



# Mad World: Book Two

# TUNNELVILLE

Erin Callahan & Troy H. Gardner

## **Back Cover**

Young Adult Urban Fantasy by Erin Callahan & Troy H. Gardner

Following their panicked escape from Wakefield, Astrid Chalke, Max Fisher, and their friends find themselves adrift and on the run in western Massachusetts. After picking up a young thief with a complex philosophy, and dealing with the pains of prescription drug withdrawal, they make their way to Boston.

Drained by a long trek to the city, the damaged teens settle in an underground tunnel community—a city below the city that appears to lie on the fringes of both the world above and the world of magic. Among the eccentric tunnel folk, they encounter the fabulous Angie DeVille, a self-made hipster and socialite who takes them under her neon wing and envelops them in her breathless and fast paced life.

Funded by a seemingly ruthless organization, the relentless Dr. Lycen is tasked to hunt down the Wakefield escapees. But as Astrid and Max eke out a meager existence in their new home and do their best to stay off Dr. Lycen's radar, they learn that new and even more harrowing threats might be lurking just over the horizon.

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## Prologue—Leonard

I navigated the underground hallways of a facility I never cared much for. The cream pastel walls made me yearn for a flamboyant decorator's whimsy. I could just imagine the founders' faces when they saw what had become of their hallowed building. Wakefield, the institution where I previously worked as Director of Psychiatry, was built shortly after we ushered in the new millennium, but this building was right out of the 1920s.

My knees hurt, which only worsened my mood. They say every pound of weight is four pounds of pressure on those delicate joints, but I couldn't imagine losing any fat. There just wasn't enough on my body to work off. No, my knees hurt because of the battle I lost with a host of shadowforms at Wakefield.

I swiped my magnetic key an inch over an electronic reader and waited a second for the click of the lock before opening the heavy door. That was certainly an upgrade from the 1920s. Most Hickory offices looked like your average cubicle and were as about as advanced as the 1950s; however, the science department preferred to do things their own way. I started down a long hallway inside. Drake Palatino, a tall scientist in a lab coat, stepped out from one of the side doors.

"Lycen?" he asked, brushing the shaggy, brown hair out of his narrow face.

"Your supervisor is expecting me," I told him coldly. "Is he in his office or the lab?"

"He was in Lab One 'bout thirty minutes ago. Check there first," Drake suggested. "Have fun."

"Thanks."

He trotted away without another word.

I continued on until I reached a nondescript white door. A stenciled designation

on the wall to the right, just below eye level, read SBL1A. I'd been ordered to see the Director of Sciences, Dr. Bathory, deep in the sub-basement. This was never a chore I relished.

I took a deep breath to steady myself for the upcoming conversation. Once ready for the expected unpleasantness, I pressed a button on the intercom on the wall by the doorknob.

"Dr. Lycen?" Bathory's voice crackled over the intercom's speaker.

"It's me." The door immediately unlocked with a click.

Bathory's workspace was twice as large as the office at Wakefield that my supervisor had just informed me was no longer mine. Glass shelves jutted out along two walls and most of the third, except for a door to Lab 1B. A laptop rested on the corner of a desk, next to vials on metal tables. A classical piece, probably European, played on the laptop. I surveyed the bloody surgical equipment before I met Bathory's cold eyes. He sat on a stool by the desk, eating what looked and smelled like Chinese takeout from a Styrofoam carton held in his gloved hands. A bit of rice fell from his chopstick and landed on his bloody apron.

"Working lunch," Bathory explained with a sidelong grin. He stood up and crossed the room to me. "It's good to see you again, Doctor."

"Yes, good to see you, too," I lied.

He wore a pair of glasses with a jeweler's magnifying lens attached to the right side, ready to amplify any disgusting thing he needed to see in horrific detail. He spun around to the center of the room, where a body lay under a translucent sheet. I could see nearly everything under the cloth, so why bother with it at all? I hoped the good doctor didn't leave it as a veiled threat to any visitors. It would certainly take more than a corpse to unnerve me. I'd done my fair share of dissections during my schooling.

"Drake's in a particularly pleasant mood," I said sarcastically.

“Setbacks on his Cigamadrine Plus research,” Bathory said. I’d heard Dr. Palatino was working on a highly addictive form of Cigamadrine to better keep the patients dependent, or at least in pain if they stopped taking the medication or escaped without any rations. Withdrawal can be one hell of a bitch. I didn’t agree with the idea, as making the kids sick could create even more unstable magic practitioners. We didn’t need to add an additional layer of craziness to hormonal teenagers who could potentially wield the power of God in their hands.

“I’m sure he’ll crack the mystery eventually.”

“I was just preparing a little study. You’ll help me.” It wasn’t a question.

“Of course. I’d also like you to look at my sonic scrambler if you have the time.” I held out the tiny pin I’d used to subdue the teenagers at Wakefield. Bathory had created the technology twenty years ago, and I still relied on it to keep the gifted from using their powers. Even with it sending out a blocking signal to his brain, Terrence “Teddy” Theodore had still surged during our physical altercation at Wakefield. Hopefully, I could blame the mass escape on a malfunctioning device.

Bathory flicked a switch on the table and delicately took the pin from me. I heard a humming from near the corpse.

“My equipment takes a short while to warm up.” He lowered the jeweler’s magnifying lens over his grey eye. I chose to look at his short, spiky white hair rather than the enlarged eyeball.

He sat at a table, grabbed a small screwdriver, pulled something apart, and surveyed the wiring inside. “Nothing looks out of the ordinary here,” he informed me. “But I’ll have to do a full diagnostic to make sure. Was the specimen in question especially powerful?”

“He’d have to be.”

“Yes, well…” Bathory smiled. I could tell he’d love to get his hands on

Terrence Theodore. What a wonderful “specimen” he’d make to the scientist. Bathory lowered the sheet over the corpse. A few incisions had already been made in the scalp. “Hand me the clamp, please,” he ordered quietly. After I gave the instrument to him, he unscrewed a portion of the white bone and set it on a silver tray. He grabbed a wire and proceeded to attach it to the exposed brain.

“You’re studying the neural pathways of a magical brain.” I deduced. He stiffened at the mention of “magic.” I’d forgotten the good doctor was loath to use that term. To him, there was science in the world and nothing more. For those strange happenings we couldn’t describe, there was just a mystery waiting to be solved and explained in terms of electrons and neurons. “Who was this man?”

“I don’t know.” He looked up at me quizzically. “Why on earth would that matter?”

“It wouldn’t, I suppose.” Plenty of men in prisons around the world regarded life the same as Bathory.

“Yes, well, please press the square red button to your left.”

I did so. More humming.

“I begin with a very small current, and gradually increase, to test the pathways at different levels,” he explained. This was revolutionary work. I imagined what the founding fathers would think if they knew the barely funded research committee they established would become a gargantuan entity. It was like they planted a seed that took root and grew beyond anyone’s expectations into, well, a mighty hickory tree. “Now then, as the test begins, please inform me of the little fiasco at your office.”

