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Prologue

Lucy

Friday, early evening

Normally I wouldn't have been caught dead at a field party.

If you'll pardon the pun.

This was a supreme sacrifice on my part for my best friend, Solange, who was having a really bad day, which was about to turn into a *really* bad week. Her sixteenth birthday was coming up, and we weren't talking a new car and a pink dress for her sweet sixteen. Not in her family.

This wasn't much better though.

She was standing in the middle of a field, trying to drink cheap wine and pretend she didn't want to be anywhere but here. The music was passable but that was about all it had to recommend it. The cars were parked in a wide circle, the sun setting behind the

trees with all the colors of a blood orange pulled into pieces. Practically my entire high school was here; there wasn't much else to do on one of the last weekends before school started. People danced and flirted in a sea of baseball caps and faded denim. Someone burped loudly.

"This was *such* a bad idea," I muttered.

Solange smiled softly, abandoning her plastic cup on the hood of someone's rusted truck.

"It was a nice thought."

"It was stupid," I admitted. She just looked so sad lately, I'd hoped a complete change of pace might distract her from all that worrying. Instead it made me want to bare my pitifully human teeth at the rowdies. Someone's shoe nudged my heel, and when I looked back at it, I was greeted with way too much information about the mating habits of my fellow students. I kicked hard at the boot.

"No one needs to see that," I said, turning away quickly before more clothing came off. The couple giggled and went deeper into the corn. I stared at Solange. "What the hell was I thinking?"

She half grinned.

"It is rather unlike you."

Darren, from my math class last year, tripped over his own feet and sprawled in the dirt in front of us before I could answer. His grin was sloppy. He was nice enough usually; in fact, he was the reason I hadn't entirely flunked out of math. But he was drunk and desperate to fit in.

"Hi, Lucy." Apparently beer made him lisp. My name came out as "Loothee"—which was marginally better than my real name,

which was Lucky. I had *those* kind of parents, but I'd made everyone at school call me Lucy since the first day of first grade.

"Hi, Darren."

He blinked at Solange. Even in jeans and a tank top she looked dramatic. It was all that pale skin and those pale eyes. Her black bangs were choppy because she trimmed them herself. The rest was long and hung past her shoulders. Mine was plain old brown and cut in a wedged bob to my chin. My glasses were retro—dark rimmed and vaguely cat's-eye shaped. I didn't need them to see the way Darren was drooling over Solange. All guys drooled over her. She was beautiful, end of discussion.

"Who's your friend? She's hot."

"You've met her before." Solange was homeschooled, but I dragged her around when I could. "Sober up, Darren. This isn't a good look for you."

"'Kay." He spat grass out of his mouth.

I slung my arm through hers. "Let's get out of here. The sun's starting to set anyway, and maybe we can salvage the rest of the night."

The wind was soft through the corn, rustling the stalks as we wandered away. The stars were starting to peek out, like animal eyes in the dark. We could still hear the music and the occasional shout of laughter. Twilight was starting to settle like a soft blue veil. We'd walked from my house, which was a half hour away. We'd probably waited too long. We picked up our pace.

And then Solange paused.

"What?" I froze beside her, my shoulders tensing until I was practically wearing them as earmuffs. I was all too aware of what

could be out there. I should never have suggested this. I'd just put her into even more danger. I was an idiot.

She held up her hand, her eyes so pale suddenly that they were nearly colorless, a ring of ice around a black lake. And because I was scared, I scowled into the gathering shadows around us. Mom always said bravado was a karmic debt I had to work through. She was basically saying I'd been mouthy and obnoxious for several lifetimes now. But somehow I didn't think this particular situation called for a round of *oms*, which was my mother's favorite way of cleansing karmic baggage. Most babies were sung lullabies; I got "Om Namah Shivaya" when I was really fussy.

"Cops?" I suggested, mostly because they seemed like the better alternative. "They always break up these parties."

She shook her head. She looked delicate and ethereal, as if she were made of lily petals. Few people knew the marble all that softness concealed.

"They're close," she murmured. "Watching."

