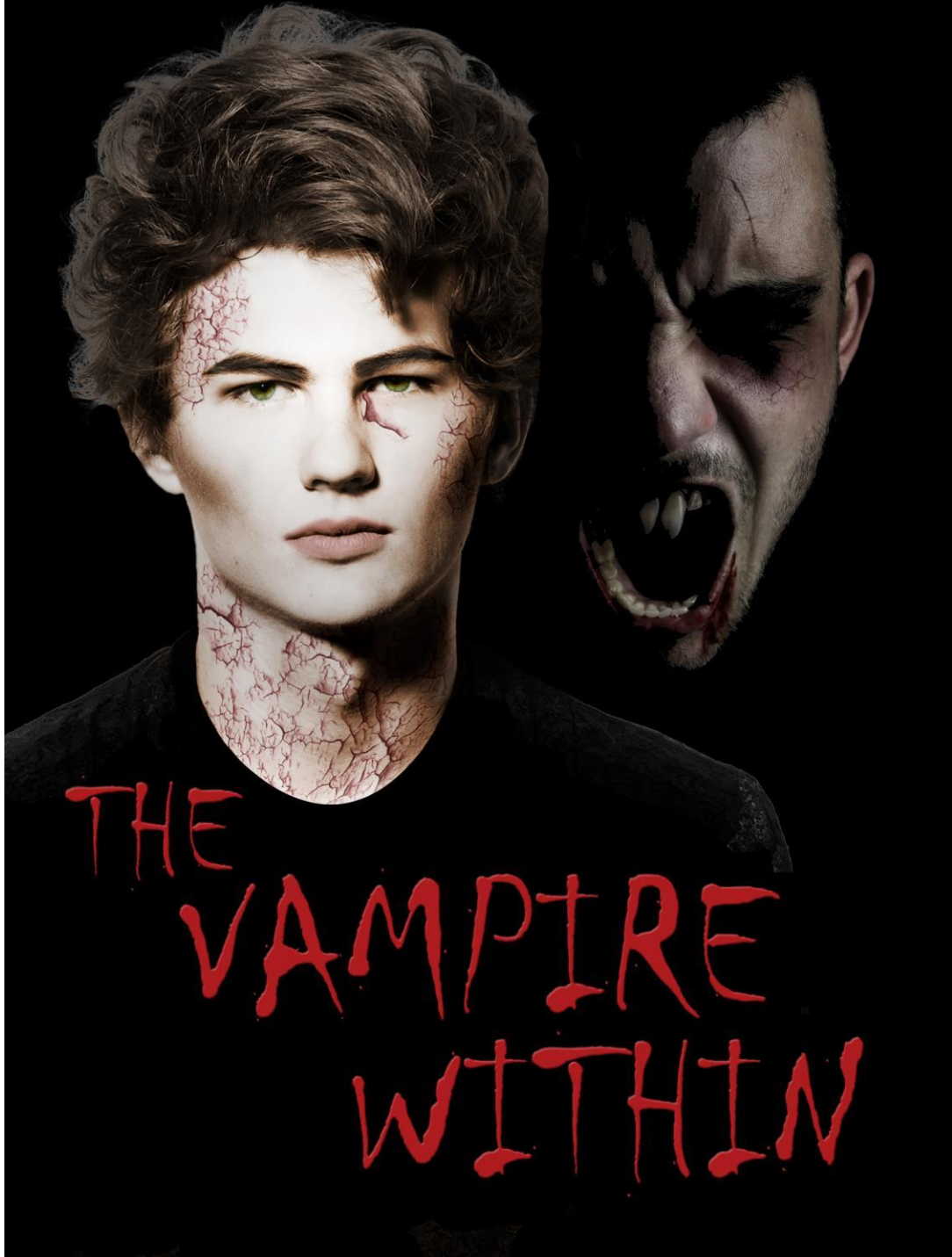


LAURA DALEO



THE
VAMPIRE
WITHIN

CHAPTER 1

I jumped out of bed at the very last second, took a quick shower, threw on some clothes and raced downstairs. As my mom nagged me about the time, I shoved a piece of toast in my mouth, washed it down with some OJ, then dashed out the door seconds before the school bus pulled up. As usual, my fellow classmates were taunting the new kid, Roger, and Mr. Gilbert, the bus driver, was yelling out his customary, “Knock it off!” at them. I flopped down in an empty seat at the back of the bus and let out a frustrated groan. Could my life be any more boring?

I dragged my feet as I made my way into Mrs. Clark’s history class and claimed my usual seat. Whose bright idea was it to make history first period? Staying conscious while Mrs. Clark rambled on about a bunch of dead people who changed the world was near impossible. I slid farther down in my chair and was about to initiate full zone-out mode when Sam walked into class.

An electric jolt zapped me upright—I could smell her. The scent quickened my pulse and sent my heartbeat skyrocketing. My mouth watered as a feverish hunger growled in the pit of my stomach. It wasn’t her perfumed skin or freshly shampooed hair. No, it was musky and unpleasant. It got under my skin, and I found it terribly distracting.

