



FANGED
AFTER FORTY

DOUBLE TROUBLE
IN THE
MIDLIFE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
LIA DAVIS — L.A. BORUFF

Double Trouble in the Midlife

Fanged After Forty

Book 11

A Life After Magic Mystery



USA Today Bestselling Authors

Lia Davis and L.A. Boruff

Double Trouble in the Midlife

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Published by The Phantom Pen

PO Box 224

Middleburg, FL 32050

DavisRaynesPublishing.com

Cover by Glowing Moon Designs

Formatting by The Phantom Pen

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HAILEY

THE SCENT OF BOOKS AND PAPER SWIRLED AROUND MY OFFICE, a testament to the unending paperwork that came with vampire bureaucracy. Something that wasn't high on my list of fun things to do.

I was hunched over the latest roster Ransom had put together for the new enforcer team, the names of vampires from each territory neatly typed out in columns. My eyes were starting to cross from all the reading.

"Every territory is sending one vamp on a monthly rotation." I tapped a finger on the list. "It's like a supernatural UN peacekeeping force."

Looking every inch the serious council member he *wasn't*, Ransom *nodded* with his dark hair slicked back and piercing eyes. "Grim and Nash have agreed to be captains. They'll run it military style."

"Good. The last thing we need is a bunch of undisciplined bloodsuckers roaming around." I snorted, imagining Grim trying to get a pack of unruly vamps to fall in line.

The door swung open with a confidence that suggested it was done by someone who never doubted they belonged wherever they pleased. Izora strolled in, her heels clicking against the hardwood floor. She plopped in the chair beside Ransom's, a jelly-filled donut in hand.

"Since when do meetings come with snacks?" My stomach gave a betraying gurgle at the sight of food. It had been nothing but blood since I turned, except for a few blood-spiked

drinks, and I wasn't sure if I missed eating or just the idea of it.

"Since always, my darling." Izora licked jelly off her fingers with an air of nonchalance that made me gape.

"You eat?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

Izora looked at me like I'd grown a second head. "You don't?" Her tone was light teasing, but underneath, she was genuinely surprised by my ignorance.

"Uh, no." I grimaced at the memory of the last time I'd tried. "It makes me sick."

"Only at first." Izora waved off my concern as though it was nothing more than a minor inconvenience. "You're bonded to a powerful vampire. You can eat now. Even if you weren't bonded with Jax, you'd probably be able to start eating by now. You don't *need* to, but you can."

"Wait, what?" The information hit me like a tidal wave, leaving me sputtering mentally as I tried to process it. "Seriously?"

"Dead serious." Her pun, intentional or not, didn't amuse me.

"Ransom, did you know about this?" I turned to him, incredulous, irritated, and, most of all, *starving*. Not really, but you know what I mean. I could've been enjoying all my favs without gaining a pound!

"Sure," Izora said before Ransom could answer. "Jax knows this, too."

"Of course he does." I pushed back from the desk, my frustration mounting. The idea that I'd been denying myself the pleasure of food because no one thought to mention this little tidbit was infuriating. "I need to go speak to my mate."

"Hailey," Ransom said, but I waved him off, already halfway to the door.

"Later." My voice was clipped, and the edges of my control frayed. I didn't have time for this. Not when my world had just been turned on its head—again. Food!

The cool air of the corridor did nothing to soothe the heat of my irritation as I strode toward Jax's office. How many times had we drunk together?

Bursting into his office without knocking, I found him poring over some documents, the very picture of vampiric focus. He looked up, his expression shifting from concentration to concern in a split second.

"What's wrong?"

"Did you know I could eat food?" I said. This was no time for pleasantries.

"Of course, I—" He paused and tilted his head, eyes narrowing as though trying to decipher if this was a trick question. "You don't know?"

"No!" I threw my hands up in exasperation. "Imagine my surprise when Izora strolls in, eating a *jelly donut* like it's the most natural thing in the world."

"Ah." Jax's lips twitched. He was fighting back a smile. That buttface was trying not to *laugh* at me! "I guess it never came up."

"Never came up?" I said incredulously. "Jax, I've been living on a liquid diet for ages now. You couldn't have mentioned that I could have a cheeseburger if I wanted?"

He stood, crossing the room to pull me into his arms. I wanted to stay mad, I really did, but the feel of him, strong and reassuring, always managed to dull the sharp edges of my anger. And usually to make other feelings get, ahem, *sharper*.

"I'm so sorry, my love. It honestly didn't occur to me. After a while, you just stop craving it. I did, at least. I never want food." His voice was soft and apologetic, and I sighed against him.

"Well, okay then, but now what? I suddenly start stuffing my face with everything I've missed?"

"Moderation might be key," he said with a chuckle, kissing the top of my head. "Though, there is something you should know before you dive into a buffet."

“Which is?”

“Once you start eating, well, to be frank, you’ll also need to use the bathroom again.”

My mouth fell open, and I pulled back to look at him. “You’re joking.”

“Unfortunately not.” His grin was wide, toothy and unrepentant.

“Fantastic. Just when I thought being undead couldn’t get any weirder.” I huffed out a breath, the remnants of my irritation fading into amused resignation. “Well, I suppose there’s only one thing to do.”

“Which is?” Jax said my earlier question, his eyebrow quirked.

“Find Luke! We’re going on an eat-a-thon.”

“An eat-a-thon?” Jax chuckled, releasing me. “Sounds adventurous.”

“Adventurous doesn’t even begin to cover it.” I gave him a quick kiss and hurried out, already fantasizing about the different tastes waiting to explode across my tongue after so long without.

At Luke and Ransom’s house, which used to be mine, I knocked once before pushing open the front door, finding him in the kitchen wiping down counters. It smelled like coffee and cinnamon — remnants of breakfast for Goldie and Ivy, no doubt. Goldie’s backpack wasn’t on the hook by the door where it usually was, signaling her successful departure for school.

Goldie had started at the Rune Academy that my friends Ava and Olivia opened a few weeks ago. It was a school for all kinds of paranormal children. Goldie absolutely loved it there.

“Oh, brother, do I have news for you.”

He grinned and wrung out the dishcloth. “Well, I just finished here and was about to look for you, so you have good timing.” He tossed the cloth onto the counter. “Any bond cases that need attention today?”

“Luke,” I said with all the seriousness I could muster as I grabbed his biceps and gripped. “forget the cases. We’ve got *far* more important things to do.”

“More important than work?” He raised an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. “This must be good.”

“Good? It’s going to be glorious.” I leaned in and whispered intently, “We’re going to *eat*.” I grinned.

“Eat?” Confusion spread across his face. “But... do you mean dri—”

“Vampires can *eat*, and we’re going to feast like it’s our last day on Earth.” My stomach growled in agreement, a sound I hadn’t heard in far too long.

“Hailey, you’re serious?” He leaned against the counter, trying not to laugh.

“Deadly,” I said with a wink. My pun was intended. “So, grab your coat. Philly won’t know what hit it.”

“Lead the way, sister.” His laughter echoed through the house as we headed out, both completely unaware of the adventure and indigestion that awaited us.

* * *

THE AROMA HIT ME FIRST, a heady blend of spices and sizzling meats that made my long-dormant taste buds quiver in anticipation. Luke and I stood at the threshold of ‘The Global Gorge’ buffet, our eyes wide as we took in the gastronomic wonderland before us.

“Whoa,” Luke said, his gaze darting between the sushi station and the Italian pasta bar. “This is... impressive.”

I nodded, barely able to contain my excitement. “Let’s dig in before I start gnawing on the furniture.”

We grabbed plates, and I piled mine high with everything that caught my eye: spicy curry, buttery naan, tangy barbecue ribs, and even a scoop of paella that sent a saffron scent wafting up

to tickle my nose. Luke matched my enthusiasm, stacking his plate with an equally diverse selection.

“Isn’t this great?” I took a tentative bite of curry that danced across my tongue, fiery and complex. When no nausea followed it, I nearly bawled in relief.

“Phenomenal,” Luke said, though his attention was elsewhere. I followed his gaze to find a woman at the dessert counter staring at him, her expression dreamy.

“I think you’ve got an admirer.” I elbowed him playfully.

“Good for her,” he said with a chuckle, but then he winked at the woman, and she blushed furiously before hurrying away with her plateful of sweets.

“Since when did you become a heartbreaker?” I asked, half-joking, half-intrigued.

“Must be my new cologne, ‘Eau de Buffet,’” he said, but the bemused look on his face suggested he didn’t quite understand what had just happened.

As we ate, more people glanced our way, their expressions shifting from interest to fascination to downright adoration. It was like watching a wave of infatuation ripple through the room, all centered around Luke.

“Okay, seriously, what’s going on?” I finally burst out after a group of patrons left their table to hover near ours, asking Luke for recommendations on the best dishes.

“I have no idea.” He sounded as confused as I was. As he reassured a starry-eyed older man that the meatloaf was indeed excellent, the man practically sprinted back to his table, shouting to his companions about the revelation.

“Luke,” I said slowly, “I think you’re doing something. Charming them or something.”

“Charming?” He raised an eyebrow. “I’m flattered, but—”

“No, I mean literally,” I said, then lowered my voice. “Like some kind of vampire charm power. Since when can you do that?”

“Since never.” His protest was cut short as a family of four approached. “Excuse us.” The mother of the group held out a cell phone. “Could we take a selfie with you?”

“Okay, this is getting weird.” I scarfed down another mouthful of food while trying to ignore the growing crowd.

“Time to go?” Luke said, his sheepish grin disappearing as the crowd closed in, their admiration turning uncomfortably intense.

“Yesterday.” I stood up so quickly that my chair toppled over. We dove into the sea of people, dodging grasping hands and eager questions.

“Sorry, folks, show’s over.” I grabbed Luke’s arm and yanked him toward the nearest exit.

Luke threw out random platitudes as we maneuvered through the mob, laughter bubbling up inside me despite the absurdity of our escape.

“Can’t believe we’re being mobbed at a buffet,” I gasped, finally bursting through the doors into the relative calm of the Philadelphia streets.

“Guess I need to figure out how to turn this charm thing off. I mean, what the actual hell was that?” Luke panted slightly as we put distance between ourselves and ‘The Global Gorge.’

As we fled the scene of our indulgent binge, the absurdity of it all almost made me forget the impending consequences of my newfound dietary freedom. Almost.

HAILEY

I POKED AT THE SHINY PATCH OF DRAGON SCALES ON MY forearm, still not entirely convinced it wasn't some sort of supernatural hallucination. Jax and I had figured out that we could partially shift, which would come in handy for taking down paranormal bounties for the council.

"Is it supposed to feel tingly like this?" I asked, half expecting my new dragon powers to come with a user manual or maybe an online FAQ section.

Jax leaned back in his leather chair, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth as he surveyed his own set of iridescent scales. "Only when you're about to breathe fire," he said with a deadpan delivery that could have given any stand-up comedian a run for their money.

I snorted. "Great, because spontaneous combustion is exactly what I need to add to my repertoire. 'Hey, look at me, I'm a vampire with extras.'"

"Come on." Jax stood up and stretched, his muscles rippling in a terribly distracting way. "You've got to admit, it's pretty badass. We're vampire-dragon hybrids now."

"Right, because being undead bloodsuckers wasn't enough. Now we're mythological creature mash-ups." My tone dripped with sarcasm, but the idea of having dragon powers did send a thrill zigzagging through me. It was like every childhood fantasy had decided to kick down the door to reality.

Jax's laughter rumbled through the room, warm and infectious. I joined in until his phone rang, the sound slicing through our

joy. With a little focus, the scales on my arm turned back to skin. If we wanted to keep it a secret, nobody outside our little circle had to know we were now dragon shifters.

“Sorry, I should take this.” Jax swiped the device off his desk. The humor on his face vanished as he answered, his stance shifting into one of alertness. “This is Jax.”

I tried to be polite and not eavesdrop, but my ears betrayed me, honing in on the one-sided conversation. Jax’s face darkened with each passing second, his fingers tightening around the phone.

“Understood,” he said gravely. “Keep your people safe and stay out of sight. I’ll handle it from here.”

Jax hung up the phone, his stare enough to pin a ghost to the wall. “That was Marcel,” he referred to one of our area leaders. New Orleans, if I remember correctly. “It’s not looking good.”

“Let me guess,” I said, my fingers drumming impatiently on the mahogany desk. “Our rogue necromancer is throwing a dead man’s party, and everyone’s invited?”

“Try terrorizing the undead with puppet strings.” Jax ran a hand through his hair, a sure sign he was stressed. “They’re scared. This necro-nutjob has them under some kind of thrall. Vampires are all about control, but being controlled? That’s our worst nightmare.”

“So what’s the deal with this magic miscreant surfacing now?”

“Who knows? Maybe he ran out of zombies to boss around underground.” He paused, a look of frustration creasing his brow. “We’ve got to act fast before the Big Easy becomes the Big Chaos.”

“Okay, time to call in the cavalry.” I reached for my phone before Jax’s hand stopped me.

“Already on it.” He dialed a number with practiced ease, putting the call on speaker. “Pearl? It’s Jax. We’ve got a situation.”

“Owen’s already en route,” said Pearl from the speaker. She was the type of woman who could scare a haunt right out of its haunting. “We had a call from a friendly vampire we know in New Orleans. Owen will help you track down this rogue.”

“Appreciate it,” Jax said before the line went dead.

“Guess that means we have company coming.” I jumped to my feet, the dragon power within me stirring restlessly.

“Let’s head over to Wade’s and meet him there.” Jax grabbed his coat from the stand.

“Lead the way, Captain Dragonpants, my fearless leader.” I earned a smirk from him as we made our way through the house.

The stars were out to light the way as Jax and I made our way through the shortcut we’d fashioned in our backyard to get quickly to Wade’s house. The scent of fresh earth mingled with the faint aroma of wildflowers that had somehow managed to thrive amidst the chaos of supernatural life.

“Kendra has been getting pretty cozy with her inner goddess lately,” I said. “Think she can give us a leg up on this necromancer business?”

“Rhiannon’s got nothing on the mess we’re about to walk into,” Jax said as he scanned the shadows that danced just beyond the reach of the streetlights. “But Kendra’s resourceful. She’ll be crucial.”

I chuckled. “Resourceful is one word for her.” I thumbed through my phone to send a mass text to our paranormal posse. “I like ‘witchy Swiss Army knife.’”

Jax laughed. “Pretty accurate.”

I hit send on the group message: **Code Black. Gather at Jax’s. Bring snacks — it’s not an apocalypse without snacks.**

“Snacks?” Jax raised an eyebrow.

“Hey, I can eat again. There’s nothing like some pretzels to lighten the mood of impending doom.” I tucked my phone away.

We rounded the corner to Wade's house—our house. No matter how many times I corrected myself, it would always be Wade's in my mind.

"Feels weird, doesn't it?" Jax looked up at the porch where Owen and Janice stood with Izora. "Calling it ours."

"Like wearing someone else's shoes," I said. "Comfy, but you know they aren't yours."

Owen's eyes bulged nearly comically when we approached, clearly still reeling from meeting Izora. I stifled a giggle at the sight of him gaping at the mother of all vampires like she'd sprout wings and fly off into the moonlit sky.

"Earth to Owen," I waved a hand before his face. "You good?"

"Ah, yes. Just never expected I'd meet a legend tonight," Owen said, awestruck.

"Legends have to live somewhere," Janice said dryly, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

"We appreciate you for coming, Owen," Jax patted him on the back. "Your expertise is invaluable."

"Happy to be of service," he said, still side-eyeing Izora, who looked wholly unconcerned.