"Run?" I suggested. "Like, right now?"

She shook her head again, but we did at least start walking.

"If we act like prey, they'll act like predators."

I tried not to hyperventilate, tried to walk quickly but confidently, as if we weren't being stalked. Sometimes I really hated Solange's life. It was totally unfair.

"You're getting angry," she said softly.

"Damn right I am. Those undead bastards think they can do this to you just because—"

"When you're angry, your heart beats faster. It's like the cherry on a hot fudge sundae."

"Oh. Right." I always forgot that little detail. Maybe my mom was right. I needed to take up meditating.

"Lucy, I want you to run."

"Shut up," I said, disbelief making my voice squeaky.

"They'll follow me if I run in the opposite direction."

"That's the worst plan I've ever heard," I grumbled, fighting the urge to look over my shoulder. Stupid creepy cornfields. Stupid creepy stalkers. A cricket sang suddenly from the tall corn and my heart nearly shot straight out of my chest. I actually pressed my hand against my rib cage, half-worried. The cricket went quiet and was replaced by the rumble of car tires on the ground. Cornstalks snapped. A familiar jeep skidded to a dusty halt in front of us.

"Nicholas," Solange breathed, relieved.

"Get in," he snapped.

I was slightly less enamored with her older brother, but I had to admit he had good timing. In his black shirt and dark hair, he blended into the night. Only his eyes gave him away, silver and fierce. He was gorgeous, there was no use in denying it, but he always knew just how to make me want to poke him in the eye with a fork.

Like right now.

"Drive," he said to their brother Logan, who was behind the steering wheel. He didn't even wait for me to get in. Logan lifted his foot off the brake. The car rolled forward.

"Hey!" I shouted.

"Nicholas Drake, you let her in the car right now." Solange leaned forward between the front seats.

"She's fine. We have to get you out of here."

I grabbed on to the half-opened window. Logan slowed down.

"Sorry, Lucy, I thought you were in already," he said.

"Don't you *read*?" I asked Nicholas, disgusted. "If you leave me here now that you've got Solange all safe, they'll grab me to get to her."

Solange opened the back door and I leaped in. The car sped off. Shadows flitted beside us, menacing, hungry. I shivered. Then I smacked the back of Nicholas's head.

"Idiot."

Chapter 1

Solange

"I can't believe you were actually going to just leave her there," I grumbled again as Logan pulled into our lane, which was overgrown with hedges. The unnatural glint of unnatural eyes had faded, and there was nothing but ripe blackberries and crickets in the bushes. Not only was our farm well protected, but it was also surrounded by other family farms, with forest surrounding all of them. Drakes have lived in this area since it was considered wild and dangerous, best left to gunslingers and outlaws. Now it was just home.

But dangerous all the same.

"She was fine," Nicholas said testily. "She was safe as soon as we got you away from her." He only ever called her "she," except to her face, when he called her Lucky because it annoyed her so much. They'd been getting on each other's nerves since we were

kids. There was a family joke that Lucy's first words were, "Nicholas is bugging me." I couldn't remember ever *not* knowing her. She'd drawn me out of my shell, even when we were little, though it wasn't until my fifth birthday that I'd started calling her my best friend, after she threw a mud ball at Nicholas's head for stealing my chocolate cupcake. We'd learned to ride bikes together and liked the same movies and talked all night whenever we had slumber parties.

"She was *fine*," Nicholas insisted, catching my glare. "Despite being reckless."

"She was just trying to help me."

"She's *human*," he said, as if it were a debilitating disease, as if he wasn't human as well, despite the bloodchange. We aren't undead, like the horror novels say, though we definitely look it during our transformation. That particular stereotype clings so deeply that sometimes it's easier to embrace it. Lucy's mom calls us "differently abled."

"And you're a jerk." I touched his sleeve. "But thanks for coming to get me."

"You're welcome," he muttered. "You know you shouldn't let her talk you into stuff. It never turns out well."

"I know. But you know how Lucy is. And she meant well."

He grunted. Logan grinned.

