

Prologue

“GET OUT,” I PLEADED. “GET OUT OF TOWN FOR good. That way we don’t have to kill you.”

The vampire snarled, “What makes you think you could?”

Lucas tackled him, and they fell to the pavement. Those were bad odds for Lucas; short-range fighting always worked to a vampire’s advantage, because a vampire’s best weapons were his fangs. I ran forward, determined to help.

“You’re stronger”—the vampire gasped—“than a human.”

Lucas said, “I’m human enough.”

The vampire grinned, a smile that had nothing to do with the desperate situation he was in and was therefore even scarier. “I heard somebody was looking for one of our babies,” he crooned to Lucas. “One of the powerful ones in my tribe. Lady named Charity. Heard of her?”

Charity’s tribe. A jolt of panic shivered through me.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of Charity. In fact, I staked her,” Lucas said as he tried to twist the vampire’s hand around his back. “Think

I can't stake you, too? You're about to learn different." Yet Lucas couldn't gain the advantage. They were too evenly matched. He wasn't even going to have a chance to go for his stakes. The vampire could turn the tables on him at any second.

That meant it was up to me to save him—by killing another vampire.

Chapter One

I GASPED FOR AIR SO HARD THAT MY CHEST ACHED. My face felt hot, and strands of my hair stuck to the sweaty back of my neck. Every single muscle hurt.

In front of me was Eduardo, one of the leaders of this Black Cross cell, with a stake in his hand. All around us, his vampire hunters, a ragtag army in denim and flannel, watched in silence. None of them would help me. We stood apart from them in the center of the room. Harsh overhead light painted him in stark shadows.

“Come on, Bianca. Get in the game.” His voice could sound like a growl when he chose, and every word echoed off the concrete floor and metal walls of the abandoned warehouse. “This is a fight to the death. Aren’t you even going to try to stop me?”

If I sprang at him in an effort to grab his weapon or knock him down, he’d be able to throw me to the floor. Eduardo was faster, and he’d been hunting for years. He’d probably killed

hundreds of vampires—all of them older and more powerful than me.

Lucas, what can I do?

But I didn't dare look around for Lucas. I knew that if I took my eyes away from Eduardo for a second, the battle would be over.

I took a couple of steps backward, but I stumbled. The borrowed shoes I wore were too big for me, and one of them slipped off my foot.

"Clumsy," Eduardo said. He turned the stake between his fingers, as if imagining different angles at which to strike. His smile was so satisfied—so smug—that I stopped being scared and started being mad.

I grabbed up the shoe and flung it at Eduardo's face as hard as I could.

It smacked into his nose, and our audience burst out laughing. A few of them clapped. The tension had disappeared in an instant, and I was once more part of the gang, or so they thought.

"Nice," Lucas said as he emerged from the circle of watchers and put his hands on my shoulders. "Very nice."

"I'm not exactly a black belt." I couldn't catch my breath. Sparring practice always wore me out; this was the first time it hadn't ended with me flat on my back.

"You've got good instincts." Lucas's fingers kneaded the sore muscles at the base of my neck.

Eduardo didn't think having a shoe thrown in his face was

funny. He glared at me, an expression that would've been more fearsome if his nose weren't bright red. "Cute—in sparring practice. But if you think a stunt like that will save you in the real world—"

"It will if her opponent takes her for granted," said Kate, "like you did."

That shut Eduardo up, and he smiled ruefully. Officially, he and Kate were co-leaders of this Black Cross cell, but after only four days with them, I knew most people looked to Kate for the final word. Eduardo didn't seem to mind. As touchy and prickly as he was with everyone else, Lucas's stepfather apparently thought Kate could do no wrong.

"Doesn't matter how you knock them down as long as they fall," said Dana. "Now, can we eat already? Bianca's got to be starving."

I thought of blood—rich and red and hot, more delicious than any food could ever be—and a small shiver passed through me. Lucas saw it and put his arm around my waist to draw me close, as if for a hug. He whispered, "You okay?"

"Just hungry."

His dark green eyes met mine. If there was unease about my need for blood, there was understanding, too.

