaki in your pants."

His sarcasm aside, he looked supremely delighted to see us. He had the tall, lean build that most Moroi guys did, along with their typically pale (though not Strigoi-pale) skin. I hated to admit it, but he was more good-looking than he had any right to be. He wore his dark brown hair stylishly messy and had eyes that sometimes seemed too green to be real. Adrian had on one of those button-up printed shirts that were trendy with guys lately, with a blue pattern on it I liked. He smelled like he'd been smoking recently, which I didn't like.

Dimitri and Sonya were sitting at the kitchen table going over a bunch of papers with hand-written notes on them. The papers were kind of haphazardly scattered around, which made me wonder how much work they could really be accomplishing. I would have had those pages neatly stacked and organized by topic.

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