As Sam caught me staring, a proud smirk washed over her face. She tossed her golden-blond hair over her shoulder and slid her slender body into the wooden desk in front of me, then turned around and locked eyes with me, her smug grin widening.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Her distracting aroma swiftly traveled up my nose, lighting up my brain. Shivers scurried down my spine, spinning my head...what was that smell?

As Sam tugged playfully on my hair, she whispered, “I’ve been waiting forever for you to notice me, Brandon.” She paused, looking me up and down. “Meet me after class on the front steps.”

I didn’t hesitate to agree. “Okay.”

She winked. “I have a surprise for you.”

My stomach flip flopped and my palms grew sweaty. Surprise? I had no idea what she meant, but I sure as hell was gonna find out.

Sam’s smell manipulated my brain, blurring Mrs. Clark’s words together. Once, I got wasted at one of my parents’ Christmas parties. I’d chugged down every half-finished glass of beer, wine, or hard liquid abandoned on the table to the point where my head spun out of control. Sam’s scent mimicked that same effect. I wanted to gorge on it, whatever it was. The sudden ring of the school bell, announcing the end of first period, snapped me out of the muddled fog.

Sam touched my shoulder and whispered, “You go first and I’ll meet you there.”

I obeyed and headed straight for the front steps with my heartbeat throbbing inside my throat. The breeze carried her fragrance. She was behind me; I knew it. My knees wobbled as I turned around.

Sam was inches from me, batting her eyelashes and smiling. She giggled and seized my trembling hand. "Come with me." She steered me toward the park and away from the vigilant eyes at the school. Within the boundaries of the trees and their interlocking branches, we sat, facing each other.

"What's my surprise?" I asked, my breath speeding up.

"A kiss." She grinned sheepishly, then planted her lips over mine.

That smell of hers hammered at the inner walls of my brain. Every muscle twitched, and heat spread over my skin. I pulled away and blurted out, "What's that smell? It's driving me crazy!" She flinched, and her cheeks flushed bright red. "You can smell me?"

"Yes."

"I...I don't know what to say. This is so embarrassing." She looked away from me. "I'm on my period," she whispered.

That was it—blood! Rich, dark, delicious blood! Wait, blood? Delicious? Was it? I jammed my fingertips into my temples. Her scent was screwing with my head, but I had to taste her. Cupping her face, I kissed her hard and bit her tongue. Warm, coppery blood spilled into my mouth, bringing to life a slew of delightful shivers.

Her high-pitched squeal struck my eardrums, but I didn't care. Her fluids overpowered all my senses. I swished her blood between my teeth, like mouthwash, before spitting it into the palm of my hand. A thick, gooey, red substance coated my fingers. Its power hypnotized me and...altered me. I hungered after it. My tongue darted out of my mouth and snatched up the blood staining my skin. Upon my virgin swallow, I released the low growl swelling in my throat. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of her. Her face had turned a shade of ghastly-white, and her eyes bulged out of their sockets. She opened her mouth wide, blasting out another petrified shriek. It echoed inside my ears, yanking me back to reality. I held my hands up and backed away from her, shaking my head. "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me...I'm so sorry."

She scrambled to her feet, gave my shin a swift kick, and shouted, "Freak!" As she ran away, she threatened, "I'm going to tell everyone what you did. Everyone!"

I wandered the park aimlessly with my thoughts spiraling. I bit her! Why, why, why? The blood...it made me do it! My feet stumbled to a grinding halt. Her blood coerced me; I knew it with every ounce of my being. Was that even impossible? Was I losing my mind? I had to get away from the school. I grabbed my cell and called my mom.

She picked up on the second ring. "Brandon, why aren't you in class?" Her voice sounded strained.

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm sick, Mom." My voice cracked. "P-Please come get me."

"Of course, honey."

"Hurry."

"Ten minutes, if that," she answered in a lulling tone. "Don't worry."

My shoulders quaked, threatened by a wall of tears building behind my eyelids. For the second time that day, I waited on the front steps of the school, a different person—a person who craved blood—a freak!

As my mom's car turned into the parking lot, I bolted toward it. The car hadn't even come to a complete stop when I yanked on the handle and slid inside.

She gave me a heartfelt look, then immediately placed her hand to my forehead. "No fever, so that's good. How is it you don't feel well?"

Looking into her eyes made me want to bawl like a baby. I looked away, then shuddered. "I ache all over."

Again, she touched my forehead, then each cheek. "I'll make you some soup when we get home."

She paused, then added, "Your sister's going to be jealous."

Soup wasn't going to fix my problem, and I certainly couldn't tell my mom I'd bit a girl's tongue. I couldn't tell my sister either. I couldn't tell anyone. I forced a smile and glanced at her. "Soup sounds good. Better make enough for Lindsey or she'll be really jealous."

Her vivacious laugh filled my ears. "You're probably right."

As the car pulled away from the school, the knot twisting my stomach relaxed; though, the gruesome act of biting Sam was less forgiving. The image was forever etched into my brain. I sank deeper into the seat and shuddered.

My mom glanced at me with a line of concern pinching her forehead. "Are you all right?"

That was the million-dollar question. I heaved a sigh. "My head's pounding. I just want to lie down."