"She's getting cuter. Especially from behind."

"She is *not*," Nicholas said. "And quit looking at her butt."

I was so totally going to tell Lucy they'd been talking about her butt.

"You're such an old man," Logan said scornfully, turning off the ignition. "We have all this power. We should use it."

"Flirting is not a power," I told him drily.

"It is if you're good at it. And I'm *very* good at it."

"So you keep telling us."

"Being charming's my gift," he said modestly. No one else could have pulled off such an old-fashioned shirt with lace cuffs and such a pretty face. The pheromones that vampires emit like a dangerous perfume keep humans enticed and befuddled with longing, and Logan's are especially well tuned. They don't have an actual smell that can be described, except lately in my case. It's more subliminal than that, with the power to hypnotize. Kind of like the way wild animals can smell each other out in the forest, especially during mating season. If a vampire is particularly strong, humans don't even remember being a meal; they just have a craving for rare steak or spinach. If we drink too much, they become anemic.

The pheromones don't work on other vampires, except, of course, for mine, which are rapidly becoming a beacon for all of vampire kind. I'm special, and not in a good way, if you ask me. Vampires are rarely born, except in certain ancient families . . . Exhibit A, me and my seven obnoxious older brothers.

But I'm the only girl.

In about nine hundred years.

And the closer I get to my sixteenth birthday, the more I attract the others to me. It's all very Snow White, except I don't call bluebirds and deer out of the woods—only bloodthirsty vampires

who want to kidnap me or kill me. Vampire politics are messy at best, and all Drakes have been exiled from the royal court since the very hour I was born. I'm considered a threat to the current ruler, Lady Natasha, because my genealogy is so impressive and because there's some stupid prophecy from centuries ago that says the vampire tribes will be properly united under the rule of a daughter born to an ancient family.

And Lady Natasha, unlike me, wasn't born into an ancient family—even if she considers herself to be the reigning vampire queen.

As if that's my fault.

Luckily, my family much prefers living in quiet exile in the woods. I'd heard enough rumors about our ruler to be glad we'd never actually met. She feeds off humans and is barely circumspect about it; in fact, she loves the attention and the vampire groupies. She apparently doesn't like pretty young girls; they never seem to survive her mood swings.

Technically, she shouldn't be feeding off humans, and certainly not so nonchalantly. It was becoming an issue, even among her own people. There are royalists who follow her just because she's so powerful, not because they particularly respect her. Fear, as always, is a great motivator.

And lately she's been turning more and more humans into vampires, in order to gather more followers. The council makes her nervous, and I make her nervous, but most of all Leander Montmartre makes her nervous.

He has that affect on all of us.

He's been turning humans for nearly three hundred years now,

and he's so violent and careless about it, he's basically created a new breed of vampire. He leaves them half-turned and usually buried under the ground, to conquer the bloodchange on their own without any help at all. The thirst is so strong that it twists them and gives them a double set of fangs instead of just our one retractable pair. The ones that stay loyal to Montmartre are called the Host. The ones who defect call themselves the Cwn Mamau, the Hounds of the Mothers. They were either strong enough to survive alone, or were rescued and trained by other Hounds. Everyone knew they wanted to kill Montmartre, but they were so reclusive they wouldn't accept outside help. They are fiercely independent, live in caves, serve a shamanka (female shaman), and wear bone beads in their hair. They're kind of scary, but nowhere near as scary as the most dangerous of Montmartre's creations called the *Hel-Blar*, who have blue-tinted skin, and teeth that are all fangs, sharpened like needles and unretractable. *Hel-Blar* means "blue death" in some ancient Viking language. Their bite, known as a "kiss," can infect without any blood exchange, and it's rumored they can turn both vampires and humans into *Hel-Blar*. Even Montmartre avoids them as much as possible. He's not big on cleaning up his own mess. And they want him dead even more than the Hounds do—when they're lucid enough to want anything more than blood. The Host and the Hounds managed to stay sane, unlike the *Hel-Blar*. No one can control them, not even Montmartre.