"Come on." I looped my arm through his. "Let's get back and figure out what we're going to do."

As we made our way back to Jax's place, laughter and light spilling from the windows signaled that the rest of our crew had arrived. The living room was a sardine can of supernaturals. Each person wedged between another, their words a cacophony of concern and curiosity.

Kendra was the first to spot us. "Get in here. I've been itching to test out my connection with Rhiannon on something more tangible than court cases."

"Easy there, witchy-poo." Paige handed around a big bowl of chips. "We're trying to stop the dead, not invite them for tea."

"Where are the twins?" Claudia asked, peering around the room as though expecting them to materialize from thin air.

“Oh, they went with Luke to Catch and Release for the evening,” I said. “Apparently, even potential necromancer attacks don’t trump social lives.”

“Priorities,” Grim grunted, his long fingers wrapped around a cookie. Now that there was food in the house, everyone was partaking. A trend I’d started.

Jax stepped into the makeshift circle we’d formed. “Let’s wrangle ourselves a rogue necromancer. Any ideas on where we start?”

“Let’s not sugarcoat this,” I said. “This necromancer isn’t just playing ‘raise the dead’ at local cemeteries. He’s yanking chains in the vamp community like he’s got stock in garlic futures.”

“His powers are off the charts,” Owen said, his fingers drumming nervously on his thigh. “Controlling vampires, as in plural? That takes some serious mojo. And New Orleans is his playground — we’re talking about navigating through centuries-old politics and power plays.”

“Which makes stealth our best weapon,” Jax stood by the mantel with a posture that managed to be both relaxed and ready for action. “We can’t afford a brawl in the middle of Bourbon Street.”

“Or any street, really,” said Kendra. “Tourists tend to notice when fangs come out.”

“Unless they think it’s just really good cosplay. They are rather theatrical in New Orleans, anyway.” Paige earned a few begrudging smirks.

“Back to the task at hand.” Jax’s words sliced through the chatter, simultaneously silencing the room and commanding attention. “Owen, you’re our ace in the hole. Your necro know-how could give us an edge.”

“Happy to serve,” Owen said, though I caught the flicker of doubt that crossed his face. Necromancers were notoriously unpredictable — even for other necromancers.

“Janice.” Jax nodded toward the unassuming woman who looked more like someone’s kind aunt than a hunter. “You

can't be controlled. You and Owen stick close to each other. If any vampires go to help you, they run the risk of the necromancer controlling them."

She nodded. "I'm in."

"Next, Grim and Nash." I glanced at the unlikely duo, one exuding a gothic aura of doom, the other all muscle and brooding intensity. "Your, uh, unique skill sets will be crucial for...what's the phrase? Ah, yes," I snapped my fingers, "kicking ass and taking names."

"Preferably in that order," Nash said.

"Paige?" Jax raised an eyebrow in question.

"Count me in," she said, setting down the bowl of chips with a thud. "Someone's gotta keep these boys in line."

"Then it's settled." I nodded once. "You'll head to New Orleans, sniff out this rogue necromancer, and..." I paused, searching for the right words. "Do whatever it is we do best."

"Save the day?" Kendra said, her smirk infectious.

"Prevent total undead anarchy?" said Paige.

"Try not to get eaten?" Claudia pitched in helpfully.

I nodded. "All of the above."

LUKE

THE FAINTEST SHUFFLE OF MOVEMENT DANCED THROUGH THE silence, dragging me from the abyss of sleep. I blinked into the dimness of my room, the digital numbers on my phone glowing 12:07 PM. Afternoon already? That meant Ransom was up and about, probably bench-pressing small cars for fun. His side of the bed was cold, a testament to his restlessness.

My need for sleep had dwindled since bonding with Ransom. Before that, I couldn't have been woken with a semi-truck to the temple. Now, the slightest creak or whisper could tug me back to wakefulness. Right now, whispers wove through the crack under my door, a soft conspiratorial murmur that piqued my curiosity.

“Wait, are you sure this is the right thing to do?” The voice was hesitant, tinged with an edge of doubt that could only belong to Alison. If nervousness were an art form, she'd be the Picasso of it.

“What other choice do we have?” Avery's retort was sharper, her resolve as steely as the knives she'd pretended to juggle in one of her Broadway roles. “Luke is strong—”

My ears perked up at the mention of my name, and I kept still, straining to catch every word. This was like eavesdropping, but etiquette gets tossed out the window when your twin sisters whisper about you in the hallway.

“—he has whatever this new power is. I don't even think he knows he has it.” Avery's tone took on that characteristic note of mischief. “He gets to charm people. His blood will heal us

and maybe we'll get some of the charm thing, and it'll help us get roles."

"His blood might be potent, but can you imagine if we got Ransom's or Jax's?" The sheer audacity of that idea would have made me chuckle if the situation wasn't so bizarrely serious. What were they planning? Heal them?

"Are you out of your mind?" Alison's incredulity mirrored my own. "There's no way we can sneak in and steal blood from the king of the United States vampires or the second oldest vampire in the world. Besides, Luke won't kill us if we wake him up. They might."

Kill was a strong word. Scold, maybe. Lecture about boundaries, definitely. Kill? Come on, we grew up sharing toys and clothes—I could spare a pint or two. Depending on what they needed it for. *Heal?*

"According to all the research, we'll both have it within a year," Avery said with a note of desperation. "What other choice do we have?"

Illness. It hung in the air, unspoken yet heavy, like a shroud. Their words faded as they moved away, leaving me alone with the hum of my thoughts. They needed help—my help—and they had it in their heads that my blood was the answer. Part of me wanted to leap up, confront them, and offer whatever aid I could. Another part, the part that knew my sisters and their flair for the dramatic, urged caution.

They were actresses at heart, always loving a bit of spectacle. If they thought skulking around hallways and plotting midnight blood heists was the solution, then who was I to deny them their scene?

The dim light filtering through the curtains painted hazy stripes across my room, casting long shadows that danced with whispers from the hallway. I tasted the irony in the air—my own siblings plotting to siphon my vampire blood while I pretended to slumber. If this was a dream, it was a bizarre one, but then again, my life had become a regular carnival of the paranormal ever since Hailey got turned.

“Alison, seriously, we should’ve dressed the part,” Avery’s voice floated through the door. “All black, sleek gloves... like cat burglars.”

“Or like we’re attending our own very stealthy funerals,” Alison said, and they both erupted into giggles so girlish, so out of place in this nocturnal conspiracy that it nearly shattered my façade.

“Imagine the tabloids: ‘Whitfield Sisters Caught Red-Handed,’” Avery said, her tone alive with the thrill of their midday caper. It was like they were on stage, delivering punchlines to an invisible audience. Actresses, indeed.

I couldn’t help a twinge of warmth for them; they turned potential tragedy into performance art. They always did have a knack for finding the silver lining, painting it neon, and hanging it on a marquee. There I was, caught between wanting to scold them and joining the audience. Mainly, I wanted to know what was wrong with them.

If illness drove them to such lengths, who would I refuse? My blood was potent—more than I liked to admit—and if it held even a glimmer of hope for my sisters... Well, I’d once given up my favorite action figure for a week because Alison claimed it had healing properties when she scraped her knee. Some things never change.

“Do you think Luke’s up?” Avery said, a hint of worry threading her excitement.

“Please, he sleeps like the grave,” Alison scoffed. “Besides, he won’t mind. Right?”

Their giggles told me all I needed to know: this would happen with or without my consent. So I might as well make it easy for them.

With a silent sigh, I flopped onto my back, arms flung to my sides—a pose that screamed, ‘Take what you need.’ I even threw in a gratuitous snore for good measure. Theatrics ran in the family, after all.

The door creaked open, and a pair of tentative footsteps crept inside. A squeak escaped one of them, betraying their nerves.

It took every ounce of self-control not to burst out laughing. Instead, I feigned deep sleep. I pictured them exchanging wide-eyed looks, silently congratulating themselves on their stealth. All this commotion over a little bloodletting was more adorable than alarming. I could've sat up and yelled, "Boo!" and then given them my blood, but until I knew more about what was going on, I feigned sleep.

As they drew closer, the smell of their perfume, sweet and familiar, mingled with the scent of anticipation. The twins' whispers ping-ponged off the walls, shattering the midday silence. They clinked and shuffled around the dim room like a pair of amateur burglars in a slapstick comedy, their every move underscored by the symphony of my struggling self-control.

"Watch it." Alison hissed as something that sounded suspiciously like my antique lamp wobbled precariously on its stand.

"Shhh," Avery admonished, followed by the unmistakable clatter of a pile of books toppling to the floor. "Oops."

My lips twitched, threatening to curve into a smile. I willed them to stay put, the muscles in my face tensing with the effort. How much noise could two people possibly make while trying to be stealthy? It was like they were moving furniture rather than extracting blood.

"Maybe we should've practiced this," Alison said, her tone laced with a snicker that she stifled into a cough.

Their dialogue danced through the air, light, and teasing, but beneath it lurked a current of worry that knotted my stomach. They needed me, and here I was, lying about, pretending to sleep while they fumbled in the dark. Maybe I should sit up.

"His arms are out like he's asking for a hug," Alison said, her warmth melting away some of the tension. Aw, how sweet.

"Or offering free blood samples," Avery said, her chuckle barely contained.

Finally, gentle but firm fingers pressed on my forearms, guiding them into position. The cool touch of metal—likely

the syringe—nearly made me move. I might’ve been a super-powerful vampire, but needles still gave me the ick. I braced myself for the pinch. When it came, it was a pair of tiny pricks, one on each arm. My sisters worked in tandem, their breaths synchronous gusts of concentration.

“Got it,” Avery triumphantly said, though the sound of the vial knocking against another suggested it wasn’t as smooth a victory as she’d hoped.

“Me too,” Alison said, her relief tangible.

I wanted to ask if they could be a little louder but held the thought captive behind closed lips. Their sense of achievement was palpable, and I had no desire to puncture it with my sarcasm—not yet, anyway.

What was it about my blood that promised healing? How did they know to come to me? Questions swirled like leaves caught in a whirlwind, seeking answers that remained just out of reach.

“Okay, cap these quickly before we spill,” Alison said, a note of seriousness threading through her words.

“Done,” Avery said, and I imagined her sealing my essence with a click.

They lingered by my bedside for a moment longer than necessary, their presence a comforting weight in the charged atmosphere. Maybe this little heist would give them peace, however fleeting. Or maybe, just maybe, it would give them life. “Thank you, Lukey,” Avery whispered.

Alison followed that up with, “We love you, big brother.”

The cacophony of their departure was a symphony of clinks and clatters, the twins’ version of stealth as subtle as a fireworks display in a library. The door to my room swung shut with a thud that suggested subtlety was as foreign to them as an honest politician.

“Should we drink it now?” Avery’s whisper, loud enough to startle a bat, cut through the hall.

“Yup, we better,” Allison said with the decisiveness of someone who had never hesitated at a ‘Push or Pull’ sign. “We don’t know if its potency wears off.”

I listened, not moving a muscle, the corners of my mouth itching to rise into an amused smile. Trust Alison and Avery to turn vampiric necessity into a midnight snack debate. The air hummed with their anticipation, their bodies practically vibrating with eagerness on the other side of the wall.

A beat passed, then another, punctuated by the soft shuffle of their movements. I pictured them standing there, vials of my blood in hand, like kids holding soda pop they weren’t supposed to drink before dinner.

Then, with all the drama of a fainting scene in one of their off-off-Broadway plays, came a pair of thuds—unmistakable sounds of bodies hitting the floor quicker than discarded costumes after a curtain call.

“Seriously?” I said under my breath, flinging the covers aside and springing out of bed. Were they so giddy at the idea of being healed that they’d passed out? Or was the effect of my blood more instantaneous and potent than even I understood?

I rushed into the hallway, half-expecting to find them sprawled out like crime scene chalk outlines. Sure enough, there they were, lying parallel to each other, unconscious beauties minus the princes to wake them up.

I crouched down to check for breathing. “My blood’s got some kick to it.” Really, should I have been surprised? When your life is an ongoing episode of Paranormal Home Dramas, a little thing like vampire blood-induced narcolepsy barely registers on the weird-o-meter.

Their chests rose and fell with the steady rhythm of deep sleep, the kind after a day spent running from metaphorical—or literal—demons. I brushed a lock of hair away from Alison’s face, her expression serene, almost angelic.

“Guess you two didn’t need those black clothes and gloves after all.” I shook my head. “Always actresses,” I said affectionately. Something about their vulnerability in that

moment made me want to protect them from everything—even themselves.

“Here we go, Sleeping Beauties, let’s get you to bed.” I looped one of Avery’s arms around my neck and hefted her up. Her head lulled against me, a dead weight borne of trust and whatever mystical knockout punch my lineage packed.

“Next time, just ask for a nightcap, will ya?” I told her sleeping form as I carried her back to my room. At least they’d chosen me for their midday caper. They knew deep down where safety lay. My role as protector was as ingrained in me as the ancient power flowing through my veins.

I returned for Alison, her body as limp as Avery’s, and settled her next to her sister on Ransom’s side of the bed. They looked peaceful, and I had a twinge of envy at their untroubled slumber.

Snuggling into my own side, I draped an arm across them both. The leader in me, the big brother, remained alert despite the pull of sleep, ready to stand guard over their dreams and fend off any nightmare that dared approach—not that they’d remember this come morning.

HAILEY

THE SCENT OF FRESHLY BREWED COFFEE MINGLED WITH THE tang of old leather from Jax's favorite wingback chair as I perched on the edge of our overly fluffy couch. Our living room had become command central for the night, lit by the warm glow of strategically placed lamps that gave the illusion we were discussing something normal, like a book club, instead of rogue necromancers and missing vampires.

"Owen, can you hear us, okay?" I asked, tapping my phone. The crackle of static gave way to Owen's deep voice, tinged with the buzz of the connection.

"Clear as a crystal ball," he said. Janice, Grim, Nash, and Paige chimed in with their various affirmations, their voices overlapping on our supernatural conference call.

"Okay, Paige, lay it on me." I tucked my feet under me on the couch as Jax handed me a cup of blood-laced tea. The warmth did little to soothe the icy dread curling in my stomach. "What's the latest scoop on our rogue down in New Orleans?"

"Brace yourselves," Paige said through the speakerphone. "It's like Mardi Gras for mayhem down here. Humans are turning up looking like Capri Suns after a kids' party—completely drained."

"Yikes," Kendra said, her brow furrowed as she absently flicked a piece of lint off her pant leg.

"Drained isn't even half of it. They've got symbols carved into their skin. It's like he's trying out for 'Necromancer's Got Talent' with human canvases. If that wasn't enough of a horror

show, he's got a posse of vamps running wild, stirring up all sorts of trouble."

I sipped my tea and grimaced as the bitterness hit my tongue. I never could get the hang of tea without a pint of sugar, not even with the blood. "What are they doing?"

"Think frat party with fangs," Grim said. "They're tearing through the city like it's an all-you-can-eat buffet. This rogue's rounding them up, promising power, immortality—the usual spiel."

"Ugh." I sighed.

"Indeed." A sultry voice joined the conversation, and I glanced over at Izora as she lounged on the armchair like a cat who'd lost interest in her toy mouse. "It is all so... pedestrian."

"Pedestrian?" I snorted. "That's one way to put it. I was thinking more 'blood-soaked disaster,' but sure, we'll go with pedestrian."

Izora sighed dramatically, tracing a finger along the rim of her wine glass filled not with wine but a rich, AB-negative. "I simply do not understand what excitement you all find in this. Since I have cleansed our kind of the dregs, I've felt nothing but—what is the word? Ennui."

