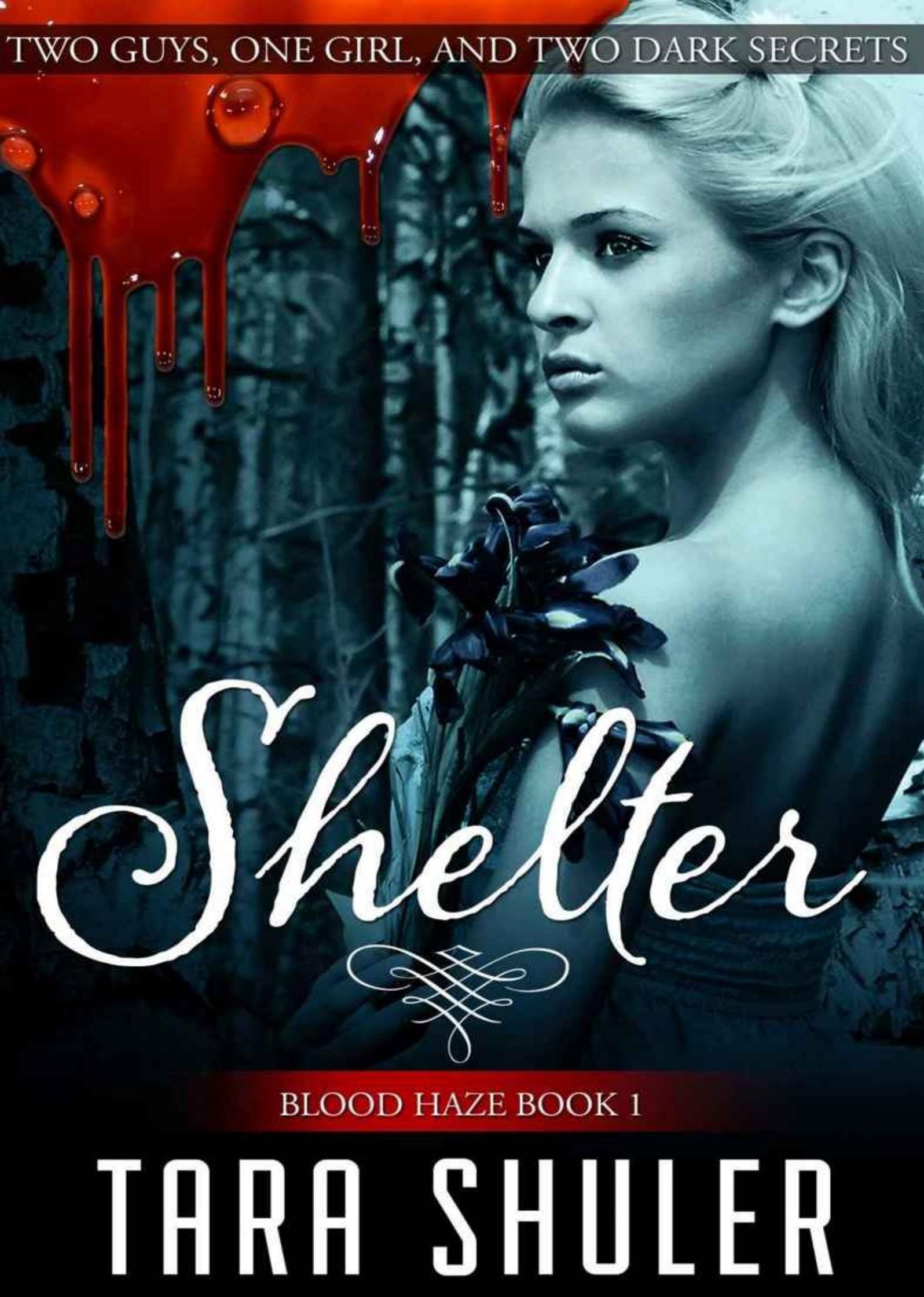


TWO GUYS, ONE GIRL, AND TWO DARK SECRETS



Shelter

BLOOD HAZE BOOK 1

TARA SHULER

"Vampires, love triangles, and true love..."