We live peacefully with other humans, and our family is one of the few ancient clans of the Raktapa Council. The council was formed ages ago when the families realized that we weren't like other vampires: our change is genetic. We transform without

being bitten, but we need vampire blood to survive that transformation. Afterward, we're nearly immortal, like the others, vulnerable only to a stake through the heart, too much sunlight, or decapitation.

"Do Mom and Dad know about what happened after the party?" I asked, finally getting out of the car and facing the house. The original building had burned down during the Salem witch trials, even though we were nowhere near Salem. The locals had been superstitious and scared of every little thing. The house was rebuilt farther into the sheltering forest. It was simple and a little shabby from the outside, but the pioneer-style log cabin hid a luxurious heart full of velvet couches and stone fireplaces. The rosebushes under the leaded-glass windows were a little scraggly, the oak trees old and stately. I loved every single treated inch of it. Even my mother's pinched and disapproving face behind the glass.

"Busted," Logan murmured.

Moths flung themselves at the lamps. The screen door creaked when I pushed it open.

"Solange Rosamund Drake."

I winced. Behind me, both my brothers did the same. My mother, Helena, was intimidating at the best of times with her long black hair and her pale eyes, and the fact that she can take down someone twice her size with a sword, a stake, or her petite bare hands.

"Ouch—middle name." Logan shot me a sympathetic smile before easing into the living room and out of the crossfire.

"Snitch." I pinched Nicholas. He only raised an eyebrow.

"Nicholas didn't tell us anything." My mom pinned him with a

pointed glare. He squirmed a little. I'd known grown men to back away physically from that look. "One of your aunts was patrolling the perimeter and saw your escape."

"Escape." I rolled my eyes. "It was barely anything. They didn't even come out of the cornfields. They were just sniffing me."

"You have to be more careful," my father, Liam, said calmly from his favorite chair. It kind of looked like a medieval throne. No surprise there. He'd only been born in 1901 but he carried himself like a king.

"I feel fine," I said, exasperated. He was drinking brandy. I could smell it across the room, just like I could smell Uncle Geoffrey's cologne, Aunt Hyacinth's pug, and the thick perfume of roses. Just another one of our little gifts. I rubbed my nose so I wouldn't sneeze.

"What's with all the flowers?" I asked, noticing the roses. There were dozens and dozens of them everywhere, in every shade of red, stuffed in crystal vases, teacups, and jam jars.

"From your . . . admirers," my father told me grimly.

"What?" Admirers, ha! They were only coming around because of my pheromones. It's not my fault I smell funny. I shower every day, but apparently I still stink of lilies and warm chocolate and something else no one can accurately describe. Even Lucy commented on it once, and she's nearly immune to us, having practically grown up here. No one else was smelly in such an obvious way; pheromones are usually subtle and mysterious. I really hope it fades once I fully turn.

The prophecy and my family's legacy in the vampire world won't, though.

Sometimes it sucks having a family that's so old and powerful.

"Darling, it's a great compliment, I'm sure," my aunt Hyacinth said. She was technically my great-great-great-aunt. She didn't look much over forty, even though she clung to the fashions of her youth in the privacy of the tribe, like most vampires. Her dress was Victorian in style, with a lace corset and jet beads. "When I was your age I had the best time. There's nothing like the rush of being a debutante. All those men hungering after you." She gave a delicate shiver.

"Hyacinth." Dad grimaced. "You hadn't even been turned then, and this is hardly a debutante's ball. They don't want to waltz, damn it." My great-great-great-uncle Edward had married Aunt Hyacinth in 1853 and turned her in 1877, at her insistence. She was inspired by Queen Victoria's undying love for her own husband and wanted to live for centuries by Edward's side. I'd never met him, though, because he'd died in World War I, shot one night on a spy mission for the Allies because he was determined to do his part. She'd been alone ever since.

I glanced at a thick cream-colored paper card pinned to an enormous bouquet of white roses in a red box and froze.

"Montmartre?" I squeaked. "He sent me flowers?"