"Ennui?" I chuckled and glanced at Jax, who looked just as dumbfounded as me. "Only you would use fancy French boredom to describe a lack of throat-ripping lately."

"Ahem." Jax gave me a look that suggested I should tread lightly.

"Sorry," I said, though I wasn't really. "It's just, Izora, you sound like you miss the *bad* old days. Don't tell me you're already getting nostalgic for the time when you were, I don't know, impaling people on spikes or something?"

"Hardly," Izora said, her red lips curling into a smirk. "Purpose, darling—that is what eludes me now. One can only attend so many vampire book clubs and undead yoga sessions before it all becomes insufferably dull."

"Undead yoga?" Kendra perked up. "Is that a thing?"

“Surprisingly effective for maintaining one’s flexibility over the centuries.” Izora took a delicate sip of her beverage as I shook my head *no* at Kendra. “Yet, I fear I am losing my edge. A vampire without a cause is like a stake without a heart—pointless.”

“Deep.” I earned another warning glance from Jax. “Look, you’re not alone in feeling a bit, erm, untethered. We’re all adjusting.”

“True,” she said. “Yet, one cannot help but long for the thrill of the hunt, the dance of predator and prey. Is there truly no place for a vampire of my... talents in this sanitized existence?”

“Trust me.” I exchanged a knowing look with Jax. “There will always be some baddies out there thinking they can take on the world. When they do, we’ll need every talent we can get—yours included.”

“Reassuring,” Izora said, though she remained unconvinced. “Perhaps I simply require a new challenge to awaken my passions once more.”

“Careful what you wish for,” I warned, half-joking. “With our luck, the next challenge will literally come knocking on our door.”

“Then let us hope it does,” Izora said with a wistful sigh. “For I am quite bored with doors that remain unknocked.”

“Okay, so here’s a wild idea,” Jax interrupted as he leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. He looked between Izora and me. “Izora, maybe you should tag along with Hailey on her next skip.”

My head snapped up, and I almost snorted my latte through my nose. “I’m sorry, what? Tag along? She’s not a lost puppy looking for a home, Jax. She’s a centuries-old vampire who uses ‘bored’ as code for ‘might snap and decimate a small village.’”

Izora raised an elegant eyebrow, the corner of her mouth quirked in amusement. “A most colorful description,” she said. “Fear not. I am quite capable of restraint.”

“Restraint? You mean like holding back from turning every outing into an episode of ‘The Real Vampires of Vampireville’?” I crossed my arms, the metal bangles on my wrist clinking together—a small reminder of the metallic power I wielded yet so often struggled to control.

“Hailey,” Jax said, ignoring my sarcasm, “it might be good for both of you. Izora gets out of her funk, and you get someone who can literally throw cars at your problems.”

I glanced at the vampiress, who simply sipped her drink, unperturbed. “Throwing cars isn’t exactly low-profile. We’re supposed to apprehend skips, not create a demolition derby. *Low profile.*”

“Low-profile?” Izora swirled the crimson liquid in her glass. “I suppose I could manage such subtlety for a time.”

“Great, now she’s humoring us,” I said under my breath, rubbing my temples. The last thing I needed was to babysit the Queen of the Undead while trying not to get killed myself.

“I’m just spit-balling here,” Ransom said. “You’ve got dragon-shifter muscles now, right? So technically, you’re stronger than ever. Maybe you can handle Izora.”

“Dragon-shifter muscles do not equate to handling an ancient vampire with a penchant for drama,” I said, though a part of me wondered if my new abilities would give me an edge. My mind wandered to the sensation of fire coursing through my veins, the primal strength that came with the shift. Then reality crashed down, reminding me that Izora wasn’t just any vampire—she was a force of nature.

“Besides, we have no idea what kind of fireworks show will start if I try manipulating metal around her,” I said with a grimace. “Could be like waving a matchstick in front of dynamite.”

“Fireworks show?” Jax said. “Sounds festive. Just make sure to aim away from the civilians.”

“Very helpful, Jax. Seriously, this isn’t a game. If Izora loses it—”

“Hailey,” Izora said, her tone suddenly earnest. “I may jest, but I understand the gravity of your concerns. I assure you, I have more control than you credit me for.”

“Control is one thing when you’re at a fancy undead soiree,” I said. “It’s another when we’re surrounded by humans.”

“Perhaps so,” she carefully placed her empty glass on the mahogany coffee table. “Yet, I believe I am in need of a challenge such as this. To feel the pulse of the hunt once more, to sharpen my instincts that have grown dull with complacency.”

“Instincts.” I sighed, then kept sighing. “Just what we need, more pointy instincts in tight spaces.”

“Look.” Jax grabbed my attention once again. “You’re the best. Even Izora can see that. If anyone can keep her on a leash, it’s you.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said, though secretly, he had a point. Surely, I could wrangle one bored vampire queen.

Jax, the ever-present rock in my tumultuous sea of undead shenanigans, cleared his throat with a gravity that demanded attention. “You know, Izora,” he said. “There’s more to being a vampire than just raw power and ancient bloodlines.”

“Is there, though?” Izora arched an immaculate eyebrow.

“Empathy,” Jax said undeterred, his gaze locked with Izora’s in a battle of wills. “It’s what separates us from the monsters we could easily become. You’ve lived centuries without it, but maybe it’s time you learned its value.”

“Empathy?” Izora said, the word rolling off her with disdain. “Pray tell, how does one ‘learn’ empathy?”

“By walking a mile in someone else’s shoes—or, in our case, flying a few miles in pursuit of skips,” Jax said, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. I chuckled at the absurdity of it all. Vampires talking about empathy while discussing bounty hunting was like a twisted episode of Sesame Street.

“Fine,” I said, the word escaping me before I could imprison it behind my better judgment. “*Fine*. I’ll take you on a skip. One

skip.” The room went still.

“Delightful.” Izora purred, her smile as wicked as a crescent moon. “I do hope it’s something challenging. Perhaps a rogue that needs eliminating? I haven’t had a good kill in ages.”

“Whoa, hold up.” I shot her a glare that could curdle blood. “There will be no killing on this skip. We’re not assassins. We’re hunters. There are rules.”

“Rules,” Izora said as if the concept were as foreign to her as a vegan vampire. “Very well, I shall abide by your *guidelines*. For now.”

“Great.” I turned and looked at my scheming mate. “If we’re doing this, Jax comes too. I’m not wrangling you on my own.”

“Ah, a threesome adventure,” Izora said mischievously.

“Sure, let’s call it an adventure,” I said. “More like a babysitting gig from hell.”

“Hailey, love,” Jax stepped closer to wrap an arm around my back. His scent—a blend of earthy pine and that indefinable Jax-ness—filled my nostrils, grounding me. “We’ll handle it. Besides, it might be fun.”

“Fun is one word for it,” I said dryly, leaning into his embrace despite myself. “Insanity is another.”

“Well,” he chuckled, pressing a kiss to the top of my head, “we do excel at insanity.”

“Speak for yourself,” I said, but the ghost of a smile was already playing on my lips. “I’m the picture of sane.”

“Of course you are,” Jax said. He pressed a kiss to my temple. “And I’m the Easter Bunny.”

“Ooh, does that mean I can expect chocolate?” I looked up at him with feigned hopefulness.

“Only if you’re good.” He chuckled.

“Damn.” I sighed, feigning disappointment. “Guess I’ll just stick to blood then.”

He squeezed my arm reassuringly. “Probably for the best.”

“Let’s just get through this skip without anyone ending up dead, undead, or wishing they were either of the two.” I glared at Izora.

“I concur,” Izora said. “After all, what’s life without a little challenge?”

I snorted. “Indeed.” As the last echoes of laughter died down from Izora’s grudging acceptance of our ‘no-killing’ rule, I sprawled on the couch next to Jax.

“Okay, so let’s talk about us being dragon-shifters now?” I traced a pattern on the cushion with my finger.

Jax stretched out his legs and placed an arm around me. “It’s not every day you find out you can turn into a mythical beast.”

“Understatement of the century.” I chuckled, tilting my head to look at him. “Have you noticed anything different since, you know, our whole fire-breathing episode?”

“Other than an inexplicable craving for barbecued ribs?” He grinned. “Maybe. It’s subtle, but I’m a little stronger. And I suspect we might be at least a little impervious to spells.”

“Right? It’s like we’ve got this extra layer of protection. Dragon magic has to come with some badass perks, right?” My thoughts drifted to the possibilities — were we spell-proof now? Or maybe just more resistant?

I sniffed the air, picking up the lingering scent of sage from the protective wards Janice had insisted on scattering around the property. Normally, it would be a faint aroma, easily missed, but now it was as if someone had shoved a bundle of the herb under my nose.

Jax’s words brought me back. “Earth to Hailey.”

“Sorry,” I shook my head to clear it. “Just realized something. Our senses might be getting sharper, too. I can smell the sage from here like it’s fresh.”

“Really?” He looked intrigued and took a deep breath himself. “Hmm, you might be onto something. Though, how could we possibly be more in tune?”

“Hey, don’t knock the upgrade. Maybe it’s like getting a software update — Vampire 2.0 now with added dragon features.” I laughed and nudged him with my elbow.

“Vampire 2.0,” he rolled the words around as if tasting them. “I like that. You know, sometimes updates come with bugs.”

“Then we’ll debug as we go. No biggie.” I pushed away the slight unease at the unknown variables. Life as a vampire had already been one big learning curve; this was just another loop in the roller coaster.

“Watch out, world. Here come the dragon vamps.” I threw my hands up, surrendering to the absurdity of our situation.

“Dragon vamps.” He chuckled alongside me. “That’s got a nice ring to it.”

“Better than drampires or vampgons, at least.” I joined in the laughter that filled the living room, which had witnessed far too much doom and gloom lately.

LUKE

I WOKE UP WITH THE KIND OF KNOT IN MY STOMACH THAT usually meant one of two things: either I'd eaten something I shouldn't have, or trouble was brewing. Considering I hadn't indulged in any late-night taco truck runs, I banked on the latter as I rolled out of bed and fumbled for the lamp. "Rise and shine, twerps." I twisted the lamp switch with a flick of my wrist.

Silence. Dead, unnerving silence.

"Come on, this isn't funny." I nudged the beds with more force than necessary. When neither of them stirred, a shiver crept up my back, and not the good kind that comes from the thrill of finding a fifty in last year's winter coat.

"Hey, now. Wake up." I shook my sisters, but they were as responsive as mannequins in a shop window.

The reality of the situation hit me like a sucker punch. Avery and Alison weren't breathing. There was no gentle rise and fall of their chests, no soft exhalations. Putting my ear to their lips, I strained to hear any sign of life, but there was nothing. No heartbeat thudded against my palm as I pressed it to their still bodies.

"Damn it!" I shot upright. The twins were turning into freaking vampires. How could I have been so stupid? Letting them sneak in and take my blood—blood that was now vampire deluxe, thanks to Ransom being my sire and Izora's cocktail of enhancements.

Fear clawed at me, thick and sour, as I bolted from their room. I had to find Ransom. He'd know what to do. My feet barely touched the ground as I sprinted through the house, skidding into the living room where Goldie and Ivy were lost to some reality TV drama.

"Where's Ransom?" I gaped at them, not quite sure I believed what was happening.

Goldie's eyes as she took me in. "He went to Hailey's," she said slowly as if talking to someone who'd just been hit on the head—which, metaphorically, wasn't far off.

"Thanks," I called over my shoulder, already halfway out the door.

I dashed across the street, each step thundering in my ears. This was bad, really bad. The crisp night air slapped against my face, doing nothing to cool the blistering panic that seared through my veins. I tasted the metallic tang of fear, like I'd bitten my tongue too hard.

I reached Hailey's front porch in record time, possibly setting a new land speed record for panicked siblings. Just as I raised my hand to hammer on the door, it swung open, revealing Ransom already striding toward me. His dark eyes were narrowed in concern. How much of my frantic state he'd sensed before even opening the door?

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Twins," I said, fighting for breath. Not because I needed to breathe but because I was *losing it*. "They're not waking up. No breathing, no heartbeat. It's like they've gone full Dracula minus the cape and the accent."

"Lead the way." Ransom stepped aside with a sweeping gesture that would have been gallant in any other context. This wasn't time for manners; it was time for mayhem.

We took off back to our place with Jax and Hailey on our tails, all of us moving with vampiric speed that would put Olympic sprinters to shambling shame. The night air whipped past us, carrying the scent of freshly cut grass and the distant aroma of

someone's late-night barbecue—an absurdly normal backdrop to our supernatural sprint.

This was the sort of thing you expected to happen in bizarre dreams or bad horror flicks, not in your actual, already-complicated life. Yet, here I was, racing against time to save my sisters from becoming the undead because, apparently, I was a walking Happy Meal with extra powers.

My feet pounded the pavement, a rhythm of regret and resolve. I glanced at Ransom beside me, his face set in grim strength of character. There was something oddly reassuring about having a vampire patriarch by your side when facing down a potential fangy family crisis.

We reached our house, the door looking like the entrance to a crypt. “Upstairs.” I took the steps two at a time, Ransom hot on my heels. The chorus of worry in my mind kept beat with our footsteps as we approached our bedroom room, the door now a gate to potential eternal night for them.

I pushed the door open with a trembling hand. There they were, our sisters, lying motionless on the bed, their faces serene as if they were merely lost in a peaceful slumber and not potentially on the brink of joining the eternal nocturnals.

“Look at them,” I whispered, though their vampire senses needed no amplification. “Tell me I’m just being paranoid.”

Ransom moved closer with Hailey on his heels, her expression etched with a concentration so deep it could split atoms. She leaned in, searching for anything that might give us a clue, any clue, that this wasn't as bad as it appeared.

“Nothing.” She finally straightened up. “They’re either dead or turning.”

Jax stood at the foot of the bed, scanning the distance beyond what ordinary mortals could see. He was silent, but the set of his jaw told me he was weighing our options, calculating moves and countermoves like a grandmaster in a game where the stakes were life and undeath.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” Ransom said, ever the voice of reason or as reasonable as one can get when discussing

accidental vampirism. “We need to monitor them. Look for signs. Just tell us what happened.”

I fidgeted at the edge of the bed, my hands wringing themselves like they were trying to squeeze water from an already dry towel. The twins lay there, mirror images of unconsciousness — still and eerily serene. I thought of Sleeping Beauties, except no prince’s kiss could fix this.

“Okay.” I licked my lips, which had gone dry as stale bread. “So, while I slept, they came upstairs, all hush-hush and conspiratorial, whispering about having some kind of illness.” The guilt sat heavily on my chest, a boulder that threatened to crush me with each word.

Jax folded his arms over his chest, a silent sentinel. Hailey’s gaze flickered between our sisters and me, a tempest brewing in those oceanic blues.

“They thought my blood would help heal them. They thought they could sneak in and take it, and even though I woke up, I pretended to be asleep. I let them take the blood.” The heat of shame flushed my face. A snort escaped me, humorless and sharp. “Guess they got more than they bargained for, huh?”

“Luke,” Hailey said. “You know better than to—”

“Believe me, I’m currently the president of the Self-Loathing Club,” I cut in, not needing a reminder of my monumental screw-up.

“Your blood,” Jax said, his tone grave, “is potent now, more than ever before. When Ransom turned you, that was one thing, and you were probably strong enough with just that. Then you bonded with Ransom, making you even stronger. You’re incredibly amplified since Izora imbued you with a fragment of Peter’s power.”

I knew all this. I just hadn’t realized it would translate to transitioning my sisters.