“One of the patients, Teddy, was restrained during the annual dance. I suspect he faked taking his Cigamadrine in the last few weeks. This coupled with his heightened emotional state caused quite a scene. He levitated in front of several residents. ‘Mass chaos’ would be an understatement.”

“And our ‘sonderkommando,’ as it were?”

Bathory meant Clint Tether, the magician in our employ who we had stationed as a cook in Wakefield. He was a semi-powerful Elemental, specializing in wind manipulation.

“Some help. Ultimately unprepared. We would have managed it better, except one of the children proved to be a powerful necromancer.” I told him of the fat girl, Ally Brennan, summoning a host of spirits. “I still don’t understand how it could have happened,” I added, “given Hickory isn’t in the business of murdering children, and there are no bodies buried on the Wakefield property.”

Bathory grinned. “I’ve run across several individuals capable of focusing the residual energy of traumatic experiences. But an army of shadowforms,” he said with an almost gleeful shake of his head. “It’s practically unheard of. She almost certainly had help.”

“From whom? Another resident?”

“Maybe. Though probably not one who was alive,” he mumbled with flicker of laughter.

I felt somewhat relieved, though I doubted my superiors would take into account the fact I’d been forced to deal with a situation almost no one would have been prepared for.

“A total of how many escapees?” Bathory asked.

“Thirty-three.”

“And how many have been found?”

“Six at last count. The police should find more this week.”

“Thank heavens for the authorities.” Bathory grinned. “And what of you? Not back to Wakefield, I should imagine?”

“My new assignment is to make sure the escapees are all brought back into custody as quickly as possible,” I explained.

“A waste of your skills. Press the blue button beside the red.”

I did, but noticed nothing happened. Perhaps I would if the subject on the table were still alive. I wondered if there would be more electrodes after I left and shuddered.

“How many of the twenty-seven are gifted?”

“Less than half.”

“How developed?”

“Varying degrees. There’s a Mentalist who could prove problematic.”

“Mentally unsound if a runaway patient from Wakefield. How hard could it be to find someone like that?”

“Max Fisher is actually quite stable. There was no real reason for him to be locked in a mental institution.”

“It sure beats leper boats or witch burnings,” Bathory said. “I’d prefer not to dissect charred brains.”

“I could see how that would be difficult.”

“I’ll finish this study myself.” Bathory’s voice rose in a cheery manner. “I know you’re needed elsewhere.”

“Very well then, Dr. Bathory. Take care.”

“You too, and good luck.” I started to leave, and then he added, “And call me Bill.”

I gave a weak grin and left the genius to his work as he upped the power of his machine again, surging electricity into the casualty on the table. I pushed it aside. I didn’t know the dead man. And now, I never will.

## Part One

### The Road

*Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change. The sun might shine or the clouds might lower, but nothing could appear to me as it had done the day before.*

—Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley

Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus, original publication 1818

## Chapter One—Astrid

Max and I shivered on the cold ground and watched the sun peek over the mountains. The tall grass tickled and scratched the undersides of my bare legs. Once the adrenaline had finally subsided, I realized how exhausted I felt.

“Did you sleep at all last night?” Max asked. He looked pale and had dark circles under his green eyes.

“Not really,” I admitted. “I was too anxious.”

I still wore the red strapless dress my mom had worn as the maid of honor in my Aunt Karen’s wedding. The gown was covered in mud stains now and snagged threads spread over the skirt. I pulled my knees up against my chest and pulled the old, oversized, gray pea coat I’d stolen from a rundown vacation home around my bare legs, hoping it would keep me warmer. It helped a little. Max had on three moth-eaten flannel shirts under the blue blazer of his Goodwill prom suit, and he was still shivering violently. He wiped his runny nose with the back of his hand.

“I’m starving,” he said flatly.

“God, me too.” Canned chicken noodle and tomato soup were pretty much the only things we’d eaten in the past three days. “Maybe we can go into town in a few hours and dine and ditch. I’m sure everyone could use a hot meal and a lot of calories.” I couldn’t believe I’d just suggested eating at a restaurant and leaving before we’d paid the bill. I wouldn’t even have considered doing that a few days ago.

Max sat up straight and looked down the embankment. We were sitting in a grassy field by a lake, maybe part of a state park, somewhere in western Massachusetts. Lawrence said it was in North Adams, but I didn’t know the area well. Now I wish I’d paid more attention when my aunt had driven me to

Williamstown to deposit me at Wakefield.

I rested my chin on my knees and my mind sifted through the blur of the past three days. A little over seventy-two hours ago, Team Orphan and friends escaped from an adolescent residential treatment facility. We hadn't planned on escaping during the annual Spring Formal, and none of us were really prepared for it. Frankly, even if we'd planned it, we probably still wouldn't have been prepared. Once we fled through the Wakefield perimeter gate and stormed the dark and mostly vacant streets of Williamstown, no one really seemed to know what to do. For about a half hour we just ran, as if we'd all tacitly agreed that putting as much distance between us and Wakefield was our best option.

Of the thirty or so escapees, Max and I seemed to be the only ones who thought sticking together was a good idea. It was probably for the best—a group of thirty kids would have been caught within hours. Once we hit the streets, we splintered off in a dozen different directions. I struggled to keep up with Max and Teddy, since they both had longer legs than me and were probably in better shape. Ben, Teddy's roommate, was somewhere up ahead of us. Simon, Max's roommate, and my friend Laura were about twenty feet behind us. Laura had asthma, and I knew she must be pushing her lungs and her skinny legs to the limit. I hadn't seen our friend Jon, the wannabe vampire who regrettably referred to himself as Azrael, since we'd run through the broken gate, but I hoped he wasn't far behind Simon and Laura.

Someone behind us shouted, "Cops!" and I saw the trees in front of me illuminated in blue. My heart leapt out of my chest, and I instinctively bolted into the woods. I ran full-tilt through the darkness, tripping over exposed roots, until I could barely breathe. I leaned against a tree, getting sticky sap on my mom's dress, and tried to catch my breath. As I gasped, I realized I couldn't see or hear anyone around me. I was completely alone in the middle of the woods at night. Icy panic

spread from my ribcage to the tips of my fingers and toes.

“Hello?” I yelled desperately. “Anyone?” I could hear the panic in my voice and it only increased my anxiety.

“Hello!” I heard someone shout in the distance. I headed toward the voice.

“Keep talking!” I shouted.

“Okay,” the voice said. “Marco!”

“Polo!” I shouted back, laughing. At least I knew it wasn’t a cop.

I could hear the source of the voice rustling through the dead leaves, somewhere in front of me. I squinted, but even in the light of the full moon, I couldn’t tell who it was.