SHELTER

BLOOD HAZE: BOOK ONE



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Blood Haze: Book One

By Tara Shuler

<http://www.BloodHaze.com>

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For My Beloved Joe
R.I.P. 1991
*Your heart taught me how to love,
and your memory keeps love alive.*

Chapter One

New Beginnings

My heart was thumping rhythmically like a bass drum. My stomach clenched in knots, and I felt nauseous. I hadn't fed on human blood in days, and now I was paying for it. A mixture of hunger and anxiety swelled inside me. I wanted to turn around and run, to flee back to the safety of the home I'd rarely left without a chaperone since my birth.

Why now? Why, when I was seventeen years old and just a year away from graduation, did my mother have to decide to send me to high school. To a human high school, of all places?

Mother had always been overprotective. She'd insisted that my brother and me be kept away from human interaction. In fact, she'd even kept me away from most other vampires, as well. I never thought much about it, to tell you the truth. We were happy. I had my brother to play with when I was little, and when I got older, I spent most of my time reading and watching movies. I learned to play the piano and I spent hours practicing. I knew we were different from other vampire families, and especially from human families, but it never really occurred to me to mind.

But now my mother was demanding that I go to school with them. Humans. Those people she'd kept me away from my whole life, insisting they were dangerous. They didn't look so dangerous. I knew I could snap a human neck like a twig without batting an eyelash, so I couldn't understand why she'd made such a fuss.

Now I knew.

As I neared the school building, I could hear them. Smell them. The scent of their blood hung thick and delicious in the air. I could hear their hearts beating, pumping blood through their veins. The sound was like a dinner bell.

Now I knew.

I knew why she wanted to keep me away from humans. I knew why she'd insisted that I never leave home alone. I knew why she said humans were just as dangerous to me as I was to them. And I knew I could never make it through the day without sinking my fangs deep into the neck of one of them and draining every last precious drop.

I shuddered and clutched my notebook to my chest, inhaling a deep, cleansing breath of the crisp morning air. A breeze fluttered past, sending swirls of crackling brown and orange leaves rustling by, and bringing the send of a dozen humans wafting

up my nostrils.

I spun around, hoping it wasn't too late, that my brother's car would still be there waiting for me in case I needed to make a hasty retreat. I exhaled sharply and felt my shoulders slouch forward with disappointment. He was gone.

I lifted my head and clenched my jaw, and then I turned around and strode toward the front door.

"I can do this," I muttered. Then I felt my face burning hot with embarrassment as I noticed several girls standing nearby and snickering at me as I talked to myself.

Don't talk to yourself out loud, you idiot! I thought.

I passed by the gaggle of giggling girls and pulled the handle of one of the glass doors that stood in a row at the entrance. I was immediately assaulted by a massive blast of blood-tinged air. I sucked in my breath and tried not to smell it, but my mind was already pulsing with the delicious scent. I could feel my fangs tingling, a sure sign that they would soon unsheathe themselves.

No! Not now! I gasped inside my head.

"Alice?"

I jumped, startled at the sound of my name. An older woman was peering down at me from behind cat's eye glasses. She smiled at me, though I couldn't tell if her smile was fake or sincere.

"Yes," I acknowledged nervously.

"I'm the school principal, Mrs. Vickers. Your mother told me you'd be coming today," she said. "I'm going to walk you to your first class. Is that okay?"

"Um, sure," I nodded.

She handed me a class schedule and a map of the school and launched into a long, droning speech about how glad she was to have me at Savannah High School, how I was really going to enjoy it, and how different it would be from homeschool.

"Listen, Alice," she said. "If you have any questions or concerns or you feel overwhelmed at all, my door is always open. Alright?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said politely.

"Good!" she said with a smile. "Now follow me. I'll take you to your homeroom class."

I followed Mrs. Vickers down a hallway that was swarming with humans. Some of them bumped against me or nudged me as we passed through them, and I could feel myself wanting to sink my fangs into their skin. How was I ever going to make it through one day here, much less an entire year?

“This is it, Alice,” Mrs. Vickers chimed cheerfully, motioning toward an open door with her hand. “Just go in and choose a seat and your teacher will be in shortly.”

“Thank you,” I said shyly.

“Anytime,” she responded. “And remember what I said. My door is always open.”

