

MARKED (Chapter 1)

Just when I thought my day couldn't get any worse I saw the dead guy standing next to my locker. Kayla was talking nonstop in her usual K-babble, and she didn't even notice him. At first. Actually, now that I think about it, no one else noticed him until he spoke, which is, tragically, more evidence of my freakish inability to fit in.

"No, but Zoey, I swear to God Heath didn't get that drunk after the game. You really shouldn't be so hard on him."

"Yeah," I said absently. "Sure." Then I coughed. Again. I felt like crap. I must be coming down with what Mr. Wise, my more-than-slightly-insane AP biology teacher, called the Teenage Plague.

If I died, would it get me out of my geometry test tomorrow? One could only hope.

"Zoey, please. Are you even listening? I think he only had like four—I dunno—maybe six beers, and maybe like three shots. But that's totally beside the point. He probably wouldn't even have had hardly any if your stupid parents hadn't made you go home right after the game."

We shared a long-suffering look, in total agreement about the latest injustice committed against me by my mom and the Step-Loser she'd married three really long years ago. Then, after barely half a breath break, K was back with the babbling.

"Plus, he was celebrating. I mean we beat Union!" K shook my shoulder and put her face close to mine. "Hello! Your boyfriend—"

"My almost-boyfriend," I corrected her, trying my best not to cough on her.

"Whatever. Heath is our quarterback so of course he's going to celebrate. It's been like a million years since Broken Arrow beat Union."

"Sixteen." I'm crappy at math, but K's math impairment makes me look like a genius.

"Again, whatever. The point is, he was happy. You should give the boy a break."

"The point is that he was wasted for like the fifth time this week. I'm sorry, but I don't want to go out with a guy whose main focus in life has changed from trying to play college football to trying to chug a six-pack without puking. Not to mention the fact that he's going to get fat from all that beer." I had to pause to cough. I was feeling a little dizzy and forced myself to take slow, deep breaths when the coughing fit was over. Not that K-babble noticed.

"Eww! Heath, fat! Not a visual I want."

I managed to ignore another urge to cough. "And kissing him is like sucking on alcohol-soaked feet."

K scrunched up her face. "Okay, sick. Too bad he's so hot."

I rolled my eyes, not bothering to try to hide my annoyance at her typical shallowness.

"You're so grumpy when you're sick. Anyway, you have no idea how lost-puppy-like Heath looked after you ignored him at lunch. He couldn't even . . ."

Then I saw him. The dead guy. Okay, I realized pretty quick that he wasn't technically "dead." He was undead. Or un-human. Whatever. Scientists said one thing, people said another, but the end result was the same. There was no mistaking what he was and even if I hadn't felt the power and darkness that radiated from him, there was no frickin' way I could miss his Mark, the sapphire-blue crescent moon on his forehead and the additional tattooing of entwining knot work that framed his equally blue eyes. He was a vampyre, and worse. He was a Tracker.

Well, crap! He was standing by my locker.

“Zoey, you’re so not listening to me!”

Then the vampyre spoke and his ceremonial words slicked across the space between us, dangerous and seductive, like blood mixed with melted chocolate.

“Zoey Montgomery! Night has chosen thee; thy death will be thy birth. Night calls to thee; hearken to Her sweet voice. Your destiny awaits you at the House of Night!”

He lifted one long, white finger and pointed at me. As my forehead exploded in pain Kayla opened her mouth and screamed.

When the bright splotches finally cleared from my eyes I looked up to see K’s colorless face staring down at me.

As usual, I said the first ridiculous thing that came to mind. “K, your eyes are popping out of your head like a fish.”

“He Marked you. Oh, Zoey! You have the outline of that thing on your forehead!” Then she pressed a shaking hand against her white lips, unsuccessfully trying to hold back a sob.

I sat up and coughed. I had a killer headache, and I rubbed at the spot right between my eyebrows. It stung as if a wasp had bit me and radiated pain down around my eyes, all the way across my cheekbones. I felt like I might puke.

“Zoey!” K was really crying now and had to speak between wet little hiccups. “Oh. My. God. That guy was a Tracker—a vampyre Tracker!”