“Who’s there?” I called out.

“Lawrence,” he shouted back. It took a second for me to register he was the smart kid with acne from my English class.

“Oh, hey. It’s good to see you,” I said as I approached him, wheezing. My lungs were still on fire.

“Good to see you, too,” he responded. “It’s Astrid, right?”

I nodded.

“That was kind of a close one,” he said. “We’ll have to learn to be more careful if we don’t want to get dragged back to Wakefield. Where are your friends?”

“Not sure. I don’t know what I’m going to do if they got caught,” I said solemnly. I took a deep breath to keep myself from crying. Then I heard leaves crunching behind me.

“Astrid!”

I was so relieved to hear Max’s voice. He and Teddy jogged toward us, and I ran over and threw my arms around him.

“Could you try not to run off like that? I was freaking out!” he said.

Teddy looked at me like he was offended. “It’s nice to see you, too, Astrid.”

“Oh, you!” I said awkwardly and punched him in the arm. He smirked at me. I realized even though we’d gone to the prom together, the thought of hugging Teddy made me kind of uncomfortable. He just wasn’t the kind of person you hugged. He was more like the kind you punched jokingly.

“Where are the others?” I asked.

“Simon and Laura are behind us,” Max said.

“What about Ben and Jon?” I asked.

Max shrugged with a look of concern on his face.

Lawrence cleared his throat.

“Oh,” I said, “this is Lawrence. He has English with Jon and me. Or had English.” I corrected myself. “Lawrence, this is Max and Teddy.”

They all nodded to each other in the nonchalant way boys do when they meet other boys.

“My uncle owns a vacation home not too far from here,” Lawrence said. “He’s only there in the summer, so I was going to break in and spend the night. You guys are welcome to come with.”

“Wow, thanks,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s great, man,” Max agreed.

“Do you think Lycen or D’Arc will try to look for you there?” Teddy asked.

“I doubt it. At least not right away. He’s my uncle by marriage and he and my aunt are divorced now. I haven’t even been there since I was like five.”

“But you know how to get there?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He pressed his lips together and cast a sideways glance toward Teddy and Max. “Geography’s never been an issue for me. The ground feels different when I’m headed in the right direction.”

“I’ll buy that,” Teddy said. “I’ve definitely heard of weirder things,” he added under his breath.

I almost panicked when I saw a ridiculously tall person approaching from the shadows behind Teddy and Max. When he stepped into the moonlight I realized it was Simon, carrying Laura on his back. She had her skinny arms wrapped around his thick neck. He reached up and wiped his bloody lip with a dirty sleeve. I heard more crunching leaves and saw Ben and Jon step into the moonlight behind them.

Max and I both sighed with relief.

“Look at that,” Teddy said. “Here we are, all together again. It’s like a Christmas miracle in the middle of March.” He absent-mindedly rubbed at his throat, as if something were chafing him, and I noticed the dark bruises starting to bloom on his neck.

“It *is* a miracle,” Laura said as she slid off Simon’s back. “I think it means we’re all going to be okay. We have each other.”

We all laughed, though it sounded forced and tinny with uneasiness.

“Let’s get out of here before we start to sound any more like an after-school special,” Teddy scoffed under his breath.

We followed Lawrence through the woods, though not back the way we came. He said if we went east, we’d end up on another road that led to his uncle’s house. We walked for what felt like hours along the deserted two-lane route. Even though I wore sneakers (the wisest fashion choice I’d probably ever made), my feet ached and I could feel the blisters starting to form. Max gave me his suit jacket to keep me from freezing in the cold night air. My contacts irritated my dry eyes, so I took them out and tossed them on the ground. I pulled my glasses out of the pocket on my skirt and put them on. The lenses were smudged, but I felt too tired to clean them.

No one said much as we shuffled down the dark road. The strange events of the night had so thoroughly exhausted us we just kept moving in silence without thinking about it, like terrified zombies. After what seemed like an eternity,

Lawrence turned down a side road, which forked into two dirt roads after about a mile. Lawrence took us down the fork on the right.

“I thought you said this place wasn’t far,” Simon barked. He was carrying Laura on his broad shoulders again.

“It’s not,” Lawrence said. “We’ve only got about a quarter mile to go.”

We turned left onto a private drive marked by a carved wooden sign nailed to a tree. I could barely make out the words on the sign in the darkness, but I was pretty sure it read “Home Away From Home.” The drive itself had no streetlights and the tree canopy was so thick, very little moonlight shone through. I bumped right into Max because I couldn’t see him even though he was less than a foot in front of me.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, sounding unsure. “I hate the dark.”

I felt someone link arms with me.

“I hate the dark, too,” he whispered. It was Jon. I laughed quietly and thought about making a vampire joke. We walked until the tree canopy opened up a little, and I could see the silhouette of a small, boxy house in front of us. I heard Lawrence stumbling around on the porch. As my eyes adjusted, I saw him reach up to grab a key off the top of the doorframe and slip it into the lock on the front door. He turned a light on inside and I felt instantly relieved by the soothing yellow glow.

The small living room we stepped into had some dusty, ratty pieces of furniture and one of those old TVs with a frame made of fake plastic wood. I was so glad to have a safe, warm place to sleep with working plumbing, I couldn’t have cared less how unkempt the house looked.

Teddy waltzed in and stood with his hands on his hips as he surveyed the place. “Home sweet home away from home,” he finally said. Ben went straight for the TV and I sat down in one of the well-worn chairs. We only got static and snow

on the TV at first, but Ben changed the channels and adjusted the antenna until we had a semi-clear picture of an infomercial for a pasta maker. I leaned my head against the back of the chair and listened to the comforting, familiar voices oozing from the TV until I sank into a deep sleep and dreamt of endless bowls of delicious pasta.

\* \* \* \*

I woke up, groggy and starving, to the sounds of the six o'clock morning news and someone rifling through the kitchen cupboards. I went to the bathroom to pee and wash my face. Outside the dusty bathroom window I could see the sun starting to rise between the trees. I stumbled into the tiny kitchen and found Simon piling cans onto the counter. Something that smelled amazing was already heating up on the stove in a large saucepan.

“Hey,” Simon said, “so do you want soup or soup?”

“Soup sounds fantastic right now. Anything with noodles?” I was still craving pasta.

“Yeah, chicken noodle. That’s what I got on the stove right now. I’ll bring you a mug when it’s ready.”

“You’re the awesomest,” I said as I lumbered back toward the living room. Simon and I hadn’t been friends at Wakefield and I’d always pegged him as hopeless sociopath who’d eventually move on to juvenile detention. But he treated Laura with an almost disarming amount of kindness and had proven himself a useful ally during our escape. The fact that he was heating up soup for all of us like a dutiful mom make me laugh a little.

Ben and Lawrence sat on a well-worn couch in the living room, watching the news. Ben rocked forward and back as he chewed his nails, looking agitated and frazzled.