“Enough to turn humans,” he said bluntly. The words slammed into me like a two-ton hammer.

“Vampire Maker Luke, at your service,” I said bitterly. My sarcasm was a defense mechanism, kicking in when things got

too real, too fast. It was like throwing a smoke bomb down in the middle of a gunfight — useless but momentarily distracting.

“Damn it.” Hailey paced now, her fingers tangling in her bangs. “Why would they even think that was a good idea?”

I laughed bitterly as I stared at my little sisters. “Because they’re stubborn, just like their big sister.”

“The transformation process,” Ransom said, “it’s unpredictable. It could be a while before they wake up.”

“Can we stop them from turning?” I whispered, clinging to hope like a lifeline.

“Once it begins,” Jax said, “it’s impossible to reverse without serious repercussions.”

“Like what? They become vamp-zombies? Develop an aversion to garlic bread?” The jokes were hollow, but I clung to them like a shield.

“Like death,” Jax said, his gaze steady and unflinching. “True death.”

The ceiling fan whirred above, casting an oscillating shadow over the twins as they lay motionless. Hailey sat on the edge of one bed, her fingers lightly brushing against the still hand of one twin. Ransom, ever the stoic sentinel, leaned against the wall, his gaze pensive but unwavering. Jax stood at Hailey’s back, a solid presence radiating both authority and concern.

“Any change?”

“Nothing yet,” Hailey said, her tone gentle but laced with worry. “They’re strong. They’ll pull through.”

I nodded, though the pit of dread in my stomach only grew heavier.

“Ransom, you’ve seen more of these transformations than any of us.” I turned toward him. “There must be something we can do.”

Ransom’s gaze met mine as he shook his head sadly.

It was then that I noticed the tension in the room, like an electric current beneath the surface. Jax shifted slightly, a frown creasing his brow as he regarded me, not with anger but an odd sort of fondness. It took me a moment to realize—it was my crazy new power. That unasked-for charm that made it difficult for others to hold onto their irritation with me. Right now, it was working overtime.

“Luke, your influence. It’s making it hard to stay focused,” Jax said, not unkindly.

“Ah, crap. Sorry, guys.” I rubbed the back of my neck, the warmth of embarrassment rose to my cheeks. “I don’t exactly have an off switch for this thing.”

“Perhaps it is not wholly unfortunate,” Ransom said, his expression softening as he reached out and pulled me into his arms. “In times of stress, harmony may be a balm, even if compelled.”

“Harmony’s great and all, but I’d trade it for some good old-fashioned answers right about now.” I curled into him, needing comfort from my mate.

“Answers will come,” Ransom assured me.

“Along with fangs and a thirst for O positive,” I said under my breath.

Silence settled again. My gaze drifted to the twins’ serene faces. The urge to shake them awake battled with the fear of what that awakening might bring.

“Come on, you two,” I said. “Give us a sign you’re still in there. Any sign at all.”

“Luke...” Hailey’s hand found mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “They’re fighters, remember? They’ve got Whitfield blood.”

“Whitfield blood.” I let out a shaky laugh. “Right now, that’s part of the problem.”

“Then let’s hope it’s also part of the solution,” Ransom said, his words wrapping around us like a protective spell.

“From your lips to whatever deity’s listening,” I squeezed Hailey’s hand in return. “Because right now, we could use all the divine intervention we can get.”

We sat beside the twins all night, with no change. Sunshine began to peek through the windows. “Hailey,” Jax said, his tone firm but gentle, like a doctor delivering tough love with a side of sugar. “You being exhausted won’t help them. Let’s go home, rest. They’ll call the moment there’s any change.”

“Fine.” The word tumbled out of Hailey’s mouth like a reluctant stone. She wrapped her arms around me, squeezing tight enough to remind me she wasn’t entirely breakable anymore. “Call me. No matter what time.”

“Promise.” I inhaled the familiar scent of her shampoo—strawberries and something else, something distinctly Hailey. It grounded me, if only for a moment.

With one last concerned glance at the twins, Hailey turned on her heel and followed Jax out the door. The click of the closing door echoed ominously, like the final note of an overture before a tragedy unfolded on stage.

Ransom stepped up beside me. “We wait.”

“Great.” I leaned into his support. “Because waiting is definitely my strong suit.”

“Who knows, maybe you’ll discover a hidden talent for patience tonight.” Ransom gave me a light squeeze and kissed my temple.

“Right, and maybe I’ll sprout wings and fly us to Transylvania for a midnight snack,” I said, flickering a glance to the twins’ still forms.

What kind of illness would push them to become vampires to heal themselves?

HAILEY

THE FLUORESCENT LIGHTS IN MY OFFICE BUZZED LIKE A SWARM of lethargic bees, casting a pallid glow over the stack of paperwork that I was resolutely ignoring. Instead, I leaned back in my creaky leather chair, mind on my sisters, feet propped on the cluttered desk, as Jax paced before me with the phone pressed to his ear.

“You’re telling me this rogue has gone to ground *again*? What is he, part mole?” He listened to Paige a moment as his brow furrowed so deeply it could hide secrets. “Yeah, we’ll keep on it.”

He ended the call and glanced at me with storm clouds in his blue depths. “Our elusive friend is burrowing into the underbelly of the city once more. It’s like playing Whack-a-Mole with fangs.”

“Fabulous.” I sighed, thumping my feet back to the floor. “Here I thought tonight would be all about Netflix and chilling with a glass of O positive.” And worrying, *still* about Alison and Avery. I’d been over with them for several hours in the early evening, but there was no change. Luke had sworn on all our lives he’d call the very second they woke up.

“When have you ever known our lives to be that simple?” Jax offered me a wry smile that softened the edges of frustration etched on his face.

Before I could respond, the door burst open with the subtlety of a cannonball. Izora strode in, her Amazonian stature

dwarfing the frame, a jelly-filled donut clasped triumphantly in her hand like some kind of sugary trophy.

“Guess who got the last donut?” A glob of jelly oozed onto her chin, and she swiped it away with her thumb, licking it off without missing a beat.

“Congrats.” I smirked, eyeing the donut with mock reverence. “You’ve won the Hunger Games of pastry.”

“Jealous?” She cocked an eyebrow.

“Devastated,” I said. The scent of sweet dough and fruit filled the room, mingling with the sterile tang of the office air. It made my stomach do a little flip—not from hunger. Who did she think ate the first eleven donuts? I couldn’t gain weight anymore, and I could eat anything I wanted, and the only consequence was a trip to the bathroom.

I’d won the food lottery.

Flint flew into the office and landed on the desk in front of me. Smiling, I scooped him up and cuddled him close. He made a sound that was a cross between a purr and a hum.

Izora took another huge bite, red jelly smeared around her mouth like a toddler’s war paint.

“Anyway,” Jax said, reclaiming our attention. “We need to refocus on finding this rogue before he causes any more trouble.”

“Of course.” I nodded, releasing Flint. He curled up on the corner of the desk where I placed a cat bed for him to nap in while I worked.

My phone pinged. It was a text from Jordan.

I know you’re covered up, doll, but I’ve got a skip and no agent. Can you spare a moment?

There really wasn’t anything I could do here for my sisters or the rogue in New Orleans. Cleo had been covering the Bond Girls cases. She was out on a skip right now. With Paige down south, it was left in my lap. I replied to Jordan and arched an eyebrow at Izora. “You ready to try your hand at skip tracing? We got a job.”

Her face lit up. “Absolutely,” she said. The last of the donut disappeared into her mouth, and she wiped her hands on her jeans like a warrior preparing for battle. “Let’s go bag ourselves a rogue.”

“Not a rogue.” I handed her a tissue and nodded toward her mouth. “A human who did something bad. He has to go to jail, not the graveyard.”

She shrugged. “Either way.”

“Lead the way,” Jax said, ushering us toward the door with a flourish. “I know I promised I’d go along with you. But I need to stay here to help track the necro.”

I nodded. Jax could be their long-distance navigator as the team goes underground to search for the rogue.” We’ll be fine.” I gave him a kiss and then led Izora out the door. “Take care of Flint.”

The chill of the evening air had nothing on the iciness in my veins as we approached the dilapidated apartment complex. Not that the cold bothered me. It was more the worry about Izora. This wasn’t a good idea. Kendra led the way with a determined stride that told me she was ready to kick some serious butt. And Izora... Well, Izora was practically vibrating with pent-up power, scanning for our target like a hawk.

“Remember,” I said. “We need him breathing. No accidents.”

“Accidents?” She snorted, casting me a side-eye glance. “I’m as graceful as they come.”

We found him—or rather, he found us—charging down the stairs two at a time, his eyes wild with fear. The guy almost made it past us until Izora reached out and—oops. With an unintentional flex of her superhuman strength, she grabbed the skip’s arm, and there was a sickening snap like a branch breaking in a storm.

“Damn it, Izora,” I said, rushing over to the crumpled form of the child abuser now very much deceased at the foot of the stairs. His arm hung at an unnatural angle; his eyes were open and glassy.

“He ran into my hand,” she said defensively, shrugging. “Literally.”

“Ran into your—? Izora, this is why I told you over and over to be careful. Humans get suspicious when skips turn up dead instead of behind bars.” Not to mention the hordes of paperwork.

She looked away and stuck her nose in the air. “He deserved much worse for what he did to those kids.” Her tone was soft, almost apologetic, but her conviction was ironclad.

“Maybe, but paperwork is a pain in my undead ass,” I said, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“Let’s just take care of this mess.” Kendra stepped forward to inspect the body. She shook her head, her dark hair swaying gently. “Let’s make it convincing.”

* * *

“OFFICER, you’ll never believe what happened,” I said, putting on my best ‘butter wouldn’t melt in my mouth’ face as we stood in the precinct. “Our skip here took a tumble down the stairs while running away from us. It was all very tragic.”

“Stairs, huh?” The officer raised a skeptical eyebrow, eyeing the body. “Looks like more than a fall.”

“Bosco. Would I lie to you?” Leaning in slightly, I pushed my will outward, letting the vampire compulsion work its magic. “You’ll do the paperwork for me, won’t you?”

“Sure thing, Miss Whitfield,” he said, now dazed, already reaching for the forms.

“See?” I turned back to Kendra. Izora was waiting in the car, pouting. “No harm, no foul.”

“Except for the dead guy,” Kendra said dryly.

I grunted. I just couldn’t muster up that much remorse for the guy. “Let’s get our bond slip and get out of here before anyone asks too many questions.”

“Yup,” Kendra said, already halfway out the door. “I could murder a pancake right about now.”

“Let’s not use the word murder for the rest of the night, okay?” I sighed, following her out, a sense of unease settling deep in my gut.

“Next time, Izora,” I said firmly as we got in the car. “Keep the supernatural strength in check.”

“Fine, fine.” She huffed, but the glint of mischief in her eye remained undimmed. Great. Just what we needed—a powerhouse with the self-control of a kid in a candy store.

I pulled out of the police station parking lot and headed to Leslie’s.

“Here’s your check,” Leslie said a half-hour later, handing over the paper. “Accident?”

“Something like that.” I tucked the check into my pocket.

“Let’s just hope the rest of the night goes smoothly,” I said as we stepped back into the cool air of the night, the city lights flickering like distant stars. In this line of work, smooth was just another word for boring, and our nights were anything but that.

“Hang on,” Jordan called. “I’ve got another skip.” He eyed each of us hopefully. “Manslaughter charge—kid offed his grandma. Didn’t mean to, apparently. He’s a flight risk, bond’s higher than my blood pressure.”

“Grandma? That’s low.” Kendra flipped open the folder with the kind of grim curiosity usually reserved for horror movies. “How do you accidentally kill your granny?”

“Let’s not speculate on family dynamics,” I said quickly, scanning the details over her shoulder. The photo showed a young man with eyes too old for his face, a sort of haunted look that clung to him like a second skin. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

“Time is money, and this one’s racking up quite the tab.” Leslie tapped his foot with impatience.

We sprang into action, the familiar rush of adrenaline kicking in as we gathered our gear. Handcuffs, tasers—non-lethal take-downs were always the goal—and, of course, we had plenty of Kendra’s little bottled potions in the car.

“Remember, no Hulk-smashing the perps,” I reminded her as we headed into the car, the night air slapping us with its crispness. “We need this one in one piece.”

“Fine,” she said. “As long as we can stop somewhere for donuts.”

“Kendra, you got the spells ready?” I asked, making sure we were prepped for any magical interference and ignoring her need for sweets.

“Always.” She grinned. “Let’s just hope we don’t need them.”

I slid into the driver’s seat and revved up the engine. “Let’s catch ourselves a grandma-killer.”

“Here’s hoping he trips on his shoelaces,” Izora said with a smirk.

I sighed, pulling away from the curb and heading toward the apartment in the file.

HAILEY

THE SCENT OF DESPERATION CLUNG TO THE SHABBY APARTMENT building like a second-hand coat—one that had seen better days, much like the skip we were tracking. Izora, in her infinite subtlety, was practically vibrating with restrained energy beside me.

“Can you taste that?” My vampire senses tingled with the tang of fear sweat—sour and unmistakable. It seeped through the cracks of the dilapidated structure, guiding us.

“Mmm, delicious.” Izora scanned the shadows.

“Keep it down,” Kendra whispered behind us. “We don’t want to spook him.”

“Too late for subtleties,” I said, catching a flicker of movement on the third floor. A shadow flitted past a grimy window—the skip was on the move, and the chase tightened something primal within me.

“Upstairs, now,” I took the lead as our trio bolted toward the rickety staircase. Kendra chanted under her breath, spells at the ready, just as Izora’s footsteps thundered after me—a tempest contained in a powerhouse frame.

We reached the landing, and I pointed to the door where the shadow had passed. Kendra nodded, her fingers igniting with a silvery glow. “Ready when you are.”

“Three... two...” I didn’t get to one. Izora, bless her impatient soul, kicked the door right off its hinges with a crack that would’ve sent splinters flying if not for Kendra’s swift containment spell.

Subtle. We burst into the room, ready for anything—or so I thought.

“Please, don’t hurt me.” The skip, a wiry kid no older than twenty, cowered behind a worn couch. His eyes were wide, and he stank of terror.

“Relax, we’re not going to—” My words were cut short by a blur of motion. Izora lunged forward, her hand shooting out, and with a sickening snap that echoed too loudly, the skip went limp.

“*Izora*,” I yelled, my heart plummeting. This was not the plan. Not again.

“Oops?” she said weakly, without her usual humor. She knew she’d screwed up.

“Damn it!” I said, almost not believing what had just happened. “We needed him alive,”

Kendra dropped to the skip’s side, her hands fluttering uselessly above him. “He’s gone. There’s nothing I can do.”

I dragged a hand through my hair, the coppery scent of blood intermingling with the mustiness, a cruel reminder of our failure. “This is bad. Really bad.”

“Look, he was guilty. He didn’t accidentally kill his grandmother. He stank of regret and murder.” Izora tried to justify, but she lacked conviction.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, anger and frustration boiling over. “Now we’ve got another mess to clean up, and guess who gets to deal with the fall out? Me. You may be strong, Izora, but you can’t punch your way out of bureaucracy.”

“Sorry,” she said. Even in the dim light, there was clearly guilt etched on her face.

“Sorry doesn’t fill out paperwork or explain dead skips,” I said, already planning the lies we’d have to spin. “Let’s just get out of here before someone calls the cops.”

The skip’s lifeless eyes stared at us, an accusation that hung in the air, silent but damning. We’d come to bring justice, but instead, we’d brought death—a mistake that wouldn’t go

unnoticed. As we left the scene, the tension among us was palpable, each step heavier than the last, our snark drowned by the gravity of our actions.