"Thank goodness we live so close." She shook her head and her frown deepened. "This came on so sudden. When you dashed out of the house this morning, you were fine."

I shrugged my shoulders. I was fine, until Sam changed things. Turning onto our street, she added, "I hate it when my kids get sick."

"I'll be okay." I lied, but my mom needed the reassurance.

"Of course you will."

As my mom pulled into our driveway, I pushed open my door. I didn't even wait for her to kill the car's engine before I was hurrying into the house with large strides, running up the stairs and into my room. I flopped onto my bed and buried my face in my pillow. The sobs I'd been fighting all day gained on me. My eyelids gave way to the mounting pressure behind them, spilling hot tears down my cheeks and drenching the pillowcase. My mom walked in during the height of my waterworks display. I quickly swiped at my face, brushing away the tears before sitting up.

"Brandon, honey, take a sip of 7UP," she said, sitting next to me and handing me a can of soda.

I shoved the soda aside on the nightstand, then latched onto her, letting my tears flow again. "Tell me I'm not a horrible person," I cried.

Her arms came around me in a loving embrace. "Why in the world would you say such a thing?"

She cupped my face in the palms of her hands. "You're my perfect sixteen-year-old son."

My breath hitched inside my chest as I thought of the why. "I don't know. I just...I just need some sleep."

My mom pulled two round white pills from her sweater pocket, then reached for the 7UP. "Here's two aspirin." She stroked my head, then rose from the bed. "I'll start the soup. Try to rest while it's cooking." She quietly closed the door, leaving me alone.

I washed down the pills and fell back onto the pillows, my gaze drifting toward the ceiling. Sam's horrified face spread across it and I jerked my eyes away, burying my face into a pillow. Sam, I'm so sorry. She'd never forgive me. I couldn't forgive myself. There was no forgiving what I'd done. What kind of person bites another person? A freak, that's who.

A Google search could pinpoint what was wrong with me. I glanced at my laptop resting on my desk and shivered. Bad idea. Searching the internet for reasons why someone craved blood might uncover something far worse.

A rock of fear landed in the pit of my stomach. I bolted into my bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. I caught my reflection in the mirror as I toweled off the clammy sweat and stared hard, searching for the slightest change—same hazel eyes, sandy-brown hair, and dimpled cheeks looked back at me. I didn't see a freak or a monster, just me.

I wandered back to my bed and sank deeper into the pillows. The feather-down cradled me, programming my brain to shut down and summon sleep. My eyelids grew heavy, sliding down over my eyes like curtains. I didn't fight it and drifted off.

The creak of my bedroom door sounded inside my head like an alarm. My eyelids fluttered and slowly opened, my vision coming into focus. My sister stood in the doorway, her school books tucked under her arm. "What do you want, Lins?"

Lindsey bounced into my room, unloaded her books on my desk, before sitting on the edge of it. As she twirled a strand of her brownish-blond hair around her finger, her big green eyes studied me. "You really sick or just faking?"

What I wouldn't give to be faking the whole mess. I rolled my eyes. "I'm not faking."

She plastered one of those 'I don't believe you' looks on her face and heaved a sigh as her shoulders sagged. "I hate high school."

That was so Lindsey; everything was always about her. I leaned against the headboard and folded my arms. "Why?"

"I was so popular in junior high. Everyone knew me or wanted to know me. Now, I'm at the bottom of the fish bowl, like scum. My social status is non-existent."

I couldn't help but smirk. "Social status, really? Lins, you're fourteen."

She turned her nose up at me. "Like sixteen's old. Besides, I happen to like being popular." She pouted. "Ninth grade sucks."

"Eleventh grade isn't any easier," I pointed out. "The twelfth graders have all the power."

"Hmph. It just isn't fair." She paused, scrunching her eyebrows together. "Something's really wrong with you, isn't there? You're doing that thing with your forehead."

I swiped a hand across my brow. "What thing?"

“Pulsating the vein in the center of your forehead.” She shuddered. “Gross. You always do it when you’re stressing out.”

I waved her off. Truth be told, though, I was in major stress mode. A whiff of chicken turned my head toward the doorway. Mom entered, carrying a breakfast tray.

“Ready for some soup?” She set the tray of steaming chicken noodle soup, soda crackers, and another can of 7UP next to me on the bed. “I came up earlier, but you were asleep.”

I licked my lips. “So ready.”

She touched her hand to my forehead. “Still no fever. That’s good, honey. Eat your soup and get some rest.”

Lindsey leaned in and took a deep breath. “Mom, that smells delish.”

“There’s plenty more downstairs.” She smoothed Lindsey’s hair and gave her a smile. “Why don’t you join me downstairs for a bowl.”

Lindsey jumped off my bed and scooped up her books. “Totally.” She glanced back at me. “Feel better.”

“Thanks, Lins.”

“I’ll check in on you later,” Mom said, then followed Lindsey out of my room and shut the door behind her.

I scarfed down the soup and crackers, then chugged half the can of 7UP. I pushed the tray aside and let out huge sigh. Once more, I fell back onto the pillows and closed my eyes.