“You okay, Ben?” I asked.

“He’s fine for now,” Lawrence said. “You should see this.” He pointed at the TV.

I saw a young reporter standing in the parking lot of Wakefield. “... approximately ten p.m. last night,” he said. “Authorities initially reported a total of thirty-three escaped students, though we just learned six were recovered early this morning, along with a stolen van.”

“Told ya,” Teddy said smugly. He was standing next to the couch, watching the TV.

I heard the toilet flush and Max emerged. “What’s up?” he asked.

“They were talking about the Wakefield escape on the news,” I explained. “Six kids have already been caught.”

Max raised his eyebrows. “Did they say who?”

“They can’t release their names,” Lawrence said. “It’s against the law unless they have permission from a parent.”

“They said they found the van, though,” Teddy added, “so it had to be Lunky and his crew. Effing delinquents.”

“Better them than us,” Simon said as he stepped into the living room with a tray of mismatched mugs and bowls full of steaming soup.

After downing the salty soup in a few gulps, I looked through the closet and dressers in the bedroom at the back of the house for a change of clothes. All I found was the old gray pea coat hanging by itself in the closet. I went upstairs and found only one big room with no furniture. There was a set of drawers built into the wall and I found some flannel shirts and a big wool sweater that smelled like mothballs. I gave the sweater to Laura.

“Thanks,” she said enthusiastically as she slipped it over her head. The ratty garment hung to her knees, though she didn’t seem to care. “Oh, I almost forgot,” she said suddenly as she reached for a slim black folder on the bedside table. I

recognized it immediately as the folder I'd found on Eduardo's desk.

"Awesome! You carried this the whole way?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said proudly. "Well, Simon carried it for part of the way. It was pretty wet when Jon handed it to me and most of it's all smeared now. Where did you get it?"

"From Eduardo. Did you read any of it?"

"I tried, but like I said, most of it's all runny."

I thanked Laura and went outside to a picnic table behind the house to examine the folder. Laura was right. Most of the documents in the folder were now illegible. I noticed a runny stamped logo of a triangle over a crescent. I'd seen it somewhere before but couldn't quite place it.

"What's that?" Teddy asked casually while slipping out the back slider door with Max and Lawrence in tow. They sat down at the picnic table.

"It was in Eduardo's office. I'm pretty sure he meant for me to find it, just like he meant for me to find the key."

Max nodded and Teddy pursed his lips.

"Who's Eduardo?" Lawrence asked.

"He's the clinician on our unit," I explained. "Or was. I hope they don't find out he gave this to me and fire him."

"I hope he quit," Max added. Teddy and I both nodded.

"So what's it say?" Teddy asked.

"It got wet from the sprinklers and almost all of the ink ran. I guess it's kind of useless now, though I remember some of it." I swallowed hard before I began explaining. "It was a list of, I don't even know what to call them—special kids? Kids with powers? And it was broken up by units. When I found it in Eduardo's office, the page with Newton kids was on top. After each name it had, like, a designation or something. Like you guys," I said as I pointed at Max and Teddy,

“you’re both Mentalists.” Max’s eyes widened and Teddy almost laughed at the word.

“But Laura had something different after her name,” I continued. “I think it was ‘Elemental.’”

Teddy cracked up and Lawrence glared at him.

“Do you remember anything else?” Lawrence asked me as he pulled the document across the table and started examining it.

“The initials HG were printed in the corner.”

“What do you think it stands for?” Max asked.

I shrugged. “It also said all the kids on the list were on Cigamadrine, but that it wasn’t really working for Teddy anymore.”

“That’s probably because I was cheeking the pills,” Teddy snorted.

“Do you think Eduardo wrote it, or someone gave it to him?” Max asked.

“I doubt he wrote it,” I said, “though I don’t know how he got a hold of it.”

“Lycen probably wrote it,” Lawrence said, his brown eyes suddenly darker than usual. “Some of the others on my unit and I were pretty sure he was in charge, at least at Wakefield.”

“You think this goes beyond Wakefield?” I asked. It occurred to me I didn’t really know what “this” referred to. A conspiracy of some kind? The thought seemed so ridiculous I couldn’t bring myself to say it out loud.

Lawrence nodded. “Why else would Lycen, or someone else at Wakefield, have typed this up all neatly? He was reporting to someone.”

“To who?” I asked.

Lawrence paused for a moment. “I don’t know. I’m not sure I really want to know as long as they leave us alone. Right now I’m just glad I’m not at Wakefield anymore.”

The four of us sat quietly for a few moments before I broke the silence.

“I know it’s hard to tell now, but the font looked old, like the documents came from a typewriter instead of a computer,” I said.

Lawrence nodded. “Lycen probably wouldn’t want any electronic evidence of what was going on there,” Lawrence pointed out. “Once you create a document on a computer there’s basically a million copies of it out there and they’re almost impossible to get rid of.”

“That’s messed up,” Max said, “but it makes sense.”

Lawrence flipped through the pages in the folder and then paused. “Part of this is still readable,” he said as he pointed to a handwritten note at the bottom of one of the pages. I recognized it immediately.

“Brennan, Allyson,” Lawrence read aloud. “I can’t make out the next word. After that I think it says ‘confirmed necromancy.’ Did you guys know her?”

“She was my roommate,” I said quietly.

Lawrence looked at me with wide eyes. “Why isn’t she with us?” he asked. “You guys didn’t get along?”

“She refused to leave,” I explained. “She said she couldn’t, I think because she made a deal with those...things...whatever they were...that attacked the staff. But I don’t really know. It was such a blur,” I added as I put my head in my hands.

“Oh,” Lawrence said, nodding.

“I should have shoved her out the door,” I said with a sigh.

“We should have helped you,” Max said solemnly.

I couldn’t handle talking about Ally. I got up from the picnic table and went back in the house to take a shower and have at least a few minutes to myself. I figured it would be nice to be clean, even if I didn’t have any clean clothes to change into. The water wasn’t hot, only lukewarm. It still felt nice to wash all the sweat and grime away. Once I knew I was completely alone, I let the emotions of the past twenty-four hours flood over me. The tears warmed my cheeks more than

the tepid shower but it felt good to finally let them go.

The escape had been dizzying and terrifying and I couldn't believe my aunt had sent me to a place where dangerous and amoral people watched over me on a daily basis. The thought of it made me sick to my stomach now, though I still wasn't sure how many of the Wakefield staff knew before the prom what was really going on there. Most of them had to have noticed something that should have tipped them off at some point, right? Why didn't they question what was happening? Why didn't they care? At least one of them had managed to redeem himself. Without Eduardo's help, we might not have gotten out, at least not as easily as we did. I hoped he was okay and Lycen and the others at Wakefield didn't know what he had done for us.