Back at the office, the stench of failure clung to me like a second skin. The coppery tang of blood had infiltrated my nostrils, and I could still smell the grimy apartment air. I slumped into my chair with a graceless thud, the leather creaking.

“Hailey, I know you’re upset,” Izora said. “But really, I promise, he deserved—”

“Deserved or not, that’s not your call.” My words came out sharper than I intended, but I couldn’t help it. My fingers drummed an impatient rhythm on the desk, each tap a punctuation mark for my brewing irritation. “We can’t keep leaving trails of bodies. Humans have this pesky habit of asking questions when people start dropping like flies.”

“Fine, but he wasn’t just some skip. He killed his grandma, and not by accident.” There was a fire in Izora’s eyes, the same fire that made her an excellent hunter, and also, occasionally, a liability.

“Intentionally or not, there’s protocol. Now, thanks to you, I’ve got an Everest-sized mountain of paperwork waiting for me.” Not really. I’d compelled a different cop to take care of it, but still. She didn’t need to know that.

I stood, pacing in front of her, my movements rigid and jerky, a marionette pulled by strings of frustration. “We’re in the business of justice, not execution.”

“Right, right.” She ducked her head.

“Seriously. No more killing skips unless absolutely necessary. Like our lives are in danger and there is no other way out of it.” I locked gazes with her, trying to drill the importance into her skull. “I mean it.”

“Understood,” she said, though her shoulders sagged as if I’d just told her Christmas was canceled.

Flint made a soft noise from my desk and scooped him up in my arms. “Mama’s, okay,” I whispered and set him on my

shoulder.

Luke walked in, looking exhausted. He hadn't slept a wink since he'd woken up to find the twins transitioning, two nights ago. He flashed a weary grin at Izora, who perked up considerably. "Hey, maybe try to be a little more gentle next time? We want them breathing when we bring them in."

"Of course, *Luke*," Izora said, her demeanor shifting like the phases of the moon. Suddenly, she was all batting eyelashes and coy smiles—a sight so foreign that I nearly choked on my own spit. Maybe I could pair her and Luke together on skip hunting.

"How are the twins?" I asked as I kept my attention on Izora. Her adoring gaze followed Luke around the room, and I suppressed a groan. Great, just what we needed: an Izora distracted by infatuation rather than focused on the job.

"Asleep. There's no denying now that they're transitioning." He scrubbed a hand across his face. "At least they're not dead but frick." My brother was completely oblivious to the mooney eyes being thrown his way.

"I'm sure they're fine," Izora cooed, the room ten degrees warmer with the heat of her sudden infatuation.

"Anyway," I said, cutting through the awkward tension that Luke still hadn't clued into. "Let's focus on not making a habit of corpse creation, okay?" The last thing we needed was a repeat of today's disaster. "Alive is how they should stay. Preferably until trial."

"Got it," Izora said, though her attention lingered on Luke, who seemed increasingly oblivious under her intense scrutiny.

As I looked at the latest roster from Ransom about the enforcers, Izora's sighs kept interrupting my focus, as loud as her earlier punches. They were aimed at Luke, who was scrolling his phone, blissfully unaware.

"Luke, did you see this new band? They're playing downtown next week," Izora said, fluttering her eyelashes like she was trying to signal planes for landing. She leaned against the wall, a casual pose that came off as anything but, given how she

batted her lashes in his direction as she held out her phone for him to look at.

“Uh, yeah, I’ve heard of them. Might check it out,” Luke said, then went back to his phone.

“Great, We should go together.” She pounced on the opportunity.

“Actually,” I cut in before my brother could muster a polite decline or remind her that he was *bonded* to her *offspring*.

“We’ve got a ton of paperwork, remember? No more outings for you until we sort out your, erm, enthusiasm issues.”

“Paperwork can wait.” She pouted, her face scrunching up like a child denied candy. “What’s life without a little excitement?”

“Fine.” She sighed dramatically, throwing herself into a chair. “No more skips.”

Thank frick.

As Izora daydreamed, probably about moonlit strolls with Luke, I worried about the potential consequences of her crush. A distracted vampire was one thing, but an infatuated Izora was a force of nature — unpredictable, unstoppable, and unnervingly enthusiastic.

HAILEY

“HAILEY, YOU’VE GONE THROUGH THE AGENDA HOW MANY times now?” Jax leaned against the bookshelf crammed with ancient texts that we rarely used but looked impressive on the shelves. His arms were crossed, the muscles beneath his tailored shirt a testament to the physical strength he wielded so effortlessly.

“Forty-two,” I replied, not missing a beat. “It’s a perfectly reasonable number.” Why did I get so nervous still for these vampire council meetings? It was silly.

Jax chuckled, the sound warm and grounding. “You’ll do fine. You always do.”

“Flatterer.” I swiveled my chair to face the computer as the time for the call inched closer. My fingers hovered over the mouse, reluctant to click the ‘Join’ button, as if that simple action would unleash all manner of supernatural bureaucracy on my head.

“Ready?” he asked, scooting another office chair up beside me.

“As I’ll ever be.” With a click that sounded far more ominous in my head than it should have, the faces of our fellow council members splayed across the screen. From Milan, Dominic and Amaya sat in the Vampire palace, looking like they’d just stepped out of a Renaissance painting, all brooding looks and luxurious clothes.

“Good evening, Hailey, Jax,” Dominic greeted us, his Scottish accent weaving through the connection like silk. The man

could read a takeout menu and make it sound like poetry.

“Evening, Dominic, Amaya,” I said with false cheer.

Then there was Arric, framed by stone walls and ancestral portraits in his English castle, his expression stoic. The guy had an air of ‘I’ve-seen-it-all-and-lived-to-tell-the-tale,’ which, considering his age, wasn’t far from the truth.

“Hailey.” He nodded. “Jax.”

“Arric.” Jax nodded back. Blah, blah, blah.

“Right, shall we begin with the enforcer report?” I dove in, figuring it was best to tackle the beast head-on.

“Wait,” Amaya interjected, tilting her head, “is that a new plant on your desk, Hailey? It’s quite vibrant.”

“Ah, yes, it’s a—” I started, but Dominic cut in.

“Can we focus, please? We have important issues to discuss.” There was a hint of impatience in his tone, but his lips twitched in a suppressed smile.

“Of course.” I cleared my throat. “The enforcer report.” I launched into the plans and projections, my voice steady even as my mind raced with thoughts. Was I being too detailed? Not detailed enough?

“Your attention to detail is commendable,” Amaya said after I finished, her praise seeming genuine.

“Let’s hope the details don’t strangle us,” Dominic muttered, but the corner of his mouth quirked up.

“Only metaphorically,” I said with a grin. “No actual strangulation planned for this meeting.”

“Shame.” Arric twiddled a pen in front of his face, all lounged back in his chair. “That might have livened things up.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Trust me, when it comes to council meetings, I prefer my excitement strictly metaphorical.”

“Spoken like a true leader.” Jax squeezed my hand. I leaned into the touch for a moment, grateful for his presence.

“The enforcers will be arriving in Milan shortly to begin their training.” I tapped the papers on my desk. “Grim and Nash are currently playing tag with a rogue necromancer down in New Orleans, but they’re keen on joining the ranks in Italy and heading up the program.”

“Excellent,” Arric chimed in, his aristocratic English accent making everything sound like a royal decree. He was the newest member of the council, but liked to jump right in, apparently. “About this rogue business? Do we need to be concerned?”

“Concerned? Not yet. We’ll keep you posted,” Jax said. It could become a bigger problem.

I continued with the enforcer project. “What do you guys think about installing a permanent portal in Philly for Grim and Nash? You know, so they can pop in and out of Milan?”

Dominic narrowed his eyes, then nodded. “Yes, a permanent portal would be most convenient. All in favor?”

“Absolutely,” Amaya said with a nod, her dark hair rippling like a silken shadow.

“Indeed.” Arric looked as if he’d rather be sipping tea than discussing supernatural logistics.

Dominic cleared his throat, an obvious segue. “Now, onto the matter of Zara’s return to Philadelphia. It’s imperative that her integration into our community is handled delicately.”

Zara coming back had always been a possibility but I didn’t have to like it. She’d been the one who attacked me, making it necessary for Jax to turn me. Being happy with my life as it was now didn’t mean I wanted to have anything to do with her.

My heart sank as Dominic continued, “I recommend she should not take residence with you and Jax—”

“Whoa there, Count Dracula.” I held up a hand. “That wasn’t even on the table.”

“Exactly my point,” Dominic said smoothly. “I suggest she moves into the house Paige relocated to. It’s nearby so you can keep an eye on the young vampire.”

“Wait, you want Zara shacking up with Paige and Claudia? Claudia has a daughter there. I have serious reservations about—”

The office door swung open, and Izora waltzed in, her timing was impeccable as ever. Flint flew in with her, carrying something in his claws. I held out my hand and he flew over and dropped it in my hand.

An earring. It was one of those silver hoop ones. It wasn't mine so I let him have it. I've told everyone to keep their shiny things up so he can't steal them, so that was on whoever the earring belonged to. My guess was Claudia's or her daughter's, Emily.

“Great, just what we needed,” I muttered as Izora plopped down on my other side, her presence commanding enough to silence the council for a split second.

“Is that... Izora?” Dominic asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Surprise!” She grinned at the screen, waving energetically. “Now, about Zara moving in with Paige and Claudia—I'm all for it. What's life without a little chaos?”

“Chaos is Izora's middle name,” I whispered to Jax, who was doing his best not to laugh out loud.

“Hailey, your thoughts?” Dominic prompted, bringing my focus back to the conversation.

“Fine,” I sighed, running a hand through my bangs. “For the sake of unity and all that jazz, let's give it a whirl. Only if Claudia and Paige agree. But if they turn the place into a bloodbath, I'm blaming you, Dominic.”

“I will take that responsibility,” he said, nodding sagely. “And Jax, make sure to keep an eye on them.”

“Zara's always been a bit of a wild card,” Amaya chimed in, her voice tinged with the kind of concern usually reserved for discussing whether to invite your drunk aunt to Christmas dinner. “We can't just send her back into Philly without some ground rules.”

“Ground rules? She’d eat those for breakfast and then ask for seconds.” I tried not to imagine Zara turning Paige and Claudia’s place into her own personal amusement park.

“Perhaps some guidelines would suffice,” Arric suggested. “After all, we’ve managed to reintegrate others before.”

“Guidelines.” I glanced at Jax who looked just as worried.

“Keep us updated, will you?” Dominic asked, with a hint of empathy creeping into his voice. “We’re counting on you to make sure this transition is smooth.”

“Smooth as sandpaper,” I replied, my attempt at humor masking the unease twisting in my gut. As the meeting wrapped up and farewells were exchanged, I leaned back in my chair.

The screen blinked off, and I turned to Jax, who was watching me with an expression that was equal parts amused and sympathetic.

“Think she’ll behave?” he asked, crossing his arms.

“About as much as Izora does around those donuts she loves,” I answered, pushing away from the desk and standing. “Which is to say, not at all.”

Jax chuckled, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “We’ll handle it.”

LUKE

THROUGH HALF-LIDDED EYES, I LOOKED AT THE CEILING, trying to figure out who had woken me up.

“Good grief, what truck hit us?” groaned a voice beside me. I sat up and looked down at my sisters. It was Avery, rubbing her temples.

“Feels more like a fleet of trucks,” Allison said from my other side. Her eyes were still closed, but relief washed over me. They were okay.

“Welcome to the eternal hangover without the fun of getting drunk.” I pushed myself up and wiggled out from between my sisters to stand at the foot of the bed.

“Why can I hear so well? Why does it sound so weird?” Avery asked, panic tinging her words as she sat up, eyes wide and bewildered.

“Because, dear sister, you’re not exactly human anymore,” I offered a sardonic smile to soften the blow as I texted Hailey.

TWINS ARE AWAKE!!!!

!!!!

Meet us in the living room.

They replied quickly, but I put my phone on silent to keep the pings from freaking the twins out.

“Vampire bodies? We’re vampires?” Allison asked, her hands exploring her face as if searching for familiarity. “I can see every fiber in this stupid comforter. Is this normal?”

“Normal for us.” I moved toward the bedroom door.

“Tell me about it,” Allison chimed in her own voice a harmony to Avery’s melody. “I can hear the dust settling.”

They both sat up, gazing incredulously at their hands, flexing fingers that were now capable of rending steel. Fangs peeked out from under their lips as they smiled uncertainly at each other, marveling at the sharp points.

“Is it weird that I feel... powerful? Like I could bench-press a car?” Avery asked, a tentative smile breaking through her confusion.

“Exciting, isn’t it?” I said though I didn’t feel as happy as I sounded. This wasn’t how things were supposed to have turned out.

Their laughter was a sudden burst, bright and untamed, followed just as quickly by tears welling in their eyes. “Oh, no. Are we going to start sparkling too?” Allison joked, wiping away a tear with the back of her hand.

“Only if you’re auditioning for a teen vampire movie, which I love, by the way, so don’t say anything bad.” I tried to keep the mood light despite the gravity of our situation. No sense in making things harder for them.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” Avery said in the world’s tiniest voice. “We just wanted to get better.”

“I know. Come on. Let’s go see what we’re going to do now. I’m going to change out of my PJs. Meet me in the living room.” Using my vampire speed, I rushed to mine and Ransome’s room, changing faster than I’d ever have.

When I stepped out of my bedroom the twins stepped out of theirs. We made our way downstairs, where Hailey, Jax, and Ransom had gathered in the living room. The tension in the air was thick enough to cut with one of the twins’ newly-acquired fangs. Ransom must’ve told Ivy what was going on because she was conspicuously absent. Thank goodness that Goldie was in school.

“Okay, let’s not beat around the bush.” I paced back and forth while everyone else settled in, the twins with big, wide eyes.

“Avery, Allison, becoming vampires, it’s no walk in the park. There are rules, expectations, and some serious consequences if we’re not careful.”

“Luke’s right,” Hailey said, her blue eyes piercing as she leaned forward from the couch. “The council won’t take kindly to this. Accidental or not, vampirism isn’t something you stumble into like a surprise birthday party.”

“Will they really be so harsh?” Allison asked, fear written all over her face as she glanced between us all.

“Harsh is an understatement,” Jax said somberly. “But we’ll figure this out together. You’re not alone in this.”

“Could be worse,” Hailey said, her attempt at humor falling flat. “You could’ve died.”

“Thanks, as true as that is, I’ll try to remember that when we’re standing trial.” I gave her a small smile to show I didn’t mean my words.

“Trial? What do you mean by trial?” Avery’s voice rose in panic.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” I held up a hand. “First thing’s first, we need to get your bearings, teach you control. And then... well, we’ll cross that rickety bridge when we come to it.”

“Great, vampire kindergarten followed by supernatural court. Our schedule’s just packed.” Allison tried to sound nonchalant, but her eyes didn’t stop moving as she looked nervously around the room.

“Hey, I aced vampire kindergarten,” Hailey said, a smirk playing on her lips. “Look at me now, manipulating metal and running the states with Jax.”

“Everyone’s journey is different,” Jax said, his gaze steady and reassuring. “Just remember, whatever happens, you have us. We’re not going to leave you hanging.”

“Thanks,” Avery said, her voice a quivering string about to snap from tension. “We didn’t plan on...this.” She gestured at herself, fangs peeking out and saying hello.

“Luke’s blood—it was supposed to be a cure, not a...” Allison trailed off, swallowing hard enough for it to echo in the silent room.

“An eternal life sentence?” Hailey offered, her fingers drumming on the armrest.