“K.” I blinked hard, trying to clear the pain from my head. “Stop crying. You know I hate it when you cry.” I reached out to attempt a comforting pat on her shoulders.

And she automatically cringed, and moved away from me.

I couldn’t believe it. She actually cringed, like she was afraid of me. She must have seen the hurt in my eyes because she instantly started a string of breathless K-babble.

“Oh, God, Zoey! What are you going to do? You can’t go to that place. You can’t be one of those things. This can’t be happening! Who am I supposed to go to all of our football games with?”

I noticed that all during her tirade she didn’t once move any closer to me. I clamped down on the sick, hurt feeling inside that threatened to make me burst into tears. My eyes dried instantly. I was good at hiding tears. I should be; I’d had three years to get good at it.

“It’s okay. I’ll figure this out. It’s probably some . . . some bizarre mistake,” I lied.

I wasn’t really talking; I was just making words come out of my mouth. Still grimacing at the pain in my head, I stood up. Looking around I felt a small measure of relief that K and I were the only ones in the math hall, and then I had to choke back what I knew was hysterical laughter. Had I not been totally psycho about the geometry test from hell scheduled for tomorrow, and had run back to my locker to get my book so I could attempt to obsessively (and pointlessly) study tonight, the Tracker would have found me standing outside in front of the school with the majority of the 1,300 kids who went to Broken Arrow’s South Intermediate High School waiting for what my stupid Barbie-clone sister liked to smugly call “the big yellow limos.” I have a car, but standing around with the less fortunate who have to ride the buses is a time-honored tradition, not to mention an excellent way to check out who’s hitting on who. As it was, there was only one other kid in the math hall—a tall thin dork with messed-up teeth, which I could, unfortunately, see too much of because he was standing there with his mouth flapping open staring at me like I’d just given birth to a litter of flying pigs.

I coughed again, this time a really wet, disgusting cough. The dork made a squeaky little sound and scuttled down the hall to Mrs. Day's room clutching a flat board to his bony chest. Guess the chess club had changed its meeting time to Mondays after school.

Do vampires play chess? Were there vampire dorks? How about Barbie-like vampire cheerleaders? Did any vampires play in the band? Were there vampire Emos with their guy-wearing-girl's-pants weirdness and those awful bangs that cover half their faces? Or were they all those freaky Goth kids who didn't like to bathe much? Was I going to turn into a Goth kid? Or worse, an Emo? I didn't particularly like wearing black, at least not exclusively, and I wasn't feeling a sudden and unfortunate aversion to soap and water, nor did I have an obsessive desire to change my hairstyle and wear too much eyeliner.

All this whirled through my mind while I felt another little hysterical bubble of laughter try to escape from my throat, and was almost thankful when it came out as a cough instead.

"Zoey? Are you okay?" Kayla's voice sounded too high, like someone was pinching her, and she'd taken another step away from me.

I sighed and felt my first sliver of anger. It wasn't like I'd asked for this. K and I had been best friends since third grade, and now she was looking at me like I had turned into a monster.

"Kayla, it's just me. The same me I was two seconds ago and two hours ago and two days ago." I made a frustrated gesture toward my throbbing head. "This doesn't change who I am!"

K's eyes teared up again, but, thankfully, her cell phone started singing Madonna's "Material Girl." Automatically, she glanced at the caller ID. I could tell by her rabbit-in-the-headlights expression that it was her boyfriend, Jared.

"Go on," I said in a flat, tired voice. "Ride home with him."

Her look of relief was like a slap in my face.

"Call me later?" she threw over her shoulder as she beat a hasty retreat out the side door.

I watched her rush across the east lawn to the parking lot. I could see that she had her cell phone smashed to her ear and was talking in animated little bursts to Jared. I'm sure she was already telling him I was turning into a monster.

The problem, of course, was that turning into a monster was the brighter of my two choices. Choice Number 1: I turn into a vampire, which equals a monster in just about any human's mind. Choice Number 2: My body rejects the Change and I die. Forever.

So the good news is that I wouldn't have to take the geometry test tomorrow.