Even though I didn't want to, I started thinking about Ally. I buried my face in my hands and started sobbing. I felt guilty about a lot of things. She tried to tell me about what was happening to her, about what she was experiencing, but I didn't believe her. I left her to deal with it all by herself. I hated myself now for being so closed-minded and selfish. I hated myself for not seeing what an amazing and brave person she was until it was too late. I could only hope she'd be able to hold her own against the "they" behind Wakefield, and that someday we might see her again.

After I got dressed and wrapped the gray pea coat around my shoulders, I stepped into the hall to find Teddy standing in the short hallway outside the bathroom door. I hadn't really been able to look him in the eye since we'd escaped. I suppose I still hadn't come to terms with the fact that Teddy had picked up on a pattern that, in all my grounded stubbornness, I'd refused to acknowledge.

He squinted at me. "You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I said sharply. I started to blush with embarrassment and prayed he hadn't heard me crying.

He nodded and looked down at his feet. “It’s been a rough couple of days. What were you thinking about in there? Ally?”

I could feel the tears starting to rise again and tried to push past him.

“Hey,” he said gently, putting his arm out to stop me. “It probably doesn’t make any difference now, but I feel bad about all the mean things I said about her. What she did for us was really amazing.”

I couldn’t stomach a heart to heart with Teddy, and I told him I needed to go for a walk. I was hoping Max or Laura, or even Jon, would see me leaving and follow me, so I could talk to someone without everyone else there. Instead, I ended up by myself, shuffling along the private drive through the woods. Now that I’d taken some time to ponder what Ally was suffering through, I allowed myself to face something nagging at me since the night of the prom. I did my best to fully realize, to fully admit to myself, that the world I thought I lived in had essentially crumbled and ceased to exist. My bubble of logic had imploded all over me in a sticky mess and left me feeling raw and vulnerable. Would anything ever make sense again or was I doomed to drift along in an irrational world of disorder and endless possibilities? The very thought gave me a pounding headache. I considered Max, Laura, and even Teddy close friends of mine, but how much control did they have over their abilities? What if one of them lost control or turned on some of us? What were they truly capable of?

Once I’d fully indulged my own self-absorbed worries, I decided it was time to put on a brave face and deal with the day to day. There just wasn’t time for a quasi-spiritual crisis. Right now we needed to worry about surviving. I cried the last of my tears, collected myself, and walked back to the house.

I found Lawrence, Simon, Teddy, and Max sitting in the living room, talking about what we should do next.

“We can probably stay here for a few days,” Lawrence said. “But once we get

some rest and put some supplies together, we should move on. It's not a good idea to stay in one place for too long."

"Makes sense," Simon said as he nodded. "Where to after this?"

"We should head to a major city. Boston would be the closest," Lawrence said.

"Boston sounds fun," Teddy said.

"It sounds dangerous," I said.

"It might be," Lawrence agreed. "More importantly, cities have more resources for homeless people. We can get odd jobs and stuff. Also, it will be harder for anyone who's looking for us to track us down there. We'll be like needles in a haystack—just a few kids on the street out of thousands."

My stomach felt like it caved in when Lawrence said "homeless." It was hard to swallow, but that's what we were. *Homeless*.

That day and the next, we slept a lot, ate a ton of soup, and scoured the house for supplies. We didn't find much. We packed some blankets and flashlights in an old canvas army bag and Lawrence used an old map he found in a kitchen drawer to start planning our route to Boston. The night before we planned to leave, ceaseless flickers of anxiety wouldn't let me sleep. I lay restlessly on a dusty twin mattress with Laura, wrapped in the gray coat and a scratchy wool blanket until the early hours of the morning. Teddy and Max were sound asleep on a double bed against the opposite wall. Eventually I decided trying to sleep was useless. I got up and wandered out to the living room, trying not to wake the others as I tiptoed out of the bedroom. Ben, Simon, and Jon were asleep on the couches and chairs. I opened the door, stepped out onto the porch, and saw Lawrence sitting in a rocking chair.

"Oh, hey," I said. "You couldn't sleep either?"

"Nope. I always get really nervous the night before I travel," he said with a smirk.

I smiled and sat down in the chair next to him. As I rocked back and forth, I started to relax and thought I might be able to fall asleep. I was startled when Lawrence sat bolt upright. Then I saw them—headlights coming through the trees down the private drive. I could hear the distinct crunch of tires on gravel.

“Oh my god,” I whispered.

Lawrence and I ran back inside. “Everyone up!” he shouted. Ben was already standing in the middle of the living room, staring into space, his eyes bloodshot. Jon and Simon sat up, looking sleepy and confused.

Lawrence rummaged through the canvas bag for a flashlight and handed it to me.

“Wake everyone up in the back bedroom,” he said to me. “Then go out the back slider door. There’s a path through the woods that leads to a lake. We’ll all meet up there.”

I nodded and ran. Laura and Teddy had just woken up, and Max was still curled up in a ball on the double bed.

“What’s going on?” Teddy asked, yawning.

I jumped on the bed and shook Max by the shoulders to wake him. “There’s a car coming down the driveway,” I shouted. Max looked at me groggily as I slid off the bed and grabbed my sneakers. I pulled on my shoes and felt my adrenaline surging. My hands shook so badly it took an eternity to tie the laces, but I didn’t want to risk tripping as we fled.

“Shit,” Teddy said. “There’s no way in hell I’m getting dragged back to Wakefield.”

Laura ran out of the room and down the hall, probably to find Simon.

“Lawrence said to go out the back slider,” I said. “There’s a path to a lake.” I looked at Teddy and Max. “Should we wait for Laura?” I asked.

“She’ll be fine with them,” Teddy said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.” He opened the slider door and ran into the dark early morning as I searched for the

path with my flashlight.

“Right there,” I said, pointing the thin beam at a small opening in the thick forest behind the house. We ran down the overgrown path as the beam of the flashlight bounced wildly against the trees.

\* \* \* \*

Teddy strutted back up the embankment, shortly after dawn, as Max and I sat by the glassy lake. There was still no sign of our friends. I wondered how many times we’d get separated before we finally made it to Boston. Or if all of us would even make it there.

“Hey,” Max said abruptly, shaking me out of my worries. “Right before you woke me up last night, or this morning I guess, I was dreaming about the fox again.” He wiped his nose gently on his sleeve and continued. “In the dream he gave me a compass, only it wasn’t the usual north, south, east, and west. All the directions were east.”

I smiled and so did he. “I guess we’re heading the right way,” I said, “assuming we can trust the fox.”

I heard someone shout, “Hey!” from somewhere behind us. When I looked up I saw Lawrence and Ben standing at the top of the embankment. I waved and ran toward them.

“What happened to you guys?” I asked. When I got to the top, I saw Simon, Laura, and Jon emerge from the path through the woods.