“Exactly,” Allison said with a nod, though her eyes were glassy with unshed tears. “We thought it would heal us, stop the Huntingdons. I have it, and that means Avery will within a year. There’s no cure.”

My heart wrenched. It was totally understandable, looking for a cure. They’d thought they were uniquely positioned to avoid a horrible diagnosis.

“Damn it,” Avery muttered darkly, her hands balling into fists so tight her knuckles blanched. “We just wanted to live without that disease shadowing our every moment.”

Jax moved forward. His concern was evident, but so was his role as the leader. “I understand your fear, anyone would,” he said gently. “But becoming vampires without consent is a serious infraction.”

“Serious is an understatement,” Ransom chimed in. “The council is going to flip.”

“Hey, hey, no need to freak them out more,” Hailey said, shooting Ransom a look that could melt steel. “Half the council is in this room.” She shrugged. “Almost half.”

“Regardless,” Jax continued, his gaze unwavering. “The rest of the council will have to be informed. You’re Hailey and Luke’s sisters, yes, and we’ve made major strides to become more open and welcoming, but we won’t turn a blind eye to this. We can’t. There will be a trial—”

“Trial?” Avery squeaked, terror on her face.

“By a jury,” Jax said, his tone solemn.

“Of vampires,” Ransom finished with a grimace. “Your peers now.”

“Vampire law doesn’t care about intent, only actions,” Jax added. “Though with the way things are changing, we may be

able to argue intent.”

A surge of protectiveness roared through me, fierce and hot. “They were desperate.” I growled, my voice rougher than I intended. “Huntingdon’s is a death sentence. They wanted hope, not eternity.”

“Luke,” Jax said, locking eyes with me. “You know I sympathize, but sympathy doesn’t change laws.”

“Or consequences,” Ransom said, reaching out to me and I let him pull me into a hug. “Luke may be called into question as well.”

“Me?” I raised my eyebrows at my love. “Why me?”

“You were awake,” he said. “You could’ve stopped them.”

“No, I was asleep.” I stuck my nose stubbornly in the air. “And you can’t prove otherwise.”

Hailey chuckled, but I didn’t miss the look that went between Ransom and Jax. They weren’t happy.

Someone squeezed my hand, and I looked down to see Avery gripping it, her face pale. The terror in her eyes mirrored my own internal dread. We were neck-deep.

“Look, let’s not spiral into doom and gloom yet,” Hailey said, her optimism a buoy in stormy seas. “We’ve handled worse, remember?”

“Hailey’s right,” I said. “We’re strong. We can handle a trial.”

“Then it’s settled,” Jax declared. “We prepare for what’s coming. We stand united.”

Hailey nodded. “First, we need to teach them how to feed.”

HAILEY

THE MOMENT WE STEPPED OUT OF LUKE AND RANSOM'S, I sighed and tried to think about good things. The night air was brisk, tingling against my undead skin—a sensation I found oddly invigorating given that I didn't technically need to breathe anymore. Jax's hand found mine, and our fingers locked together like puzzle pieces that were always meant to fit.

“Ready for an empty house?” Jax asked.

“More than ready,” I said, a smirk playing on my lips. “I can't remember the last time it was just us. It's like the universe knows it owes us one.”

We walked in comfortable silence, the only sound was our footsteps on the pavement. The anticipation was like static electricity between us—zapping little sparks every time our hands brushed. By the time we reached our front door, I barely contained the cocktail of excitement and nerves bubbling inside me.

I pushed open the door and was greeted by the warm embrace of vanilla-scented electric candles that I'd set on a timer.

Jax shut the door behind us with a soft click.

Our cozy living room was bathed in a soft golden glow that flickered across the walls, creating dancing shadows that played tag with each other. The scent wrapped around me, a comforting reminder of many evenings spent curled up on the couch with a good book—or more recently, tangled up with a

certain vampire who had changed my life in ways I never imagined.

“Vanilla candles? Someone was feeling romantic,” Jax said, dropping a kiss on my temple as he passed by.

“Hey, they were on sale,” I said, feigning indignation while trying to hide the warmth spreading through me at his touch. “If I recall correctly, someone happens to love how they smell on my skin.”

“Guilty as charged.” He wrapped his arms around me from behind. His cool breath fanned over my neck, sending shivers down my back despite the lack of any actual body heat.

“Plus, the soft lighting makes it harder to see the dust bunnies plotting their next takeover.” I leaned back into his embrace. I scanned the room, noting the carefully placed throw pillows and blankets that suggested ‘homey’ rather than ‘haunted mansion’. It was a balance I strived for, considering our supernatural lifestyle could easily tip things toward the latter.

“Ah, the vicious dust bunnies. Our truest nemesis.” Jax’s chuckle vibrated against my back.

“More dangerous than any rogue vamp or disgruntled witch.” I twisted in his arms to face him, my hands sliding up to rest on his broad shoulders. “Tonight, it’s just you and me. No beasties, bunnies, or otherwise.”

I could sense Flint in the house. My guess was he was sleeping because he didn’t rush into the room as soon as we got here.

“Sounds perfect,” Jax said, his face intense, the color shifting like liquid sapphire. It was moments like this that reminded me why I’d fallen so hard for him, why the messiness of my past was a small price to pay for the future we were building.

“If you make any more jokes about vacuum cleaners being foreplay, I’m going to start questioning your seduction techniques.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he said, his lips twitching. “Though, for the record, watching you handle a Dyson does things to me that I can’t explain.”

“Vampire-lord turned appliance aficionado.”

Jax’s hand was a cool, reassuring presence as he took mine and we drifted away from the living room’s vanilla-scented sanctuary, our fingers laced together.

Jax’s free hand brushed against the small of my back gently steering me forward. We reached the bedroom door, and Jax pushed it open. The moonlight spilled through the curtains, casting silvery patterns across the room, like a celestial artist had decided to splash our little haven with strokes of nocturnal beauty.

“The moon is really showing off tonight.” I stepped into the pool of light as Jax released my hand to close the door behind us.

“Nothing compared to you,” he said, his tone genuine, eyes reflecting the lunar glow.

“Such a charmer. You know, one day, I’ll be immune to your sweet talk. What will you do then?” I leaned into his embrace, enjoying the solid reassurance of his presence.

“Impossible. You love it too much,” he said, his lips grazing the shell of my ear, sending a delicious shiver through me.

“Too true.” I turned in his arms to face him. “Don’t get cocky. I’m still the queen of this castle.”

“Long may she reign.” He bowed his head mockingly, and I laughed, swatting his arm playfully.

I stood there, a prey to the moon’s caress spilling across the room, when Jax’s hands — those emissaries of desire — found the hem of my shirt. His touch was light, almost reverent, as if he were unwrapping a particularly satisfying fortune cookie that promised eternal bliss or at least a really good night.

“Are we sure everyone’s gone?” If there was one soul in this house other than us, I’d murder them with my dragon claws.

“Even if they weren’t, we’ve got the ‘Do Not Disturb unless the Apocalypse is happening’ vibe going,” he said, his fingertips grazing my skin beneath the fabric.

“Good, because I don’t think I could handle another interruption.”

“Nothing will interrupt us tonight.” He pulled my shirt over my head and let it float to the floor like a discarded whisper.

My hands joined the party, fumbling slightly with the buttons of his shirt — dexterity has never been my forte, especially not when the stakes are high and the player across the board is a vampiric Adonis with a penchant for making me forget my own name.

“Is it just me or do these buttons multiply when you’re not looking?” I said, finally popping the last one through its hole.

“Magic buttons,” Jax said with a grin, shrugging out of the garment and revealing the chest that would have Michelangelo scrambling for his chisel.

I traced the contours of his muscles like a cartographer charting new, tantalizing territory, and then his lips were on mine, a kiss that started as a spark and threatened to burn down the entire forest of my restraint.

“Jax.” I sighed into the kiss, my arms winding around his neck to pull him closer.

His response was to deepen the kiss, his tongue tangling with mine in a dance as old as time but as fresh as the first drop of rain after a drought. The passion between us crackled, threatening to ignite the very air we breathed.

He moaned against my lips, the sound vibrating through me like the purr of a very satisfied, very dangerous cat.

“Don’t stop,” I whispered.

Pulling back, I traced the contours of his body, each ridge and valley of muscle felt like it had been carved by the gods for my sole exploration. The scent of sandalwood and something undeniably *Jax* filled my lungs, intoxicating me more potently than any vampire aphrodisiac could.

His hands were on a quest of their own, mapping the curve of my waist, ascending the gentle slope of my ribs before grazing

the soft skin beneath my collarbone. I shivered, not from cold but from the sheer intensity of his touch.

Waves of pleasure cascaded through me. His fingers danced across my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake. “If you keep touching me like that, I might just—”

He silenced me with another searing kiss that spoke volumes more than words ever could. Our bodies melded, a perfect fit despite—or perhaps because of—our supernatural enhancements.

I couldn’t help the smile that flirted with my lips even as passion threatened to consume us. Here we were, two vampires with the added twist of dragon blood. All I could think was how much I adored this man who could reduce me to giggles and gasps in equal measure.

His fingers grazed lower, sending jolts of desire straight to my core. I arched against him, eager for more. His movements were both tender and insistent, a dichotomy that somehow made perfect sense. We were creatures of the night, driven by instincts as old as time, yet we bared our souls along with our bodies.

I gasped as Jax’s mouth found the sensitive spot at the base of my neck.

“Hailey.” He whispered my name like a sacred incantation, his breath hot against my ear. “You’re incredible, do you know that?”

“With you, I’m more than I ever thought possible.”

In that moment, as we moved in perfect harmony, I realized that our dragon powers hadn’t just strengthened us—they’d brought us closer, knitting our souls in ways that defied explanation. It was as if every whispered word, every fervent touch, was weaving a spell around us, binding us tighter with each shared breath.

As waves of ecstasy crashed over me, I clung to Jax, my anchor in the tempest of sensation. With him, I was safe, cherished, and, above all, loved. Our laughter mingled with moans, our snarky banter dissolving into sighs of contentment.

This was us—unconventional, extraordinary, and absolutely in love.

As we reached the crescendo, the world outside our embrace ceased to exist. There were no titles, no expectations, no fears—just Hailey and Jax, two halves of a whole, making magic in the moonlight.

Lying in the afterglow, Jax’s chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm beneath my cheek. He was breathing without thinking again. He’s done it often since we got together. The moonlight spilled through the curtains like molten silver, painting us in its ethereal glow. I inhaled deeply, the scent of vanilla lingering in the air, mingling with the more primal aromas of our shared passion.

“Whoa,” I said, the word barely a whisper but echoing loudly in the quiet room. “I mean, if we could bottle whatever that was, we’d make a fortune.”

Jax chuckled, the sound vibrating against my skin. “Who needs dragon fire when you’ve got that kind of heat?” he said, his fingers tracing lazy circles on the small of my back.

“Speaking of which,” I said, propping myself up on one elbow to look at him. His eyes were bright, holding a spark that had nothing to do with the bedroom antics—something more mystical, more profound. “Our dragon powers... they’re kind of mind-blowing, aren’t they?”

“Absolutely,” he said, his hand now wandering to twirl a strand of my blonde hair. “I mean, just thinking about flying is exhilarating. Actually doing it? It’s freedom like I’ve never known.”

“Right?” I recalled soaring through the clouds, the wind whipping past, the world falling away beneath us. “The fire breathing, well, that’s just cool. I always wondered what it would be like to be a flamethrower.”

“Seriously, it’s not just about the showy stuff. These powers, they add another layer to who we are, to what we can do together.”

“True.” I nestled closer to him, savoring the strength of his arms around me. “It’s like we were formidable before, but now? We’re a supernatural force to be reckoned with.”

“Formidable, fearsome, and occasionally fiery,” he said as I rolled over in his arms. “A dynamic duo.”

Lying there in the crook of Jax’s arm, a twinge of apprehension nibbled at the edges of my post-blissful haze.

I traced lazy patterns on his chest. “Do you ever worry about it though? I mean, this whole dragon-vampire combo deal we’ve got going on is pretty epic, but what if it changes things? What if it messes with our vamp powers, or our standing?”

He tilted my chin up, so I looked directly into his eyes, which were as deep and dark as the night sky outside. “Hailey, love, have I ever told you that you think too much?” he said, a gentle chuckle vibrating through his chest.

I couldn’t suppress a smile. “Seriously, Jax. We’ve got responsibilities, a whole community looking up to us. These new powers—”

“Are just another part of who we are now.” His thumb brushed over my lower lip, silencing my fears for a moment. “We adapt, we overcome. It’s what we do. Besides.” Jax pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. “If anything, I think these dragon powers have brought us closer.”

“True.” I allowed myself to be pulled back against him, loving the reassuring strength of his arms around me. “I guess I can handle a little fire-breathing if it means keeping you by my side. Do you ever think about how different our lives would be if we’d never...” I trailed off as I considered the alternative—a life without him, without this extraordinary bond.

“Every day,” he said, and the sincerity in his tone caught me off guard. “Then I remember that a world without you isn’t one I want to live in.”

“Good answer.” I smiled, my heart swelling with an emotion too vast to contain. “Because you’re stuck with me, dragon boy. For better or worse.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” he assured me.

As sleep tugged insistently at the edges of my consciousness, I allowed myself to drift off.

HAILEY

THE DOORBELL RANG NOT TWO MINUTES AFTER KENDRA AND I wrapped up our latest strategy session—complete with doodles on the whiteboard that looked more like a child’s fridge art than any coherent plan to tackle supernatural woes.

“Expecting anyone else?” Kendra arched an eyebrow at me as we walked out of my office toward the front door, her black hair pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail.

“Maybe it’s a Girl Scout peddling cookies,” I said hopefully, knowing full well that fate rarely delivered Thin Mints to my doorstep. Especially not at ten pm.

When Kendra yanked open the door, what stood on the threshold wasn’t a freckle-faced cookie merchant, but rather a vision right out of a medieval tapestry. Adalinda, with her regal bearing and pouty lips, was decidedly not here for a cookie sale.

“Hailey Whitfield.” Her rich timbre could make the phonebook sound like a Shakespearean sonnet. “I trust you are well.”

“Adalinda, Queen of Dragons.” I tried to match her formality and failed miserably. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“May I enter?” She looked past me to the cozy chaos of my living room where Flint perched on the back of the couch.

“Of course.” I stepped aside. “Come in.”

A squeal equal parts delight and smoke puff erupted from Flint as Adalinda swept inside. After fall-rolling off the couch, he

managed to get in the air and fly across the room. The queen extended a hand toward him, and he nuzzled into her palm with the reverence of a subject before royalty, ring-kissing and all that.

“Your hospitality is appreciated,” Adalinda said as she turned back to me. “I have traveled far, and with your permission, would like to extend my stay within your domicile.”

“Stay here?” I said dumbly. “As in... sleepover?”

“Among other things,” she said, her lips twitching with what might’ve been amusement.

“Sure,” I said quickly, mind whirring with how we would figure out how to fit all these dang people. “We can make room.”

“It’s gonna get a little tight.”

I whirled around to find the twins, Avery and Alison, gawking at us.

“Ah, yes.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “We still have some room at Wade’s I think, so that will be fine.”

Alison looked between Jax and me. “Okay.”

“Indeed.” Adalinda glided over to the girls with the grace of a swan—if swans were ancient, fire-breathing reptiles. She cupped their faces gently, peering down at them as though they were precious, if slightly disappointing, gems. “I’m sorry, my darling dears, but you are not worthy.”

