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Chapter 1

Hunter

Tuesday evening

Shakespeare said, "What's in a name?"

Well, my name's Hunter Wild, so I say: *a lot*.

For instance, you can tell by my name that our family takes our status as vampire hunters very seriously. Good thing I'm an only child—if I'd had brothers or sisters, they might have been named Slayer or Killer. We'd sound like a heavy metal band.

Hard to believe, in reality, we're one of the oldest and most esteemed families in the Helios-Ra. When you're born into the Wild family, no one asks you what you want to be when you grow up. The answer is obvious: a vampire hunter.

Period.

No ifs, ands, or buts. No deviations of any kind.

One size fits all.

"I hate these stupid cargo pants," my roommate Chloe muttered, as she did at the start of every single school year. Classes didn't start for another week, but most of us moved into the dorm early so we could spend that extra time working out and getting ready. Chloe and I have been friends since our first day at the academy, when we were both terrified. Now we're eighteen, about to start our last year, and, frankly, just as terrified. But at least we finally get to be roommates. You only get to make rooming requests in twelfth grade, otherwise they throw you in with people as badly matched as they can find, just to see how you deal with the stress.

Have I mentioned I'm really glad this is our last year?

Even if the room will probably smell like nail polish and vanilla perfume all year. Chloe already had her bare feet propped up on her desk, applying a second coat of silver glitter over the purple polish on her toenails. She was, most emphatically, not wearing her regulation cargos.

I was, but only because my grandfather dropped me off this morning, and he's nothing if not old-school. He's still muttering about our friend Spencer, who has long blond dreads and wears hemp necklaces with turquoise beads. Grandpa can't fathom how Spencer's allowed to get away with it, why there's a newfangled (his word) paranormal division, or why a boy wouldn't want a buzz cut. Truth is, Spencer is such a genius when it comes to occult history, the teachers are perfectly willing to turn a blind eye. Besides, cargos are technically regulation wear only for drills and training

and actual fieldwork. And Grandpa still doesn't understand why I won't cut off my hair like any warrior worth her salt.

I totally earned this long hair.

I had to pass several combat scenarios without anyone being able to grab it as a handhold to use against me. Nothing else would extract a promise from Grandpa not to shave my head in my sleep. I think he forgets that I'm not G.I. Joe.

Or that I like looking like a normal girl sometimes, with long blond hair and lip gloss, and not just a hunter who kills vampires every night. Under my steel-toe combat boots my nails are pink. But I'd never tell him that. It would give him a heart attack.

He'd still be out there on patrols if the Helios-Ra doctors hadn't banned him from active duty last year because of the arthritis in his neck and shoulder. He might be built like a bull but he just doesn't have the same flexibility and strength that he used to. He is, however, perfectly capable of being a guest expert at some of the academy fight-training classes. He just loves beating down sixteen-year-old boys who think they're faster and better than he is. Nothing makes him happier, not even my very-nearly straight As last year. The first time Spencer met him, he told me Grandpa was Wild-West-gunslinger scary. It's a pretty good description actually—he even has the squint lines from shooting long-range UV guns and crossbows. And the recent treaty negotiations with certain ancient vampire families are giving him palpitations. In his day, blah blah blah. He still doesn't know Kieran took me into the royal caves last week to meet with the new ruling vampire family, the Drakes. And I'm so totally not telling him until I have to.

Grandpa might be old-school, but I'm not.

I like archery and martial arts, don't get me wrong, and I definitely feel good about fighting the Hel-Blar. They are the worst of the worst kind of vampire: mindless, feral, and always looking for blood. The more violently procured the better. They're faintly blue, which is creepier than it sounds, and they smell like rotting mushrooms.

Needless to say, mushrooms don't get served a lot in the caf.

But I like all the history stuff too, and the research and working with vampire families. I don't think it should be a kill-them-all-and-let-God-sort-it-out situation. I love Grandpa—he took care of me when my parents both died during a botched takedown of a *Hel-Blar* nest—but sometimes he sounds like a bigot. It can be a little embarrassing. Vampires are vampires are vampires to him. If he found out Kieran was dating the sixteen-year-old Drake vampire daughter, he'd freak right out. He thinks of Kieran as an honorary grandson and would totally marry us off to each other if we showed the slightest inclination. Hell, he tries to pair us up anyway, and he's about as subtle as a brick. Kieran's like a brother to me though, and I know he feels the same way about me. I might be willing to sacrifice a lot for the Helios-Ra, but who I date is not one of those things.

Unfortunately Grandpa's not exactly known for giving up. The thing is, neither am I. The infamous goat-stubborn streak runs strong in every Wild, and I'm no exception.

"Would you please change into something decent? Just looking at those cargos is giving me hives." Chloe grimaced at me before going back to blowing on her wet nail polish. She was wearing a

short sundress with lace-up sandals and earrings that swung down practically to her shoulders. Her dark hair was a wild mass of curls as usual, her brown eyes carefully lined with purple to match her clothes. She'd already unpacked every stitch of her wardrobe and hung it all neatly in our miniscule closet. It was the only spot of neatness I'd see all year. I'd bug her about her stuff everywhere, and she'd make fun of me for making my bed every morning. I couldn't wait. I'd missed her over the summer. E-mails and texting just aren't the same, no matter what she says.

"I don't mind the cargos," I told her, shrugging.

"Please, I've seen what few clothes you have and they're all pretty and lacy."

"Not a lot of call for lace camisoles in survivalist training and drills," I pointed out.

"Well, since I don't intend to set foot in that smelly old gym until I absolutely have to, I demand you wear something pretty." She grinned at me. "I took you to dinner, didn't I?"

"We went to the caf for mac and cheese," I shot back, also grinning. "And you're not my type."