But Lucas couldn't help me any more than I could help myself. For the time being, we were trapped.

Four days earlier, my school, Evernight Academy, had been raided and burned by Black Cross. The hunters knew the secret of Evernight: that it was a refuge for vampires, a place to teach

them about the modern world. That made it a target for Black Cross—a band of deadly vampire hunters, all of whom were trained to kill.

What they didn't know was that I wasn't one of the many human students who studied alongside the vampires at Evernight, unaware. I was a vampire.

Well, not a full vampire. If I had my way, that was something I would never become. But I had been born to two vampires, and despite the fact that I was a living person, I had some of the powers of a vampire and some of the needs.

Like, for instance, the need for blood.

Ever since the attack on Evernight Academy, this Black Cross cell was in lockdown. This meant that we were hiding in one secure location—namely this warehouse, which smelled like old tires and had cots for us to sleep on and oil stains on the concrete floor. People could go outside only if they were patrolling for vampires who might come after us in revenge for the attack on the school. We had to spend virtually every waking second in preparation for battles to come. I'd learned to sharpen knives, for instance, and had the very weird experience of whittling a stake. And now they'd started teaching me how to fight.

Privacy? Forget about it. I was lucky there was a door in front of the toilet. That meant that Lucas and I had almost no chance to be alone—and, even worse, that I hadn't drunk blood in four days.

Without blood, I became weak. I became hungry. The crav-

ing controlled me more and more, and if this went on much longer, I wasn't sure what I would do.

No matter what, I couldn't drink blood in front of anybody in Black Cross, save Lucas. When he had seen me bite another vampire during his year at Evernight Academy, I'd thought he would reject me forever; instead, he had overcome his Black Cross indoctrination and remained in love with me. I doubted many other vampire hunters would be capable of the same change of heart. If anyone else in the room with us right now saw me drink blood and realized the truth, I knew exactly what would happen. They would all turn on me in an instant.

Even Dana, one of Lucas's best friends, who was still cackling about my small victory over Eduardo. Even Kate, who credited me with saving Lucas's life. Even Raquel, my roommate from school who had joined me in Black Cross. Every time I looked at any of them, I had to remember: *They'd kill me if they knew.*

"Peanut butter again," Dana said as a few of us sat on the floor by our cots with our scanty dinner. "You know, seems like I remember enjoying peanut butter, once upon a long ago."

"Beats noodles with butter," Lucas said. Dana groaned. In reply to my curious glance, he added, "Last year, for a while, that was pretty much all we could afford. Seriously, every meal for a month, spaghetti noodles with butter. If I never eat that again, it'll be too soon."

"Who cares?" Raquel spread peanut butter on her bread like it was caviar. She hadn't stopped smiling for four days, ever

since Black Cross first announced they'd take us in. "So we aren't dining out at fancy restaurants every night. What does it matter? We're actually doing something important. Something real."

I pointed out, "Right now, we're mostly hiding in a warehouse, eating peanut butter sandwiches without jelly three meals a day."

That didn't faze Raquel in the slightest. "It's just part of the sacrifice we have to make. It's worth it."

Dana ruffled Raquel's short black hair affectionately. "Spoken like a true newbie. We'll see what you say in year five." Raquel beamed. She loved the idea of being with Black Cross for five years, for ten, her whole life. After being stalked by vampires at school and haunted by ghosts at home, Raquel wanted nothing more than to kick some supernatural butt. As strange and hungry as the past four days had been, I'd never seen Raquel happier.

"Lights out in one hour!" yelled Kate. "Do what you've gotta."

As one, Dana and Raquel stuffed the last crusts of their sandwiches in their mouths and took off toward the makeshift shower that had been set up in the back. Only the first few people in line would have time to wash tonight, and only one or two would get warm water. Were they planning on fighting each other for a spot in line? The only alternative would probably be to share.

I felt too exhausted to think about taking my clothes off,

sweaty though I was. “In the morning,” I said, half to Lucas and half to myself. “I’ll have time to wash in the morning.”

“Hey.” His hand rested on my forearm, comfortably warm and strong. “You’re trembling.”

“I guess I am.”