The bad news was that I'd have to move into the House of Night, a private boarding school in Tulsa's Midtown, known by all my friends as the Vampire Finishing School, where I would spend the next four years going through bizarre and unnameable physical changes, as well as a total and permanent life shake-up. And that's only if the whole process didn't kill me.

Great. I didn't want to do either. I just wanted to attempt to be normal, despite the burden of my mega-conservative parents, my troll-like younger brother, and my oh-so-perfect older sister. I wanted to pass geometry. I wanted to keep my grades up so that I could get accepted into the veterinary college at OSU and get out of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. But most of all, I wanted to fit in—at least at school. Home had become hopeless, so all I was left with were my friends and my life away from my family.

Now that was being taken away from me, too.

I rubbed my forehead and then messed with my hair until it semi-covered my eyes, and, with any luck, the mark that had appeared above them. Keeping my head ducked down,

like I was fascinated with the goo that had somehow formed in my purse, I hurried toward the door that led to the student parking lot.

But I stopped short of going outside. Through the side-by-side windows in the institutional-looking doors I could see Heath. Girls flocked around him, posing and flipping their hair, while guys revved ridiculously big pickup trucks and tried (but mostly failed) to look cool. Doesn't it figure that I would choose that to be attracted to? No, to be fair to myself I should remember that Heath used to be incredibly sweet, and even now he had his moments. Mostly when he bothered to be sober.

High-pitched girl giggles flitted to me from the parking lot. Great. Kathy Richter, the biggest ho in school, was pretending to smack Heath. Even from where I was standing it was obvious she thought hitting him was some kind of mating ritual. As usual, clueless Heath was just standing there grinning. Well, hell, my day just wasn't going to get any better. And there sat my robin's egg-blue 1966 VW Bug right in the middle of them. No. I couldn't go out there. I couldn't walk into the middle of all of them with this thing on my forehead. I'd never be able to be part of them again. I already knew too well what they'd do. I remembered the last kid a Tracker had Chosen at SIHS.

It happened at the beginning of the school year last year. The Tracker had come before school started and had targeted the kid as he was walking to his first hour. I didn't see the Tracker, but I did see the kid afterward, for just a second, after he dropped his books and ran out of the building, his new Mark glowing on his pale forehead and tears washing down his too white cheeks. I never forgot how crowded the halls had been that morning, and how everyone had backed away from him like he had the plague as he rushed to escape out the front doors of the school. I had been one of those kids who had backed out of his way and stared, even though I'd felt really sorry for him. I just hadn't wanted to be labeled as that-one-girl-who's-friends-with-those-freaks. Sort of ironic now, isn't it?

Instead of going to my car I headed for the nearest restroom, which was, thankfully, empty. There were three stalls—yes, I double-checked each for feet. On one wall were two sinks, over which hung two medium-sized mirrors. Across from the sinks the opposite wall was covered with a huge mirror that had a ledge below it for holding brushes and makeup and whatnot. I put my purse and my geometry book on the ledge, took a deep breath, and in one motion lifted my head and brushed back my hair.

It was like staring into the face of a familiar stranger. You know, that person you see in a crowd and swear you know, but you really don't? Now she was me—the familiar stranger.

She had my eyes. They were the same hazel color that could never decide whether it wanted to be green or brown, but my eyes had never been that big and round. Or had they? She had my hair—long and straight and almost as dark as my grandma's had been before hers had begun to turn silver. The stranger had my high cheekbones, long, strong nose, and wide mouth—more features from my grandma and her Cherokee ancestors. But my face had never been that pale. I'd always been olive-ish, much darker skinned than anyone else in my family. But maybe it wasn't that my skin was suddenly so white . . . maybe it just looked pale in comparison to the dark blue outline of the crescent moon that was perfectly positioned in the middle of my forehead. Or maybe it was the horrid fluorescent lighting. I hoped it was the lighting.

I stared at the exotic-looking tattoo. Mixed with my strong Cherokee features it seemed to brand me with a mark of wildness . . . as if I belonged to ancient times when the world was bigger . . . more barbaric.

From this day on my life would never be the same. And for a moment—just an instant—I forgot about the horror of not belonging and felt a shocking burst of pleasure, while deep inside of me the blood of my grandmother's people rejoiced.

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