I nodded again, and she patted me on my shoulder and disappeared into the undulating swarm of students. I felt the need to take a deep breath, but I knew if I did, it would only intensify my hunger.

I chose the desk in the far back corner of the room, assuming no one else would willingly sit that far away from others. A few moments later, two guys walked into the room and sat down. One sat in the desk right beside me, and the other chose the desk on the other side of him.

Thirty other desks in the room, I thought, and they had to choose these. Great.

Immediately after they sat down, the guy sitting beside me slapped the other one on the shoulder with the back of his hand and nodded toward me, grinning. Much to my chagrin, the guy sitting beside me turned toward me.

“Hey, you’re new here, aren’t you?” he asked.

I sighed, my eyes still facing straight ahead, but I could see him staring at me out of the corner of my eye. Did I even have to respond? Maybe I could just ignore him.

“Um, yeah,” I heard myself saying, despite the intense desire to remain silent.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Alice.”

Why did I keep talking? Surely no major disaster would befall me if I just ignored him, would it?

“I’m Van,” he said. Then he pointed to the other guy and said, “And this is Zach.”

What should I say next? Having never interacted with humans this way, I wasn’t sure. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself on the first day. My instinct was to jump up and leave, but then they’d *really* think I was a kook.

“Nice to meet you,” I said quickly.

Van smiled. He seemed pleased for some reason. Zach sat on the other side of Van grinning at me like an idiot. Was this what all humans were like? They seemed like drooling fools to me. I was shocked they could walk and breathe at the same time.

“There’s a party tonight,” Van said. “Do you want to come?”

A party. I said it over in my head a couple of times. I remembered seeing human parties on television. Vampires had social gatherings, but we didn't have wild music and drinking and crazy party games the way humans did. Ours were more... civilized.

"Umm. No, thank you," I replied. "I have to get home after school."

Oh, crap. Now I was really going to look like a spaz. I knew from movies, television and books that human teenagers looked down on other teens that went home early and didn't go to parties.

"Oh," said Van, looking disappointed. "It's cool."

Clearly, he had seen my rejection as personal rather than my own reluctance to throw myself into the midst of human culture so thoroughly on my first day. I hadn't meant to offend anyone – especially when I was just getting used to interacting with the humans.

"Wait," I said. "I'll go."

Instantly, I regretted my decision. It was one of those times when you hear yourself saying something, and it seems like a good idea at the time, but once you blurt it out you can hardly believe it was really you speaking. What was I thinking?

Van perked up.

"Awesome!" he said. "Let me give you the address."

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a spiral-bound notebook and a pen. He scribbled an address on the paper, and he wrote the time – eight o'clock. Then he ripped the page out and handed it to me.

I took the paper and glanced at it. The address was familiar to me for some reason. 725 Sycamore Street. Where did I know that address from? I couldn't remember. It probably didn't matter, anyway.

"It's at my cousin's house. It's going to be mostly seniors like us, but there might be some underclassmen there," Van said.

I didn't know what to say. I thought back to the books and movies I'd seen, but nothing came immediately to mind. Oh, yeah. Seniors don't generally like to hang out with younger students, I remembered.

"Bummer," I said.

"My cousin's nineteen, so he's not in school anymore," Van said. "But he doesn't really care who shows up."

"Oh," I said. I couldn't really think of anything else to say.

By then, other students were coming into the room and sitting down. A pretty blonde sat in front of me, and an overweight brunette girl with acne sat down at the

desk in front of Van. The blonde looked at the heavier girl in disgust and stood up, choosing a desk across the room. If the brunette noticed, she didn't let on. She had her head bent, and she gnawed her fingernails nervously.

Pretty soon, the classroom was full. All around me I could feel body heat radiating from the other students. *Thump, thump, thump*. I could hear their hearts pounding. *Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*. Their blood swished through their veins. My stomach gnawed angrily, and my mouth watered. I tried to ignore my tingling gums as my fangs tried to extend.

The bell rang. Seconds later, a good-looking man about forty years old walked in. He sat down at the teacher's desk and cleared his throat, waiting for everyone to be quiet. The cacophony of voices slowly died down, and the man introduced himself as Mr. Raines. He began calling out names from a list.