Dad flicked the box a baleful glare. "Yes."

"I'm putting them down the incinerator," I said darkly. The last thing I wanted was Montmartre or his Host to know who I was. I was also hoping to slip out while everyone else was distracted. I should have known better.

"You can do that later." Mom pointed to a chair. "Sit."

I dropped onto a velvet settee. Nicholas sat as well, joining my other brothers, who were all watching me grimly.

"Don't you lot have anything better to do?" I asked.

"Than protecting our annoying baby sister?" Quinn drawled. "No."

Being the only girl in a family of boys would have been tough enough to navigate, never mind a family with the rare ability to give birth to mostly male vampires. Even among the Drakes, that ability is rare. Most vampires are "made," not born. My mom, for example, had been human until my dad turned her shortly after I was born and they'd decided they didn't want any more children. He'd been born human too, like my brothers, until his sixteenth birthday—when he'd sickened, the way we all did—and would have died if my aunt hadn't given him her blood to drink.

Family legend has it that the first of our clan was William Drake. No one knows how he was turned. We did know he married Veronique DuBois, a lady-in-waiting to Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine. A year after their wedding, she went into labor with their firstborn. After twenty-seven hours of childbirth, the midwife told William that Veronique was not going to survive the birth. In desperation, William turned her, and their twins were born healthy. By their sixteenth birthday, though, the twins weakened and grew unnaturally sensitive to the sunlight. They were hungry but couldn't eat, thirsty but couldn't drink. Nothing tempted them.

Except blood.

And so the Drake vampire family began.

Veronique, as the oldest surviving Drake, is our family matriarch. William was staked by a hunter during the reign of Henry VIII. Veronique rarely visited, preferring to have us come to her

once we'd survived the change and she could afford to get attached. At least she hadn't joined us tonight, which meant it wasn't a formal meeting, just a family ambush. She was scary enough that she probably could have given Lady Natasha a run for her crown if she'd wanted it. Luckily for everyone, she preferred embroidery to court intrigue.

"Solange, are you listening to me?"

I jerked my head up.

"Yes." I'd heard this particular lecture enough times over the last few months to know it intimately. "Nothing happened. You're all overreacting." I did feel guilty; I just knew better than to show it.

"There were at least three of them in that field tonight, maybe more." Nicholas scowled. "You know they don't all send flowers. Most of them just want to grab you and run."

I scowled back. "I could have handled it. It wasn't even full dark yet. Besides, if they were so dangerous, why'd you nearly leave Lucy behind?"

"You were going to leave Lucy there?" my mom sputtered, and Nicholas narrowed his eyes at me. I crossed my eyes smugly. Growing up with so many brothers taught me the fine art of misdirection, self-preservation, and revenge, if nothing else.

"She was *fine*." I knew Nicholas was trying not to slump in his chair. "They weren't after her. And she's not fragile, for God's sake."

"She's under the protection of this family," my father said.

"I know, but she can look after herself. Broke my nose last summer, didn't she?"

"Be that as it may."

"Okay, okay." Nicholas backed down.

"And you, young lady." Dad turned to me. Every single one of my traitor brothers smirked. They look enough alike that people usually assume they're all sets of twins. Only Quinn and Connor are actually twins. Quinn keeps his hair long and Connor, like Sebastian, prefers to fade quietly into the background. Logan is the flamboyant one, and Nicholas spends most of his free time worrying about me. Marcus and Duncan just came home from a road trip. They're all gorgeous; it's like living with a bunch of male models. And it makes girls stupid around them.

"You have to take this seriously."

"I do, Dad," I said quietly. "You know I do."

"What I know is that they're coming for you and soon you'll be weaker than a blind kitten."

"I know." This totally sucked. I was getting in trouble over a party I hadn't wanted to go to in the first place. I *like* being alone and staying on the farm. But I hate being trapped and hovered over.

"Let the girl be," Hyacinth said, drinking delicately from a goblet. It looked like cherry cordial. It wasn't.

"Thank you." I swallowed thickly.

Did I mention?

I was squeamish about blood.