Lucas shifted until he sat next to me. His tall frame, well-muscled but wiry, made me feel small and delicate, and his dark gold hair looked brilliant even in these dingy surroundings. His warmth made me imagine that I was in front of a fireplace in winter. As he put one arm around my shoulders, I rested my aching head against him and closed my eyes. That way I could pretend that there weren’t a couple dozen people around us, talking and laughing. That we weren’t in some gray, ugly warehouse that smelled like rubber. That there was nobody in the world but Lucas and me.

Into my ear, he murmured, “I’m worried about you.”

“I’m worried about me, too.”

“Lockdown’s not going to go on much longer. Then we can get you some—something to eat, I mean—and you and I can figure out what to do next.”

I understood what he meant. We were going to run away, the way we’d planned before the attack on Evernight. Lucas wanted to get away from Black Cross almost as badly as I did. But in order to do that, we’d need money, our freedom, and a chance to make plans together in private. Right now, all we could do was hang on.

When I looked at Lucas, I saw the concern in his dark green

eyes. I put my hand to his cheek and felt the rough scrub of beard stubble. “We’ll make it. I know we will.”

“I’m supposed to be the one taking care of you.” He kept studying me, as if he could somehow find the answer to our problems in my face. “Not the other way around.”

“We can take care of each other.”

Lucas embraced me tightly, and for a few seconds, I didn’t have to pretend we were anywhere else.

“Lucas!” Eduardo’s voice echoed against the concrete and metal. We looked up to see him nearby, arms folded across his chest. Sweat made a dark V on the front of his T-shirt. Lucas and I drew away from each other. It wasn’t that we were ashamed, but nobody could kill a romantic mood faster than Eduardo. “I want you to walk the perimeter on the first shift tonight.”

“I went two nights ago,” Lucas protested. “It’s not my turn yet.”

This only made Eduardo’s scowl blacker. “Since when do you start whining about turns, like a kid on the playground who wants the swings?”

“Since you stopped even pretending to be fair. Back off, okay?”

“Or what? You’ll run to your mommy? Because Kate wants to see some proof of your dedication, Lucas. We all do.”

He meant, because of me. Lucas had broken Black Cross rules many times so that we could be together—more than the others in this cell knew.

Lucas wasn’t backing down. “I haven’t had a full night’s

sleep since the fire. I'm not spending another night in the drainage ditch outside, waiting for nothing."

Eduardo's dark eyes narrowed. "At any second, we could have a vampire tribe on our trail—"

"And whose fault would that be? After your stunt at Ever-night Academy—"

"Stunt?"

"Time out!" Dana, fresh from her shower and smelling strongly of cheap soap, held her hands in a T between Lucas and Eduardo. Her long braids fell over the thin, damp towel looped around her neck. "Chill, okay? In case you lost count, Eduardo, it's actually my turn to take a shift tonight. I don't feel so tired anyway."

Eduardo never liked being vetoed, but he couldn't refuse a willing volunteer. "Suit yourself, Dana."

"Why don't I bring Raquel out with me?" she suggested, smoothly steering the conversation away from Lucas. "My girl's chomping at the bit to do more."

"Raquel's too new. Forget it." Apparently Eduardo felt better for having been able to put his foot down. He stalked off.

"Thanks," I said to Dana. "Are you sure you aren't too tired?"

She grinned. "What, do you think I'm going to be dragging butt tomorrow like Lucas did today? No way."

Lucas pretended to punch her arm, and she mock-sneered at him. They pretty much gave each other hell all the time without meaning a word of it. I thought that Dana might be Lucas's

best friend. Certainly only a real friend would take a perimeter-search shift, which involved—as Lucas put it—a whole lot of stooping, a whole lot of mud, and almost no sleep.

Soon everyone around us was preparing for bed. The only privacy any of us had was the “wall”—actually a bunch of old sheets hung over a clothesline—between the men’s half of the room and the women’s. Lucas and I were both right up against the sheet, separated only by a few inches and one thin cotton cloth. Sometimes I was reassured by the fact that he was so close; other times, the frustration made me want to scream.