"Jamie Adams," called Mr. Raines.

"Here," replied the brunette quietly.

"Amanda Brit," called Mr. Raines.

"Here," answered the pretty blonde.

He went through the list name by name. By the time he called my name, I knew what to do. Thank heavens my name didn't come before Adams, or I'd have looked like a complete moron.

"Alice Wright" he called.

"Here," I called back.

Whew! At least I hadn't made an ass of myself in homeroom.

The rest of homeroom was uneventful. Everyone chatted amongst themselves, but thankfully Van and Zach were having their own conversation and they left me alone. Jamie was the only one besides me who wasn't prattling away. I wondered if she was purposely isolating herself, or if she was being ostracized because of her appearance.

When the bell rang, everyone got up to leave the room. I noticed something fall off Jamie's backpack when she stood up, and instinctively I picked it up and ran after her.

"Hey!" I called.

A few people glanced at me to see whom it was I was referring to, but Jamie did not. I caught up with her and tapped her on the shoulder. She stopped and turned around to face me, looking a bit startled.

"Hey, you dropped this," I said, extending my hand, which held the item in

question.

I looked down at it, noticing it was a keychain. Several keys dangled from the end of a weird pink wiggly thing. It looked kind of like a sea urchin, but the spikes were all made of some squishy, stretchy material. It was one of the strangest things I'd ever seen.

"Oh, thank you," Jamie said, taking it from me. "My mother would kill me if I lost my keys again."

Jamie turned and walked away, staring straight down at the floor as she went. She soon disappeared in the crowd of students. I felt bad for her. I had some kind of strange kinship with her. Whether she exiled herself intentionally, or was shunned by her peers – she must have felt as out of place as I did.

Most of my classes were really boring and uneventful. Van was in my English class, and I had gym class with Jamie, Amanda, Zach, and Van. Jamie brought a note from her mother that said she must be excused from gym class because she had a bad knee. I overheard Amanda telling her friend Ashley Patterson that maybe Jamie wouldn't be so fat if she didn't sit out gym class. I thought that was really rude.

At lunchtime, I looked around for a table where I could be alone. Unfortunately, someone was sitting at every single table in the cafeteria. I scanned the lunchroom looking for a span of chairs where I could at least sit without someone elbowing me while I was trying to eat.

I noticed Jamie sitting by herself. As usual, her head was down. I didn't see any other empty spots, but no one was sitting within 3 chairs of Jamie on either side of the table.

"Can I sit with you?" I asked, holding my tray and peering down at her.

She barely looked up long enough to notice it was me before saying, "I guess so."

I sat down directly across from her and placed my tray in front of me.

"Thanks," I said to her. "I don't know anyone, and I really didn't want to sit with strangers."

Jamie poked at her hamburger with her fork, but she did not eat. She seemed to be looking longingly at the food on her tray, but she refused to take a bite. My curiosity got the better of me.

"Something wrong with your food?" I asked.

Jamie looked up at me and sighed. Instantly, I regretted saying anything. She looked hurt, and there was a loneliness behind her eyes that was startling. I cleared my

throat uneasily.

“I’m not hungry,” she said, turning her eyes back toward her food.

“Oh,” I answered, accepting the obvious lie. “I’m starving.”

I picked up my hamburger and took a bite. It was dried out and hard, but I was so hungry I probably would have eaten a hockey puck if I didn’t think my teeth would all break and fall out onto my tray like a cartoon character. I tried to ignore the aching hunger for blood that lingered in the back of my mind like a constant shadow.

I noticed Jamie looking around out of the corners of her eyes. It seemed as though she was trying to see if anyone was watching her. When she was confident no one was looking, she grabbed a French fry and shoved it into her mouth. She tried to chew as inconspicuously as possible.

I couldn’t understand this. Jamie was clearly overweight. She was hardly the only overweight girl in school, or even the largest. It was obvious she didn’t often turn down food. So why would she not just eat?