“The car turned around once it got to the house, so we stayed for a few minutes to make sure we had all our stuff together,” Lawrence explained, holding up the canvas army bag. “Then we took our time walking here. No need to run when we have such a long day ahead of us. Plus, we didn’t want Laura to have another asthma attack.”

“The car didn’t come back?” I asked.

“We didn’t exactly stick around to find out,” he said. “It might have just been a neighbor pulling into the wrong driveway in the dark.”

That explanation seemed plausible, though I didn’t fully believe it. I wondered if living in an institution for almost a year had made me paranoid.

Max ran halfway up the embankment and motioned for the others to come down toward the lake. As I watched my friends walk slowly down the hill, I was suddenly filled with hope, though it didn’t kill the clinging dread I hadn’t been able to shake since we’d all left Wakefield.

## Chapter Two—Max

Teddy skipped rocks on the lake, and I couldn't tell if he made them sail unnaturally far through wrist motion or *powers*. Laura sat nearby, just staring with one bare foot dipped into the clear water. Astrid and Azrael seemed lost in their own thoughts, and I guess I was, too. Ben sat on a boulder, looking almost like a bird of prey. He listened to the elders, Simon and Lawrence, confer by the edge of the woods.

I approached them, and it struck me what our first move had to be. "Guys, I think we need to figure out one thing before we plan our own trail of tears to Boston."

"What?" Simon asked. Ben also turned to me for guidance. I wasn't sure why people were giving everything I said such weight lately.

"We're dressed like crazy losers on the run from a mental institution, which we sort of are." I was referring to the hand-me-down-like prom attire mixed with ratty hunting flannels we all still wore.

"Or rejects from an '80s music video," Simon said.

"Where do we get new clothes? We don't have any money," Ben said glumly. "I don't want to do *things* for them."

"Nobody would pay you to," Simon joked.

"So, what, we need clothes, money, and food?" Lawrence summed it up.

I nodded and said, "That about does it."

"Okay. We can get all three at the college," Lawrence said matter-of-factly.

"What college?" I asked. That wasn't something I was prepared for. Before Wakefield I'd seen my future as high school, college, job, and white picket fence. Now it seemed to be woods, hiking, Boston, and who knows?

“MCLA. 'Bout five to ten minutes from here,” Lawrence explained.

“That close?” Simon asked. I could tell he was thinking about college girls.

“Yeah. Over a thousand bleeding heart twenty-year-olds with cash, clothes, and snack food,” Lawrence said smugly.

“So what? We raid the place?” Ben asked. “I don’t know about that. I mean, it’s not like we’re in Williamstown, these guys aren’t rich.”

“They’re in dorm rooms and apartments. They’re not sleeping in the woods. They aren’t us,” Simon growled. “We have it a lot worse, so that means we can take from them.”

“Hey, guys, come here,” I called the other four over. Teddy threw a handful of pebbles into the pond before following the others over to us.

“What’s up?” Astrid asked.

“They want all of us to steal from some college kids,” Ben said.

“Not steal,” I said slowly.

“Then what?” Astrid asked.

“Okay, ‘steal.’ I think we should steal from college kids.” I threw my hands up in the air. “At this point? Why the hell not?” I was exhausted, I was cold, I was hungry, and we were just minutes away from a whole group of people I was insanely jealous of. I knew I’d regret it later, but better to survive to regret something than starve with morals.

“Look, we need eight sets of clothes, a little cash, and some food,” Lawrence told the group. “In an hour, we could be all set and on our way to Boston.”

“Shouldn’t we vote on it?” Ben asked timidly.

“Sure.” Teddy joined the conversation, scratching his lanky arm.

“Who doesn’t want to sneak into the college and steal a bunch of crap?” Ben asked, before raising his hand.

Laura looked worried and raised hers. Azrael bit his lip and then joined her.

“And who wants to ransack a college?” Teddy asked with a grin, before raising his own hand. The rest of us joined him. “Sweet.”

“We should break up in teams or something,” I suggested, looking at Ben, Laura, and Azrael. “Um, if you guys don’t want to participate, that’s cool.”

“We’re all in.” Teddy glared before the others could even respond.

“Yeah, fine.” Azrael relented.

“The girls should find some guys and give them a sob story,” Simon said.

“You think someone’s going to give us cash?” Astrid folded her arms.

“I’d fall for it,” Simon told her.

“Okay, we’ll try.” Laura blushed. Had she always been so easily swayed by Simon, or was this a new development? I really should have paid them more attention before. Was I a little self-absorbed?

“There’s an on-campus laundromat I can grab some clothes from,” Lawrence announced.

“How do you know so much about the place?” Astrid asked.

“My cousin went here. Azrael, you want to be my lookout?”

“Uh, sure. Okay,” Azrael stammered.

“Great. Who else is on clothes duty with me?”

“Me,” I volunteered.

“Me, too,” Teddy said quickly. “I’ll pick out my own stolen clothes, thank you. Otherwise you’ll forget some of us don’t wear juniors.”

I wondered how hard it would be to find big enough clothes for Teddy. Why did he have to be so damn tall?

“Which leaves me and Ben on food patrol?” Simon asked. “We can handle that. There’s got to be a cafeteria or something.”

“Don’t just get meat. I want to eat, too.” Azrael frowned.

“Vegan.” Teddy sighed.

“Shut up, Stretch.”

“You call me Stretch and I’ll call you Sparkles.” Teddy glared back.

“Hey, guys, you two already have nicknames. Let’s just stick to Teddy and Azrael, okay?” I played peacekeeper while they grumbled. “Don’t get caught,” I warned everyone. “We’ll head down together then meet back here as soon as possible.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Astrid nodded.

The eight of us, ragged in our prom best, descended the steep hill toward the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts.

At the bottom of the hill, I saw a seven-story brick building that must have been a dorm. I wanted two normal years to fly by so I could live there so badly. Instead I was on a mission to steal from these people. I told myself not to worry about taking from strangers, but it still nagged at me. I hoped I could do it.

We walked down the lane, wary of cops, trying to look like any casual group. A bunch of people outside the dorms played ultimate Frisbee, so Astrid and Laura left us to see how much money they could weasel out of them. The rest of us continued on. We took a left, avoiding a smaller dorm building, then walked through some big iron gates. We passed buildings that probably held classrooms and Lawrence pointed out the cafeteria to Simon and Ben, who quickly strode away.

“The laundromat’s up here,” Lawrence informed the rest of us.

“Actually, boys—” Teddy stopped us, “—I have other plans.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“I have my own way of getting what I want, so I’ll meet you guys back by the lake. I might take a minute, so wait up for me.” He had a wicked grin on his face I didn’t quite trust.

Lawrence continued walking away, but I stopped.

“Be careful,” I warned Teddy. He bowed and ran toward one of the brick buildings by the quad. I wasn’t too worried about Teddy; I knew he could handle his own. Besides, out of all of us, he could actually pass for a college student with his height.