Their faces fell faster than my hopes for a quiet evening. Avery’s bottom lip jutted out, and Alison crossed her arms, both expressions mirroring pouts.

“Hey, now.” I protested with a surge of protective irritation. “They’re plenty worthy. They’re just young.”

“Perhaps in time, they may find their own paths to greatness.” Adalinda released the twins as if granting them freedom from a spell. “Now, I am here to teach you about dragons.”

“Teach us about being dragons? That’s like having Martha Stewart teach you how to fold a fitted sheet,” I said, the humor

barely masking my nerves. The queen of dragons in our house—our very ordinary, not-at-all-royal house. It was absurd and thrilling and absolutely terrifying.

Jax bowed his head once. “We’d be honored by your guidance.”

“Truly.” I forced a smile that I hoped looked less strained than it was. “We’re kind of *winging* it here.” I winced at my pun, but Adalinda chuckled, a rich sound that reminded me of smoldering embers.

“Very well,” she said. “But first, we must address the sleeping arrangements.”

“Ah, yes,” I said, already figuring out the logistics. On second thought, putting the queen of dragons in a house with Izora was not the best choice. I didn’t want to see what those two could get into. “The twins can bunk with Ransom and Luke. They have an office that’ll convert nicely into a temporary bedroom. You—” I gestured vaguely toward the basement, “—can have the bedroom down there. It’s quiet and private.”

“Excellent.” Adalinda settled onto our couch with the grace of a creature used to perches rather than sofas. “First you must understand dragon physiology. While you are vampires now, the essence of your draconic heritage remains.”

“Like a supernatural genetic splicing?” I glanced at Jax, who shrugged.

“Indeed,” she said. “Dragons are creatures of elemental power. Fire courses through our veins, our scales are stronger than any armor, and our wings—well, they are a testament to our mastery of the skies.”

“Fire, huh?” Jax raised an eyebrow. “That explains the heartburn.”

“Jax,” I chastised, but even I couldn’t suppress a giggle. This was all so bizarre. One minute you’re a nurse-turned-vampire-turned-bounty hunter, the next you’re getting lessons on dragonhood from the queen herself.

“Moreover,” Adalinda said, unfazed, “your abilities as dragons are unique to each individual. Some may have control over

certain elements, while others possess psychic talents or gifts of physical prowess.”

“Elements, psychic powers, and super strength,” I counted off on my fingers. “Got it.”

Adalinda smirked, and for a moment, there was a flicker of firelight in her eyes—a glimpse of the dragon beneath the human facade. “We will explore everything in due time. Your education begins now. Pay attention, and you will learn to harness the might that slumbers within you.”

“Slumbering might. Got it,” I stood up straighter. “Let’s wake it up gently, though. I’m not a morning person.”

“Nor am I,” Adalinda said with a smile that was somehow both regal and conspiratorial. “Now, let us start with the most basic of our abilities: the dragon’s breath...”

An hour later, I paced back and forth, trying to wrap my head around the concept of ‘dragon’s breath.’ It was one thing to watch Jax light up a barbecue with a flick of his wrist, but entirely another to imagine that fire could come from within me.

“Okay, so you’re saying it’s not just about belching up flames like some kind of supernatural heartburn?” I asked, pausing mid-step to turn toward Adalinda. Her presence filled the room, an aura of ancient wisdom swirling around her like the most elegant of capes.

Adalinda nodded. “Dragon’s breath is an art form, Hailey. It’s tied to your emotions, your willpower. You must learn to control it, or it will control you.”

Jax leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, his brow furrowed in concentration. He was taking mental notes, probably already strategizing how to incorporate this new power into his defensive maneuvers.

“Control, got it.” I puffed out my cheeks and exhaled dramatically. “So, no using it to toast marshmallows?”

A chuckle escaped Adalinda’s lips, a sound that danced around the room before settling back in her throat. “While I would not

recommend it for culinary purposes, it can be quite *handy* in other situations.”

“Care to share?” I prodded, eager for whatever story was hidden behind her amused eyes.

“Ah, there was this one time...” Adalinda said, her face unfocusing as if she were peering through the walls of time itself. “I found myself facing a rather cheeky goblin king who thought he could outwit me in a game of riddles.”

“Let me guess. He got burned?” Goblin kings were real? Goblins were real?

“Metaphorically, and then quite literally,” Adalinda said. “His arrogance blinded him to the fact that a dragon’s wit is just as sharp as her claws. When he attempted to cheat, well, let’s just say I left him with a scorched sense of humility.”

“Note to self: never challenge a dragon to a battle of wits,” I said with a mock salute.

“Or any battle, really.” Jax earned a nod of agreement from Adalinda.

“Your powers extend far beyond the realm of mere flame, however,” Adalinda said, her tone shifting into teaching mode once more. “You have the potential for great strength, speed, and senses that far exceed human limitations.”

“Right,” I said, intrigued by the idea yet slightly overwhelmed.

“You must master the basics. Once you understand your own body, its capabilities, and limitations, then we can proceed to finesse. Let us begin with understanding your unique strengths. Jax, you possess exceptional vision. Hailey, your olfactory senses are keen. These are not coincidences but rather reflections of your inner dragon.”

“Neat,” I said, genuinely impressed. “So, I’m like a bloodhound with wings?”

“More graceful than a hound, I would hope,” Adalinda said, and I laughed.

“Graceful is my middle name,” I said, though both Jax and Adalinda raised their eyebrows in synchronized skepticism.

“Of course it is,” Jax said, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards.

As Adalinda began to unpack the intricacies of dragonfire—its hues, its heat, and its heart—something prickling at the back of my mind. The sensation wasn’t unfamiliar; it was the same feeling I got when Jax would sneak up behind me, silent as a shadow, just before tickling me into a squealing fit. This time, it wasn’t Jax sneaking up on me—it was trouble.

Jax’s phone rang. “It’s Paige.” He tapped the screen. “Please tell me it’s good news.” Jax’s eyes narrowed with concern as he glanced at me and tapped the phone again, putting it on speaker.

“Depends on your definition of good. The bad news is that there’s no new havoc wreaked by our rogue necromancer. The good? We might have a lead.”

“Define ‘might.’” I crossed my arms and leaned back against the plush armrest of the sofa.

“Let’s just say it’s more of a thread than a rope,” Paige said. “If we pull it right, we might unravel something big.” The line rustled for a moment. “Gotta go.” And it went dead.

Adalinda stepped forward, her presence commanding the room even without the crown she’d left behind. “Do not let uncertainty douse your flames,” she said, her tone firm yet reassuring. “You are both more capable than you realize.”

“Er, thank you?” I forced a smirk onto my lips. “The vote of confidence is nice.”

She reached out to cup my cheek with a hand like it could forge destiny itself. “You have confronted darkness before and prevailed. Your spirit is indomitable.”

“Indomitable?” I raised an eyebrow. I totally had no idea what that meant.

“Yet you stand here, a vampire with a dragon’s soul,” she said.

“Dragon soul or not,” Jax said. “We’re gonna need more than cryptic cheerleading to catch this creep.”

“Perhaps,” Adalinda said with a nod, “but never underestimate the power of belief. Belief fuels the fire within, and that fire can incinerate any obstacle.”

“Sounds nice when you put it that way.”

HAILEY

I SLOUCHED ON THE COUCH, MY LEGS CURLED UNDER ME AS I tried to process the sour tang of disappointment. The living room was a cocoon of silence, save for the soft ticking of the clock on the mantel. Across from me, Jax was a portrait of calm – or maybe just well-practiced indifference.

“Any word from Paige?” I asked, though I already knew the answer by the way his brow furrowed slightly – the only tell he ever gave.

“Nothing,” Jax muttered, his deep voice resonating with frustration. “The lead’s a bust.”

I sighed, rubbing at an invisible spot on the coffee table, tracing circles on the polished wood.

Two sharp raps on the front door were followed by Kendra sticking her head in. “Hey guys. Portal’s up and running at Wade’s.” She tucked a stray hair behind her ear. Her brown eyes were lit with an energy that contrasted sharply with the slump of my shoulders. “We can pop over to the palace whenever now.”

“Fantastic,” I said, but my voice lacked enthusiasm. The portal would be convenient, but the lack of progress on the rogue necromancer had me grumpy. It made the portal feel like we were just setting up more elaborate ways to chase our own tails.

Kendra frowned, picking apart my mood like a crow at roadkill.

Before she could ask me, Dominic walked through the front door, all serious and handsome. Classic Dom. “Jax, Hailey. You’re well?”

What in the world was he doing here?

“As well as can be expected,” Jax said, extending his hand for an arm-to-arm handshake with Dom. “You?”

Dominic didn’t answer. Instead, he stepped to the side. Behind him, nearly hidden by his broad-shouldered shadow, was Zara. I’d completely forgotten she was due to come and move in, what with all the other supernatural shenanigans on my plate.

Damn it.

“Everyone, this is Zara.” Dominic gestured at the timid brunette who shrank further under our collective gaze.

“Hi,” she whispered, so quietly I almost missed it even with my vampire hearing. Zara fidgeted with the hem of her shirt, her eyes fixed on a particularly interesting spot on the floor.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, though I couldn’t shake the prickling sensation on the back of my neck. It wasn’t her fault, really. She was just a girl, probably overwhelmed by all things vampiric and witchy. But something about her set me on edge, like a splinter you can’t see but feel every time you move. Not *something* about her. This was the girl who attacked me, making it necessary for Jax to turn me. Should I slap her or thank her?

Rationally, I should’ve thanked her. Too bad flashes of fangs, pain, and blood kept me from moving forward. I didn’t remember the attack, not really, so it was either memories trying to poke through or my fanciful imagination piecing together what it might’ve been like.

“Zara has been through rigorous training and is ready to join vampire society.” Dominic nudged her.

“Thank you for letting me move back home,” she said quietly. “I missed it here.”

“Great.” My smile was as strained as a cheap pair of pantyhose. “More the merrier, right?”

“Exactly.” Dominic moved into the living room and looked around. “Place looks good.”

It looked exactly the same. “Thanks.” I couldn’t take my gaze off of Zara. What was I supposed to do with her now?

Flint flew in from the dining room and landed on my shoulder. Zara stared at him in awe. I guess it wasn’t everyday you saw a baby dragon. She took a step closer but froze when Flint took to the air and hovered between us. Then he bared his fangs, making a hiss-like sound. A puff of smoke rolled out of his mouth and nostrils. I quickly grabbed him and cuddled him to me. “Be nice. She is our guess.”

I silently praised him for protecting me as I met Jax’s gaze, trying like hell to not laugh.

“Anyone want some coffee?” Jax asked with a bit of humor in his tone.

Kendra jumped up. “I’ll help. Hailey?”

“Pass. My stomach’s doing somersaults without adding espresso to the mix.” Not even a mug of warm blood sounded good right now.

Jax shot me a knowing look, offering a subtle nod of solidarity before turning his attention back to our guests.

The uncomfortable silence in the room was so thick I could’ve sworn it was clogging my already jittery senses. Zara sat perched on the edge of our least intimidating chair—a floral piece that looked like it belonged to a kindly grandmother. She fidgeted with the hem of her skirt, her eyes darting around the room like a cornered mouse. “Um... you have a lovely home,” she murmured, voice barely above a whisper.

“Thanks.” I offered what I hoped was an encouraging smile. “We’re all about hospitality and... helpfulness.” My tongue felt like sandpaper as I spoke.

“Zara’s got some pretty interesting skills that might come in handy.” Dominic moved to sit next to her, patting her knee in a fatherly fashion.

“Interesting is one word for it,” I mumbled under my breath, earning a quick glance from Jax.

I glanced at my phone, its screen winking at me with the promise of escape. Without thinking twice, I shot off a text to Luke:

Code Red. Living room. Now.

“Can someone fill me in on what’s going on?” Zara peeped, looking between us all as Jax returned with mugs.

He handed them around and sat beside me. It didn’t escape my notice that he wasn’t having a coffee either.

“Right. So, we have a rogue necromancer stirring up trouble,” Kendra said, leaning back against the couch with the causal grace of a cat who’d just found the sunniest spot in the house. “And we’re trying to put a cork in it before things get worse.”

“Ah, I see...” Zara’s voice trailed off, leaving an open-ended note hanging in the air like a bad joke waiting for a punchline.

Before anyone could add anything else, the front door banged open—Luke didn’t believe in knocking. His entrance was always grand, like a tornado. He strutted in, all swagger and sneer, eyes immediately finding Zara.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, not bothering with hellos. His gaze was sharp, accusatory even.

“Nothing, um, Luke, this is *Zara*,” I said quickly, trying to head off any imminent rudeness. “She’s moving back to Philly and we’ve agreed to let her stay in our little compound.”

That was what I started calling our section of the neighborhood. We did own most of the houses on our street.

Luke crossed his arms, towering over her seated form. “You know we can’t trust just anybody these days.” Oh, he knew exactly who she was.

“Luke!” I shot him a glare that I hoped conveyed a mix of ‘back off’ and ‘be nice’. “She’s our guest.”

“Mhm.” He flopped down next to me, sending me a side-eye that said we’d be discussing this later.

“Sorry about him,” I said to Zara, whose eyes were wide as saucers. “He’s the overprotective big brother type. Thinks he’s got a sixth sense for sniffing out trouble.”

“That’s what big brothers are for,” Jax said, trying to lighten the mood. “Comes with the territory.”

“Speaking of territory.” Luke leaned forward. “How exactly does Zara fit into ours? Seems like we’ve got enough cooks in the kitchen without adding strangers to the mix.”

“Luke...” I warned again, but there was no stopping the freight train once it left the station.

“Look,” he continued, undeterred. “We’ve got more pressing matters than playing host to the supernatural exchange student program. We need to focus.”

“Actually, my abilities might be useful,” Zara said, her shyness momentarily forgotten. “I have a special vampire power. I can sense energy signatures, especially those of magical beings. Vampires, witches, all kinds of things.”

“Energy signatures?” I echoed, surprised. Maybe she would be an asset after all. That sounded pretty handy.

“Let’s just hope they lead us to Mr. Necro and fast,” Luke muttered, but this time his tone was less confrontational and more contemplative. Even he couldn’t argue with the possibility of gaining an upper hand.

Zara nervously wrung her hands, the soft fabric of her skirt still twisting between her fingers. Despite Luke’s earlier abrasiveness, she’d managed to hold her ground with timid grace. The guilt gnawed at me like an insistent mouse on a block of cheese. I was being ridiculous—judgey even. She hadn’t meant to attack me. She’d been turned and abandoned without a clue how to be a vampire.

“Zara, don’t mind my brother,” I said, finally pushing up from the couch. Her eyes, wide and reflecting the soft light of the living room, met mine. “Luke is... well, he’s protective. We all are. But it’s not your fault.” Ugh, I hated this.

“Thank you,” she murmured, and even her gratitude seemed to have a delicate quality to it. “I just want to help.”

“Help is exactly what we need right now.” Jax’s voice sliced through the tension as he re-entered the room with a stack of files under his arm. “Especially since our necromancer friend seems to be escalating his shenanigans.”

“Shenanigans?” I raised a brow. “Is that what we’re calling raising the dead and causing terror now?”

“Seems fitting for the absurdity level we’ve hit,” Jax said with a wry smile.

The doorbell chimed, slicing through the simmering tension like a silver bullet. I glanced up to Claudia striding into the living room. Jax must’ve texted her.

“Hello Zara,” Claudia said. “Let’s get you settled at my place. You’ll be safe there, and we have a spare room that’s all yours. My girlfriend is out of town right now, but you’ll meet her soon enough.”