Suddenly, I heard snorting noises coming from behind Jamie. I peered over her shoulder and Amanda and Ashley were sitting with several other girls staring at Jamie’s back. They giggled uproariously as they snorted, and the whole thing was almost surreal. It felt like a scene straight out of one of those pre-teen novels I’d read when I was a little kid. I couldn’t believe it could really happen. I always thought that kind of thing was purely fiction, and I never imagined people would actually behave that way. My gums tingled. I wanted to draw blood from every one of them.

Jamie sat quietly for a moment, and then she stood up so quickly her chair turned over. She fled from the lunchroom, leaving her tray sitting on the table. I watched her go, and then I turned toward Amanda and Ashley and watched them exchange knowing looks. They’d gotten to Jamie, and they thought it was riotous. The whole table exploded in laughter.

Suddenly, I didn’t feel hungry anymore. This was exactly why I had been so ambivalent about attending a human school. I thought this kind of thing was more of a caricature of human behavior made up to sell tickets to sappy teenage movies, but clearly, I was wrong. Seeing it with my own eyes made it real, and it was horrifying.

I picked up my tray and Jamie’s, and I took them to the window where other students were dumping their finished lunches, and I handed both trays to the woman wearing plastic gloves. She took both trays and slammed them against the side of a huge black trashcan and then shoved them into a black crate, which she picked up and sent through a curtain made of strips of clear plastic. She looked completely defeated.

I guessed her job wasn't the most fulfilling.

I managed to make it through the rest of the day, but I was more than ready to go home by the time the final bell rang. Thankfully, Will was already waiting for me when I got outside.

"So, how was your first day?" he asked.

"It was okay," I said.

It wasn't exactly a lie. Part of it hadn't been completely horrible.

"You don't sound so sure," he observed.

"No, it was fine," I said. "I just don't understand humans."

"Well, join the club!" he said, chuckling.

Will had never been much for human contact, either. In fact, talking to humans was downright distracting, and sometimes humorous in a creepy way. They were food, not friends. I imagined it would be a bit like a human having a polite conversation with a cow – all the while imagining the cow as a thick, juicy steak.

Truthfully, conversing with humans hadn't been quite as creepy as I thought it would be. I managed to make it through an entire day without sinking my fangs into one of them, though not without considerable effort. Their behavior was disturbing, nonetheless.

It occurred to me that I had to figure out a way to explain to Will why I was going to a human party that night. I had to go to school. Mother had insisted. He got that. But, he would never understand why I would willingly accept an invitation to interact with humans. I was sure of it.

"Um, Will?" I blurted out. "I'm going to a party tonight."

For a moment, he was silent, as if he were trying to decide if he'd heard me clearly.

"You're what?" he asked.

"Going to a party," I repeated. "This guy asked me, and I didn't know what to say, so I said I would go."

"Oh," he said. "Um... okay."

"It's no big deal," I said.

"I didn't say it was," Will said. He sounded sincere.

"What do you think Mother will say?" I asked.

"Who knows?" he commented, and the conversation ended.

When I got home, Mother was waiting in the parlor. She lounged on the sofa – a fire roaring in the fireplace, though it was nearly eighty degrees outdoors. She smiled

at me when I walked in.

“Alice, darling,” she cooed, standing up and walking over to me. “Tell Mother about your first day!”

She put her icy cold hands on my cheeks and cocked her head to the side, eyeballing me as if she were waiting for me to make some incredible revelation. Mother was always chilly, but today her hands were particularly frosty. I guess that was why she had the fire going.

“I’m going to a party,” I blurted out, instantly wishing I hadn’t.

“That’s a lovely idea!” Mother gushed. “It’ll give you a chance to get to know some people!”

Mother was so hard to understand. She had kept my brother and me away from humans our whole lives. She refused to hire humans as servants – even though they cost far less than vampires. She escorted us on almost every trip to the store and every outing personally, and those she couldn’t attend she had our vampire nanny chaperone. Why, now, was she suddenly so determined that I be around them? It was bizarre.

“What time is the party, dear?” Mother asked.

“Eight,” I answered.

“Do you have any homework?” she wanted to know.

“No, Mother,” I said.

“Well, then you’d better go get ready for the party,” she told me. “Where is it?”

I couldn’t remember the exact address, so I set my backpack down on the coffee table and fumbled through it. I finally found the paper on which Van had written the address, and I handed it to her.