Azrael, Lawrence, and I walked through some grass and by some buildings until we were at a small parking lot nestled between two strips of townhouses and a road.

“Okay, this is it. Azrael, you’re lookout. If anyone’s coming, casually come in first, so we can prepare, okay?” Lawrence asked.

“Yeah, I’m cool.” Azrael stiffly crossed his arms.

I followed Lawrence inside, where I found a row of washing machines piled two high across from a row of dryers. A few yellow plastic tables sat in one corner, and a bulletin board was plastered with flyers and advertisements. It felt homey and warm. I wished I would be around long enough to see the drama department’s original Lizzie Borden Cabaret.

Lawrence silently approached the dryers and pulled one open. It was empty, and so was the second. The third dryer was stuffed full.

“Are we too good for underwear?” Lawrence asked as he scrunched his acned face.

“It’s clean, right?” I shrugged.

“I’m taking them. And socks. We need lots of socks.”

“So does whoever they belong to,” I grumbled.

“I’m not getting off on stealing, Max,” Lawrence told me as he grabbed an empty blue laundry bucket and stuffed socks and underwear inside.

“It doesn’t look like it bothers you any, though,” I said as I threw open another dryer to find skirts and shirts with floral prints. I figured the more I complained about it, the less evil I’d feel while stealing. It only helped a little.

“Doesn’t bother me. Doesn’t really affect me either way,” my co-thief said simply. “It just is.”

“Oh. You think the girls will like this stuff?” I held out the girlie clothes. Lawrence shook his head. “What?”

“You don’t pay any attention to what people wear, do you?”

I tossed the clothes back in the dryer and checked another.

“How about these for the girls?” I showed him some skinny jeans, fitted T-shirts, a few sports bras, and a pink hoodie.

“Sure. Teddy, too.” Lawrence laughed, but I didn’t get why.

“What, you don’t like Teddy?” I asked as I tossed the women’s clothes into the blue bin.

“No, he’s all right,” Lawrence said as he stepped around to a fifth dryer.

“We need to hurry up,” I said. He nodded and grabbed a few more things.

We joined Azrael outside. He was sweating up a storm and tapping his fingers nervously against the exterior of the building. I made a mental note he probably shouldn’t serve as lookout again.

“Oh, good, let’s go, let’s go.” Azrael hurried us along, his arms waving frantically. “Come on.”

The three of us walked as fast as we could, without actually running, back the way we’d come, through the campus, and up the hill to the lake. I wasn’t surprised we were the first back, since our “mission” was the only one that relied on speed. We rifled through the clothes, pulling out whatever looked like it would fit us. Azrael grabbed some new underwear and ducked into a Porta Potty to change while Lawrence and I changed in between the trees.

We waited at least an hour before Astrid and Laura appeared.

“How’d you two do?” I asked, relieved to see them.

“Almost fifty bucks,” Astrid told us proudly.

“Nice.” Lawrence nodded.

“Are there any clothes for us?” Laura asked.

Azrael handed them the blue laundry bin to rifle through. Laura changed in the portable restroom first, followed by Astrid. Simon and Ben showed up about twenty minutes later with some chips and sodas.

The rest of us each grabbed a soda and devoured the chips.

“Where’s Teddy at?” Ben asked as we stuffed our faces.

“He went off on his own,” Lawrence said.

“Rogue agent. Is he coming back?” Astrid asked quickly.

“Probably.” Lawrence shrugged.

“Yes,” I answered more surely. I couldn’t imagine continuing on without Teddy.

Simon and Ben went through the last of the clothes and then we sat at a picnic table, waiting for Teddy. Simon stripped his shirt off and grabbed a fresh one in front of us.

“I want that.” Ben reached for the shirt in Simon’s hand.

“It won’t fit me anyway, Tiny.” Simon reluctantly released the shirt and continued leafing through the remaining clothes.

The daylight began to fade and I didn’t know how long everyone would want to wait for Teddy. I knew he wouldn’t tell anyone where we were if he got caught, but it wouldn’t take a genius to look for us up here. We decided to clean our filthy clothes in the lake while we waited, so each of us took our prom suits and dresses and squatted with them by the water. Maybe it was good Teddy wasn’t with us, since I doubted he had any experience with washing clothes. He’d probably complain that was why maids were invented. Most of us haphazardly dunked our stuff in the cold water, but I noticed how careful Astrid was with her prom dress. The afternoon sun felt pleasantly warm, and we sat back on the picnic table to

relax, which became a little difficult when Lawrence started throwing up.

“Too many potato chips?” Simon asked, as he rubbed his knees with his bulky hands.

Lawrence shrugged before retching again.

“Something wrong?” Laura asked Simon.

He shook his head. “My knees ache a little. Probably just stress.”

“Look!” Laura pointed behind me. I spun around to find Teddy striding toward us, a huge, triumphant smile on his face. I’d look that way, too, if I had a new jacket, jeans, and a backpack like he had.

“Hello, hello!” he called out. We all leapt off the picnic table and ran to our friend.

“Where were you?” Astrid asked.

“What did you get?” Simon asked.

“A whole new look.” Teddy modeled his clothes, showing off like Vanna White. “And a bag full of water bottles and granola bars, fifty bucks, and a map.”

“Nice job,” Lawrence complimented him.

“Yeah, Teddy, fantastic. How’d you do it?” I asked.

“Easy. One of the buildings said Bowman Theater, so that’s where I went. There were a bunch of people practicing some play, so I introduced myself, told them about the abusive home I’m running away from and the saintly grandmother I’m searching for in Boston who will protect me from it all.”

“You failed to mention your trust fund?” I elbowed him.

“Somehow it slipped my mind.”

“And they bought all that?” Simon sounded incredulous.

Teddy nodded. “I’m good.”

Astrid had a look of disgust on her face and folded her arms.

“Now that you’re here, we should head out,” Lawrence said, making a decision

for the rest of us.

“Should we wait for nightfall?” Azrael asked. “I always have more energy at night.”

“Me, too,” Laura agreed.

“Right.” Ben spoke slowly. I couldn’t get a read on him at all.

“We’d waste hours if we sat around on our asses,” Lawrence said.

“Fine.” Azrael sighed. He looked disappointed, but Lawrence had a point.

We headed into the woods. Lawrence knew the area the best, and Simon wanted to be in charge, so they led the way. I followed closely with Astrid and Teddy. Azrael, Ben, and Laura trailed behind.

After a little while, we emerged from the trees by a high school. School had probably let out hours ago and the place was deserted, but it still felt like a beacon of stability, comfort, and everything else we missed. We continued on, crossed the road, and rounded a sharp corner.

Lawrence stepped off the road, back toward the trees.

“More woods?” Azrael asked.

“What, vampires don’t like trees?” Simon asked.

“Right, dumbass, wooden stakes,” Lawrence chimed in.