"Please, you should be so lucky."

A knock at the door interrupted us. Spencer poked his head in. His dreads were even longer and more blond, nearly white. He'd spent most of the summer at the beach, as usual. "I am so stoked to finally be on the ground floor," he said by way of a greeting. "I'm never climbing those stairs again."

"Tell me about it," Chloe agreed.

The dorm was an old Victorian five-story mansion. Ninth graders lived in the converted attic and had to climb the narrow,

steep servant stairs several times a day. Every year we were promoted, we descended a floor. Our window now overlooked the pond behind the house and the single cranky swan that lived there.

"That bird's looking at me again," I said. He'd nearly taken a finger my very first day at the academy when I tried to feed him the bagel I'd saved from lunch.

Spencer sat on the edge of my bed, rolling his eyes. "It's dark out, genius."

"I know he's out there," I insisted. "Just waiting for me."

"You can take out a vampire, you can take out a pretty white bird."

"I guess. You don't know how shifty those swans are." I wrinkled my nose and sat on the end of my bed, resting against the pillow. "But speaking of vampires—"

"Aren't we always?" Chloe said. "Just once I'd like to talk about boys and fashion and Hugh Jackman's abs."

"Hello? Like you ever talk about anything else?" Spencer groaned. "I need more guy friends."

I nudged him with my boot. "Guys would never have been able to put in a good word for you with Francesca last year," I told him.

"Yeah, but she broke my heart."

"Give me a break. *You* dumped *her*."

"Because there's only room in my heart for you two lunatics."

I threw a pillow at his head.

"What she said," Chloe agreed, since she couldn't reach her own pillow.

"And anyway, if you were hanging out burping and scratching

with other guys you wouldn't hear about my visit to the vampire royal caves last week."

"We don't burp and scratch," he turned to eye me balefully. "And *what?*"

Even Chloe put down her nail polish. "Seriously?"

"Kieran took me," I said, a little smugly. It was rare that I was the one with the story to tell. Usually I was too busy trying to get Chloe and Spencer out of trouble to get into any of my own.

"Dude," Spencer whistled appreciatively. "How did you get that past your grandfather?"

"I didn't exactly tell him," I admitted. "I said I was going out for extra credit."

"Finally." Chloe pretended to wipe away a tear of pride. "She's sneaking around and flat-out lying. Our little girl."

Spencer and I both ignored her.

"So what was it like?" he asked eagerly. "Tell me everything. Any rituals? Secret vampire magic?"

"Sorry, nothing for your thesis," I told him. "But a princess from the Hounds tribe was there."

"Get out," Spencer stared at me. "You are the luckiest. What was she like?"

"Quiet, intense, French." Like the other Hounds, she'd had two sets of fangs. "She had amulets around her neck."

"Can you draw them for me?" he asked immediately.

"I could try."

"You two are *boring*." Chloe huffed out a sigh. "Quit studying—we haven't even started classes yet. Tell me about the Drake brothers. Are they as yummy as everyone says?"

"Totally." I didn't even have to think about that one. "It was like being in a room full of Johnny Depps. One of them even kind of dressed like a pirate."

Chloe gave a trembling, reverent sigh. Then she narrowed her eyes at me. "Don't you dare leave me behind next time."

"I think it was a one-time thing. Hart was there and everything." Hart was the new leader of the Helios-Ra and Kieran's uncle. "It was mostly treaty talk. I still don't know why I was invited."

"Because you're good at that stuff," Chloe declared loyally. "Idiot," she added, less loyally.

I hadn't felt particularly skilled, more like the bumbling teenager at a table full of adults. I'd had to remind myself more than once that I'd been invited, that I wasn't obviously useless or an outsider.

Especially when Quinn Drake smirked at me.

All the Drake brothers were ridiculously gorgeous, but he had that smoldering charm down to an art. The kind you only read about in books. I'd always thought it would be annoying in real life.

So not.

Although the fact that he called me "Buffy" all night was less fun.

"You have a funny look on your face," Chloe said.

"I do not." I jerked my errant thoughts away from Quinn. "This is just my face."

"Please, you never turn that color. You're blushing, Hunter Wild."

"Am not." Quinn wasn't my type anyway. Not that I knew what

my type was. Still. I was sure pretty boys who knew they were pretty weren't it.

I was spared further prodding and poking when the lights suddenly went out.

The emergency blue floor light by the door and under the window blinked on. Spencer and I jumped to our feet. The windows locked themselves automatically. Iron bars lowered and clanged shut.

"No! Not now!" Chloe exclaimed, blowing harder on her toes. "They're going to smear."

"Isn't it too early for a drill?" I frowned, trying to see out to the pond and the fields leading to the forest all around us. It was dark enough that only the glimmer of water showed and the half-moon over the main house where Headmistress Bellwood lived. "I mean, half the students aren't even here yet."

"Chloe's the one who's supposed to know this stuff," Spencer said pointedly.

"I haven't had time! I just got here!" She swung her feet to the floor and balanced on her heels, wriggling her toes. Usually she hacked into the schedules and found out when the drills were happening so we'd have some warning. She was disgruntled, scowling fiercely. "This sucks."

"Maybe it's not a drill?" Spencer asked. "Maybe this one's real?"

"It's totally a drill. And I'm registering a complaint," Chloe grumbled, slinging her pack over her shoulder. She didn't go anywhere without her laptop or some kind of high-tech device. "I'm still on summer vacation, damn it. This is so unfair."

"Glad I didn't change out of these," I told her, pulling a flashlight out of one of my cargo pants' many pockets.

"If you spout some 'be prepared' school motto shit, I am so going to kick you."

"Like you'd risk your nail polish," I said with a snort, pushing the door open. "Let's just go."