She unfolded the paper and turned it around the proper way. When she read the address, her face blanched. She suddenly became weak in the knees, and she sat down on the couch as if she were dizzy.

“Mother!” I gasped. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she answered. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“What’s wrong?”

“This address, I know the people who live there,” she replied.

“I thought I recognized the address,” I admitted. “When Van wrote it down, it seemed familiar. Why?”

“Because,” she said. “That’s where your father was killed.”

Chapter Two

The Revelation

I was speechless. I suddenly felt my own knees buckle, and I sat down beside her on the couch and exhaled sharply. That's where I'd seen the address. I remembered that my mother kept a newspaper clipping in her dresser drawer about an incident that happened at that address. I never knew what it was, but I knew it must have been important for her to keep it like that.

I had always been a snoop. I was a curious child, and I went through every inch of the house on a regular basis. I'd found some dirty magazines under my brother's mattress when I was twelve. I blackmailed him into giving me half of them in exchange for not telling Mother. Hey, I said I was a curious child!

When I found the clipping, I hadn't understood what it meant. I had looked at it several times after that first day, but it never registered to me what it was. It was a simple story that mentioned a murder at the address, and police said it was a crime of passion. I never knew what that meant.

I couldn't speak. I desperately wanted to ask her a million questions, but I couldn't find the words. I opened my mouth, but the words would not form. It was like I'd been struck dumb.

"What happened?" I heard my brother ask. I'd forgotten he was in the room.

Mother got a faraway look in her eyes, and suddenly I saw tears begin to fill them. I couldn't remember ever seeing my mother cry, and it was shocking. She sighed deeply, and she closed her eyes tightly in an effort to regain her composure. A single tear escaped her eye and fell down her cheek, but she quickly brushed it away. After another deep breath, she spoke.

"Your father and I were in love once," she began. "It was so natural with him. Everyone said it was fate."

Mother paused, as if the memory was too much to bear. Then she continued, "His parents and my parents arranged for us to be married, but neither of us objected. You see, back then parents still arranged marriages for their children. We had no say in the person we were to marry. We did as we were told."

Tears filled her eyes again in remembrance, and she had to take a moment to regain her composure. She reached into the pocket of her dress and withdrew a white, lace-edged handkerchief and blotted her eyes carefully. She took another deep breath and went on.

“Fortunately, soon fell madly in love. I couldn’t stand to be away from him, and when we were married I was so relieved that I could spend every day with him. We were happy for the first three decades or so, but then things changed. Your father began to spend more time away from home, and soon he was away for months at a time. I never knew where he went – or why.”

“And you just let him go?” I asked her.

“What choice did I have?” she questioned. “He was not a slave. He could come and go as he pleased, as could I.”

“You never knew where he was going?” I asked.

“No, not at first,” I said. “It killed me to be away from him, but I had Will to look after, and we conceived you when he was home briefly. With the two of you to care for, I didn’t have much time to wonder.”

“Not at first,” I repeated. “Does that mean you found out later?”

“Yes, I found out later,” she agreed. “But not before I began having an affair with a human.”

That statement knocked the breath out of me. My mother had been having an affair with a human while my father was away. I was only a baby. This was totally unexpected. I looked over at Will, and he looked just as shocked as I.

“A human?” I whispered.

“Yes,” she answered. “His name was Roger Walker. He was our gardener – the only human we ever hired. We hadn’t been able to find a vampire who could properly care for the grounds, and with your father away so much I couldn’t do it myself. In his absence, I hired Roger to take care of the lawn and the gardens. Just a few weeks later, we were having an affair.”

“Were you in love with him?” I begged to know.

“I don’t know,” she answered truthfully. “I was so blindly in love with your father, I’m not sure if I *could* have fallen in love with anyone else. I was certainly enamored with him, though. He was handsome and kind. So full of life.”

Mother got that faraway look in her eyes again, and she looked as if she might burst into tears.

“So what happened to him?” I asked.

“I can’t talk about this anymore right now,” Mother said.

She stood up and fled from the room in a flash, leaving Will and me stunned and confused.

“What do you make of this?” Will asked me, when Mother was safely out of

earshot.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I remember seeing this newspaper clipping in Mother’s drawer. It talked about a murder, and I remember now it was the address where this party is happening tonight.”