“I’m a gothic city vampire, not a rural one. Completely different breed.”

“How about you try being a silent vampire?” Teddy shot back at him.

\* \* \* \*

We followed Lawrence’s directions past the treeline and onto some old train tracks. The road beside us led down, but we stayed pretty level for a minute or two. Then we realized we had to cross over the road, which snaked beneath us in an “S” shape. Four narrow wooden beams continued the tracks ten feet above the speeding cars below. Twilight had arrived and the sky took on a purple hue.

“Be careful, everyone,” Simon called back to us. “Or you’ll end up road kill.”

He strutted across the beams, choosing a wider outside plank to cross over.

Lawrence followed a bit slower once Simon was across. Astrid walked in the middle, followed by Azrael.

I prepared to cross, but Teddy stopped me.

“I’ll go first,” he said.

“Ok, sure.”

Teddy held his arms out to each side, making a big show of it like he was a circus performer.

“This is easier than I thought.” Teddy laughed, and then wobbled to his right.

“Teddy!” I called out, reaching forward. As I did, I felt a cool energy flow from my fingertips. It rushed toward Teddy and I could picture it snaking across his chest and behind his back. It pushed him forward and up a foot. He regained his balance and got to the other side.

“Intense.” Astrid laughed nervously.

“Was that you, Max?” Teddy asked.

“Um, yes? I guess so.” I wasn’t even entirely sure myself.

“Thanks. I’ll try to magic you if you fall.”

“That should be the name of a song,” Ben said.

“And you’re next, big guy,” Simon called to Ben. He walked over the road with little difficulty. It struck me I was the only one weirded out by my powers. Maybe the others hadn’t registered it, or weren’t ready to share their feelings. After all, I kept quiet and didn’t say anything else about it. Maybe they thought I was completely cool with it. *Good acting job, me.*

“Ready, Laura?” I asked.

“Uh, I was always bad at the balance beam as a kid,” she said. “Maybe I’ll just go around.”

“I don’t think there’s really an around to go,” I said as nicely as I could.

“You’d have to go back a ways, get on the road, then climb through the trees and prickles. It’s kind of dark and we don’t really know our way.”

“Oh,” she said quietly.

“It’s really not hard,” Astrid called out.

“Cars can see us, and cops will stop us if we stay here much longer,” Lawrence said. He stood a good ten feet further up the train tracks than the other five. They scrambled up to him, to get out of sight of the cars below.

“Look, I’ll walk like two feet behind you, so if you need to, you can grab on to me.” I pictured her toppling us both over the edge. The asphalt below didn’t look very inviting.

“Okay. Thanks.”

I steadied her as she stepped out on one of the two middle beams. She crossed on her own, but I followed closely. Thankfully she did better than I thought she would, and got to the other side in under a minute.

“Glad that’s over,” she exclaimed, though she clearly looked pleased with herself. We hurried to catch up to the others.

Our little group moved on along the tracks, hoping no train would come. We figured we’d hear it and have plenty of time to scramble away. We passed two bends in the path and came out to a short straightaway.

The woods deepened on either side, with a steep embankment to the right. A small shack sat down to the left, and looming large up ahead was the Hoosac Tunnel, a high, brick opening in the mountainside. I could only see in about three feet before the pitch black obscured everything. Random graffiti decorated the surface, impossibly high it seemed. I pictured some thug carrying a ladder all the way out here just to deface a tunnel hardly anyone ever saw.

“Here we are,” Lawrence said grandly.

“Right. Why are we here again?” Astrid asked.

“Secluded area, and we can sleep in that shack for shelter,” Lawrence said.

“Can we get to Boston through the tunnel?” Azrael asked.

“It goes east, but it’s dangerous and haunted,” Lawrence said. We had been slowly approaching the foreboding darkness. We stopped, letting him stand at the threshold. He reached out and touched the brick.

“Haunted?” Astrid eyed him suspiciously.

“Either way, it’s too dangerous. It’s tight in there, and we’d get crushed to death by the first train,” I told them.

“After everything you’ve seen, you’re going to draw the line at ghosts?” Lawrence asked Astrid. Before she could answer, he pressed on, “Even after you saw those inky spirits your roommate, Ally, summoned?”

“I’m a skeptic, okay?” she said briskly.

Ben walked over to the shack and tried the door, but it was locked.

“Obviously.” Teddy rolled his eyes. He made a show of strutting over to the door and holding his hands out to the lock. “If we have powers, I plan on using them.” He shut his eyes and clenched his jaw. A vein in his neck pulsed.

Laura jumped as the door flew open.

“Ta-da!” Teddy exclaimed.

Simon laughed. “I knew there was a reason I stuck with you guys.”

Something moved inside the tunnel. I spun toward it, and found only darkness.

“It looks gross in there.” Laura pointed to the small shack’s dirty, rusty landscaping equipment.

“At least it’ll be warmer than out here,” Astrid told her hopefully.

Ally would know all about the Hoosac Tunnel. She’d tell us about the ghosts and make us feel better. Instead there was just the living and the unknown. God, I hoped Ally was okay. We all owed her so much.

Laura and Ben rummaged around the shack while the rest of us hung around

outside. Simon jogged off into the clearing to go pee, leaving Azrael, Lawrence, and me by the gaping entrance of the tunnel.

“I don’t think I like it here,” Azrael said.

“Well, I know I don’t.” I meant for it to sound reassuring, but I don’t think I pulled it off. “It’s not like this place is really haunted, right?”

“Two hundred men died building this tunnel,” Lawrence reported.

“Two hundred?” Azrael asked, stepping away from it.

“That’s why they call it ‘The Bloody Pit,’” Lawrence continued. “A few of the deaths happened because a man named Ringo Kelley messed up on one of the first uses of nitro in America. A year later, Kelley disappeared. Three months later, they found his strangled body miles inside the tunnel, where the accident happened.”

“Yeah, that’s probably enough.” I stepped in between Lawrence and Azrael. My body froze suddenly as I saw a tiny white light from deep inside the tunnel. I turned to Lawrence to see if he saw it, but when I looked back, it was a black sheet again.

“Max? Did you see something?” Azrael asked.

“You guys going inside?” Simon asked, coming back from his bathroom break.

“No way,” Azrael quickly said.

“What do vampires have to be afraid of?” Simon mocked.

“Ghosts,” Azrael answered quietly.

“What a bunch of girls.” Simon laughed. He stepped forward, crossing the threshold as manly as he could.

“It’s getting late,” I said.

“Just a sec,” Simon told me, walking a few feet deeper. “It is pretty creepy in here. I can’t really see much, but yeah.”

I pictured a man in overalls stalking through the darkness. Simon backed away. We all did.

“So, enough of this shit.” Simon tried laughing it off, but we didn’t buy it.

It was dark and we were exhausted, so we joined the others inside the imagined safety of the old shack and nestled in together to sleep.