It’s not forever, I reminded myself as I changed into the borrowed T-shirt I slept in. The pajamas I’d escaped in had been ruined in the fire; the only thing I wore that belonged to me was the obsidian pendant I’d gotten from my parents that hung around my neck at all times, even when I was in the shower. The jet brooch Lucas had given me while we were first dating was tucked into the small bag they’d given me. I didn’t think of myself as especially materialistic, but losing nearly everything I’d ever owned had been a blow. So I treasured the few things I had left.

When Kate called “Lights out,” somebody flipped the switch almost that instant. I burrowed under the thin, army-style blanket over my folding cot. It wasn’t soft, and it definitely wasn’t comfortable—cots *suck*—but I was so exhausted that any chance to rest was welcome.

To my left, Raquel was already asleep. She slept better here

than she ever had at Evernight.

To my right, invisible behind the slowly rippling white sheet, was Lucas.

I imagined the outline of his body, what he looked like lying down on his cot. I fantasized about tiptoeing to his side and sliding in next to him. But we'd be seen. I sighed, giving up the idea.

This was the fourth night I'd done that. And, just as I'd done the other four nights, once I stopped being frustrated about my inability to be with Lucas, I started worrying.

Mom and Dad have to be okay, I told myself. I remembered the blaze too well—the way the flames had leaped up around me and the thickness of the smoke. It would've been easy to get lost, to get trapped. Fire was one of the only ways to truly kill a vampire. They have centuries of experience. They've been in worse trouble before. Remember what Mom told you about the Great Fire of London? If she made it through that, she could make it out of Evernight.

But Mom hadn't made it out of the Great Fire. She'd been terribly injured and near death; my father had "rescued" her by turning her into a vampire like himself.

I hadn't exactly been on great terms with my parents lately. That didn't mean I wanted them to be hurt. Just the thought of them weak and injured—or worse—made me sick to my stomach.

They weren't the only ones I was worried about. Had Vic been able to get out of the burning school? What about Balthazar?

As a vampire, he might have been targeted by Black Cross—or by his psychotic, vengeful sister, Charity, who had nearly prevented me, Lucas, and Raquel from escaping. Or what about poor Ranulf? He was a vampire, but one so gentle and unworldly that it was easy to imagine the hunters of Black Cross wiping him out.

I didn't know how many of them were. I might never know. When I chose to leave with Lucas, I'd known that was a risk I'd have to take. That didn't mean I liked it.

My stomach growled, hungry for blood.

Groaning, I turned over in my cot and prayed for sleep. That was the only way to silence the fears and hungers inside—at least for a few hours.

I reached out for the flower, but even as my fingertip touched the petal, it blackened and withered.

“Not for me,” I whispered.

“No. Something better,” said the ghost.

How long had she been there? It seemed as though she'd always been by my side. We stood together on the grounds of Evernight Academy as dark clouds roiled overhead. Gargoyles glared down at us from the imposing stone towers. The wind blew strands of my dark red hair across my face. A few leaves, caught in the gale, blew through the aquamarine shadow of the ghost. She flinched.

“Where's Lucas?” Somehow he was supposed to be here, but I couldn't remember why.

“Inside.”

"I can't go in there." It wasn't that I was afraid. For some reason, it seemed impossible for me to walk inside the school. Then I realized why it was impossible. "This can't be real. Evernight Academy was burned in a fire. It doesn't exist now."

The ghost cocked her head. "When you say 'now,' when do you mean?"

"Feet on the floor!"

The shout awakened us every morning. Even as I blinked my eyes, groggily trying to recall the dream that already had begun to slip away, Raquel bounded from her cot, strangely energized. "Come on, Bianca."

"It's just breakfast," I grumbled. Peanut butter on toast wasn't worth rushing for, in my opinion.

"No, something's happening."

Bleary and confused, I stumbled to my feet to see that the Black Cross hunters around me were already on guard. My exhaustion told me that it couldn't possibly be morning yet. Why had they hauled us out of bed in the middle of the night?

Oh, no.

Dana ran in and yelled, "Confirmed! Arm up, now!"

"The vampires," Raquel whispered. "They've come."