“Wow,” said Will, dumfounded.

“I know,” I agreed. “What are the odds?”

“Are you still going,” he wanted to know.

“I guess so,” I said. “I said I would.”

“Then you’d better get ready,” Will told me.

Chapter Three

The Meeting

I didn't see Mother before I left for the party, and she wasn't in her room. I guess she had gone to the garden to be alone. I didn't want to disturb her, so Will and I got into the car and left.

On the way, I fiddled with the door lock nervously. I flipped the power lock switch back and forth, over and over, and eventually Will had enough of the persistent *click-click-click-click*.

"Oh, my God, will you stop that?" he snapped.

"Stop what?" I asked, oblivious.

"Flicking the lock like that!" he shouted.

I looked down at my hand, and it was resting on the switch. I hadn't even realized I was doing it. I fidget when I'm nervous, and it occurred to me that this party was giving me more anxiety than I'd initially realized.

Will pulled up to the curb at 725 Sycamore Street and asked if I wanted him to go in with me. I stared at the house – small but well kept – and I tried to brace myself for the uncertainty. I noticed a few people already going inside.

"No," I answered. "I'll be fine."

I took a deep breath and got out of the car. I was desperately hoping Van would already be there. It's not that I wanted to see him, specifically. I just wanted to see a familiar face.

Fortunately, just as I was closing the car door, I heard Van shout from behind me, "Hey, Alice! You made it!"

I waved through the window to Will, and he nodded and pulled away from the curb. I watched him drive away, and then I turned to face Van. He grinned at me, and I smiled back because it seemed like the polite thing to do.

"Come on!" Van said. "Let me introduce you to everyone."

I followed him into the house where my brain was suddenly overwhelmed by the thundering boom of too-loud music. The room was packed wall-to-wall with a sea of bodies bobbing up and down as they danced. The intoxicating fragrance of blood assaulted me, and my brain was overloaded with sensations.

Zach was there, and he shot a broad smile at me when he noticed me. I smiled back politely. Van introduced me to several people, and I noticed that most of the people were unfamiliar. Other than Van and Zach, there was no one else there that I

recognized from my classes.

“Are Amanda and Ashley coming?” I asked, hoping he would tell me they were not.

“Seriously?” he asked – his eyes wide as if I’d made a serious snafu. “Like they’d lower themselves to show up at one of our parties.”

“Oh, good point,” I said quickly.

“I’ll introduce you to my cousin, Kai, as soon as I can find him,” Van shouted over the music. “He’s not big on socializing.”

“Then why is he throwing a party?” I yelled back.

“He’s not,” Van shouted. “He’s just letting Zach and me have the party here, because our parents don’t want us having parties at our houses, anymore.”

“Anymore,” I parroted. “What does that mean?”

“Long story,” Van stated. “Let’s go out back. I bet he’s in the shed.”

It was a relief to get out of the crowded house and into the night air. The loud music was still pounding in my brain, although it was much less audible once we were out of the house. I followed Van to a shed in the back yard, and he opened the door.

“Hey, there you are!” Van said to someone inside.

“Hey, man,” answered the voice.

The voice was low and quiet, and it had a melancholy edge to it that almost saddened me.

“Kai, let me introduce you to Alice,” Van said, stepping aside. “Alice Wright, this is my cousin Kai Walker.”

I started to mention the fact that his name sounded like Skywalker without the “S,” but I didn’t want to let anyone know how much of a *Star Wars* nerd I really was. I got the idea that *nerds* were a group that was often ostracized by humans.

I peeked into the shed, and there stood a sight that took my breath away. Kai was tall and thin, but his muscles were well defined. He wore a dark gray shirt that clung tightly to his frame, and it was tucked into black jeans. He wore black strappy boots, but splotches of paint in different colors dotted the toes. He had crystal blue eyes and long, striking rich, burgundy hair. He was intensely beautiful. I never imagined any human could be so attractive.

Kai paused with a paintbrush in one hand and a palette in the other, and he eyed me suspiciously.

“Hello, Alice,” he finally said.

“N-nice to meet you,” I replied, fumbling for words like an idiot.