Zara stood up, her movements hesitant, like a fawn venturing out into an open field for the first time. She cast a grateful look toward Claudia and then back at us, as if silently apologizing for any inconvenience she might have caused. “Thank you,” she murmured, her voice again barely audible.

I watched them go, the knot in my stomach tightening. It wasn’t just Zara that set my teeth on edge—it was the feeling that we were all perched on the edge of a knife, waiting for the next disaster to strike. The rogue necromancer was out there, turning New Orleans into his personal playground of the undead, and here we were, shuffling houseguests around like we were playing some twisted game of supernatural musical chairs.

“Okay, what’s next?” Kendra asked, checking her phone for the umpteenth time. “We can’t just sit here twiddling our thumbs.”

Jax, leaning against the wall with arms crossed, looked every inch the vampire leader ready to sink his teeth into the problem. “We need more intel. This necromancer isn’t going to expose himself by sending out engraved invitations to his next undead soirée.”

“Engraved invitations?” Luke snorted, looking up from his own phone. “Please, everyone knows the truly classy evil overlords use blood-sealed scrolls.”

“Scrolls are so last millennium,” I retorted, earning a choked laugh from Kendra. But the humor was fleeting, chased away by the gravity of our situation.

Jax ignored our banter. “We know he’s ramping up his activity. We’ve seen the signs, the patterns. He’s getting bolder.”

“Or more desperate,” I added. My skin prickled as I thought about the implications. Desperation made people—and necromancers—unpredictable and dangerous.

HAILEY

THE MOMENT WE STEPPED INTO KENDRA'S HOUSE, I FELT A BIT like Dorothy not in Kansas anymore—or more accurately, a witch's lair turned into a suspiciously normal living room. The usual array of mystical knick-knacks that typically cluttered her space had vanished, including the gigantic pentagram on the floor. In their place, innocuous photos and trinkets stood guard against all things paranormal. It was unsettling in its ordinariness.

“Hailey, Jax, come in!” Kendra beamed as she ushered us further in, the scent of something delicious wafting from the kitchen. “Kids, these are my friends I've told you so much about.”

“Hi,” I said, mustering up my most human-like smile. It was silly, because as a vampire I looked exactly human. Yet if my heart could still skip beats, it would have somersaulted at the unnerving task of playing Normal Homo Sapiens for the evening.

“Nice to meet you,” Jax added, his voice smooth as silk, lacking any hint of the centuries he'd walked the earth. But then again, when you're the leader of the United States vampires, you probably get good at pretending.

Kendra's daughter, Bree, extended her hand with an artist's grace to shake mine, her grip firm but gentle.

“Mom says you've got some wild bounty hunter stories,” said Kendra's son, Sean, as he shook my hand next. He had Kendra's dark hair and that same mischievous smile that

suggested he knew how to cause trouble—and get away with it.

“Wild is one word for it.” I chuckled, hoping my laugh sounded less ‘I hunger for the night’ and more ‘Oh, those pesky criminals.’

“Let’s sit. Dinner will be ready soon.” Kendra motioned toward the living room. I glanced into the dining room on the way to the couch. The table was set in a way that could only be described as aggressively normal.

“Your home is lovely, Kendra,” Jax commented as though he’d never been here before, glancing around, probably searching for signs of magic or a misplaced pentagram. “Very cozy.”

“Thanks! I try to keep it, um, welcoming.” Kendra shot me a look that said threatened my life if we slipped up. Her kids knew nothing of magic or bloody diets.

We settled into conversation, topics ranging from Bree’s recent painting exhibition to Sean’s band playing at a local dive bar. I found myself oddly envious of their blissfully unmagical lives.

“Music, huh?” I perked up when Sean mentioned his band. “What’s your style?”

“Indie rock with a touch of blues,” he replied, eyes lighting up. “We’re called ‘The Midnight Howlers.’”

“Love the name.” I grinned, relaxing a bit. “Any shows coming up? Maybe Jax and I can come to support you.”

“Definitely. Next Friday night at The Broken String. You guys should come!”

“We’d love to.” Maybe Jax could have them play at Catch and Release. Humans frequented the club often, even totally ignorant ones, but backstage and the inner workings might be a little too bloody for Kendra’s ordinarily human son.

“Hey, Hailey,” Kendra interrupted my thoughts. “You seem deep in contemplation. Everything alright?”

“Absolutely,” I said, my gaze briefly flitting to where I knew a book of shadows was usually hidden beneath a floorboard.

“Just thinking about how nice it is to have dinner like this, you know, without any... unexpected surprises.”

“Life’s full of those, isn’t it?” Sean laughed, oblivious to just how true his words were for folks like us.

“More than you know,” I murmured under my breath, earning a knowing glance from Jax. It was so hard not to giggle.

Kendra pulled out a deck of cards. “Come on, let’s have a quick round of rummy before dinner.”

Everyone got into the game and Jax dealt the cards. “Your hand okay there?” Jax flashed a grin at Bree, who was currently squinting at her cards like they held the secrets of the universe. “You look like you’re trying to telepathically command them to rearrange.”

Bree, with her mother’s dark hair pulled into a hasty ponytail, tossed a playful glare his way. “I’m strategizing.” She set down a card with more flair than necessary.

I leaned back in my chair, enjoying the warmth of the familial banter and the smell of roasting garlic and herbs wafting from the oven—Kendra’s lasagna, which she swore was legendary, was on its way to perfection. My heightened senses picked up the subtlest flavors in the air, reminding me that, despite my undead status, some human pleasures remained.

“Jax, you’re supposed to be letting her win,” I chastised halfheartedly from across the table, sipping from a glass of wine.

“Letting me win?” Bree scoffed, pulling her cards close to her chest. “I don’t need any handouts, thank you very much.”

“Ooh, fighting words,” I teased, winking at her. The room was filled with the clinking of glasses and the soft shuffling of cards—a symphony of normalcy that was almost surreal against the backdrop of our usual nightly escapades.

“You okay? You’ve got a look,” Kendra leaned in, her voice a low whisper only I could hear.

“Which one? My ‘I’m totally winning this game’ look or my ‘I haven’t fed on a blood bag in six hours’ look?” I whispered back, my lips curving upward.

“Definitely the second one.”

“Relax, I’m good.” I smiled at my bestie just as the doorbell chimed through the house.

“Expecting someone else?” Jax asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Can’t be Howard, he’s out of town,” Kendra mumbled, pushing herself away from the table. “I’ll go check.”

“Need backup?” I offered, already knowing Kendra’s protective streak ran as deep as her sense of justice.

“Stay put, Vampy,” she shot back with a smirk, gliding towards the front door.

“Vampy?” Bree repeated with a chuckle. “Is that like a pet name?”

“Something like that,” I said, the corners of my mouth twitching. If only she knew.

The murmurs of conversation faded into the background as I tuned into Kendra’s movements, my ears picking up the creak of the front door and the sudden drop in temperature as the night air rushed in. There was a pause—a moment of surprise—then Kendra’s voice, laced with confusion and a hint of exasperation.

“Uh, Hailey?”

That was my cue. I stood up, brushing past Jax with a quick, “Be right back.” He gave me a nod, his gaze lingering on the doorway, alert to any potential weirdness inbound.

“Keep an eye on the rummy shark,” I told him, pointing at Bree, who looked proud.

“Of course,” he said, his attention still divided between the game and the front door.

“Kendra, what’s—” I began as I reached the door, only to stop mid-sentence as I laid eyes on our unexpected visitor. Standing in the dim porch light was none other than Luci, aka Lucifer, looking every bit the charming devil with his tailored suit and mischievous smile.

“Luci!” I hissed, stepping outside and closing the door behind us to shield our mortal company from the sight. “What are you doing here?”

“Can’t a friend drop by unannounced?” Luci asked, feigning hurt feelings.

“Sure, if that friend isn’t the Prince of Darkness himself,” I muttered, crossing my arms. “Kendra’s kids are here—they don’t know about magic, or vampires, or, well, *you*.”

“Ah, living incognito. How quaint.” He chuckled and brushed an imaginary speck of dust from his sleeve.

“Exactly. So, unless you can play the part of a normal, boring human, I suggest—”

“Love to stay for dinner, thanks for asking.” He breezed past Kendra and me before we could protest. He didn’t wait for an invitation, but then, he never did.

“Luci! No one invited—”

“Smells divine, Kendra,” Luci called out, sauntering into the living room with all the confidence of a man who owned the place.

“Who’s this?” Bree asked, peering at him curiously with Sean equally interested beside her.

“An old friend,” I said quickly, exchanging a glance with Kendra. An old friend who just happened to rule the fiery pits of hell—but that was beside the point.

“Old is right,” Jax muttered under his breath, though a smirk played on his lips as he took in Luci’s audacity.

“Nice to meet you all,” Luci said, smooth as silk. “I’m Luci. I do hope I’m not intruding.”

“Not at all,” Kendra lied through gritted teeth, shooting me a panicked look.

“Great,” he said, settling into the empty chair next to Bree. “Now, what’s this about being a rummy shark?”

Luci managed to behave himself all through the game, then into the dining room and during Kendra’s dishing out of the

food.

“Nothing beats the zest of home cooking.” Luci moaned as he lifted a forkful of the lasagna to his lips. “It’s almost... *magical*.”

“Mom’s always been an artist in the kitchen,” Bree said, her voice carrying the pride of a daughter who’s witnessed countless culinary masterpieces. “Actually, that’s where I get my artistic streak from. Want to see some of my paintings?”

“Absolutely.” Jax leaned closer as she scrolled through images on her phone.

“Wow, these are incredible.” Jax looked genuinely impressed. “You know, I own a gallery downtown, and I’d love to have your work featured in a showcase.”

“Really?” Bree’s face lit up like a thousand-watt bulb. “That’s amazing! Thank you.”

“Of course, talent like yours deserves an audience.”

I beamed at my love. He had a knack for making people so happy.

“An audience is the least her talent deserves,” Luci added, and I held my breath. “Why, back in my day—”

“Your day must have seen many an art show, huh, Luci?” I interrupted before he could finish, shooting him a glare that I hoped conveyed *Don’t you dare out Kendra as a witch in front of her kids*.

“Sure, I’ve been around,” he said with a sly grin, picking up on my silent plea. “Art’s always been a passion of mine.”

“So,” Kendra said loudly. “When we’re done, should we have some brandy?”

After dinner, Kendra had just placed the bottle of brandy on the coffee table with a flourish when I caught her eye, and she widened her eyes and flared her nostrils. Oh, yeah. Message received. She wanted me to get Luci out of here. The sweet aroma of the fortified wine mingled with the lingering scent of garlic, but my mind was already crafting a hasty retreat.

“Luci,” I said loudly. “We found something in our attic that you simply must see. It’s... well, it’s rather unique.”

“Unique?” Luci arched an eyebrow, his interest piqued as he swirled the amber liquid in his glass. He didn’t recognize my subterfuge.

“Oh, yeah, she did.” Kendra backed me up with her lawyerly conviction. “It’s a rare find. We wouldn’t want to trouble the kids with boring adult stuff, though. You understand.”

“Ah, a mystery wrapped in an enigma.” Luci narrowed his eyes suspiciously on me, setting down his untouched glass. “Lead the way.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at his theatrics, but relief flooded through me as we made our excuses and bid a hasty farewell to Sean and Bree, promising to catch up another time. Jax’s hand grazed mine, a silent reassurance, as we stepped into the crisp night air.

“Rare find, huh?” Jax whispered as we walked. “What are we showing him, exactly? Your collection of worn out nurse scrubs?”

“Har-har. We’ll think of something. Besides, we’re not going back to discuss my past.”

“Could be a conversation starter,” he said, earning himself a playful shove.

Our laughter trailed behind us as the familiar outline of our home came into view. But the sight that greeted us upon arrival was anything but normal.

Arric and Izora perched awkwardly on our front steps, their guilty expressions shining brighter than the porch light. The pair looked up, like deer caught in headlights, as we approached.

“Evening, guys,” Jax said, his tone a mix of curiosity and caution. “What brings you to our doorstep looking like you’ve swallowed canaries?”

“We... um,” Arric stammered, glancing at Izora, who seemed equally tongue-tied.

Before either could elaborate, Luci's presence seemed to dawn on them, and the shock on Izora's face would have been comical if the situation weren't so charged. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly as she stared at Luci.

"Luci?" she finally squeaked, the single word holding volumes of unsaid questions and accusations.

"Ah, Izora." Luci's usual smooth demeanor faltered for a split second before he regained his composure. "Long time no see. I didn't realize you were... Well, isn't this a quaint coincidence?"

"Coincidence?" I looked back and forth between the two of them, both looking totally dumbfounded. The tension was as thick as molasses, and it didn't take a vampire's heightened senses to notice that the air between Luci and Izora was electric with unspoken history.

"Actually," Luci said, hastily smoothing the front of his jacket. "This has been delightful, but I really must be off. Prior engagements and all that."

"Riiiiight," I drawled, my arms crossing over my chest as I watched him into thin air. "Because the devil always keeps his appointments."

"Something tells me we've just scratched the surface of a very, very interesting story," Jax muttered, echoing my thoughts.

"Later," I said to Arric and Izora, a promise that we'd unravel this thread when the time was right. "Let's go inside and discuss why you two look like you've been baking with forbidden fruit."

HAILEY

“OKAY, SPILL IT. WHAT THE HECK HAPPENED?” JAX’S WORDS cut through the room, authoritative and laced with that ‘dad-voice’ he probably didn’t even realize he had mastered.

The eerie silence in the house stretched into infinity, pressing on my eardrums like an unseen fog. I almost tasted the tension, a tangy mix of guilt and anticipation heavy in the air.

Out of the corner of my eye, Flint stretched in his sleep on top of the couch. He was curled up tight, blissfully unaware of the macabre scene unfolding, or maybe he just didn’t care.

“Jax, you look like you’re about to pop a vein. Relax, it’s not what it looks like.” Arric attempted a casual shrug that failed spectacularly due to the crimson smudges decorating his once-white shirt.

“There’s no need to be upset.” Izora flicked a piece of, um, ew, *something* off her sleeve. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know whether it was dried blood or a bit of someone’s epidermis.

“Really? You two look like extras from a zombie flick.” I crossed my arms over my chest as I tried to feign authority—a move Kendra pulled off effortlessly time and again. “You can’t just wander in looking like you’ve bathed in someone else’s circulatory system without giving us a little context.”

“Fine.” Arric huffed, exchanging a glance with Izora before continuing. “Let’s just say we had a very *lively* evening.”

“More like an un-lively one for someone, if I’m guessing?” These two, looking this bloody, was definitely not going to be a good thing.

The silence of the room was suddenly deafening, a stark contrast to the chaos that had clearly reigned earlier. I blinked at Arric and Izora, their appearance painting a thousand words — none of them particularly reassuring. Jax’s hand tightened in mine as we took in their disheveled hair and the crimson stains that marred their clothes like badges of dishonor.

“Okay, seriously, what is going on?” The question slipped from my lips before I could tether it with civility. Their nonchalance was unnerving, to say the least. “Now.”

“We had a party,” Izora said with a shrug as if she’d just returned from a quaint tea gathering rather than whatever macabre soirée had actually transpired.

“A party?” Jax asked incredulously. “With whom, the cast of a slasher flick?”

“Relax,” Arric said. “We only invited the cream of the crop.” He flashed an impish grin. “The baddest of the bad.”

“Bad?” I parroted. “You mean—”

“Yup.” Izora popped the ‘p’ with a sickeningly sweet smile. “Very bad people. Let me tell you, they were delicious.” Her tongue flicked out, as though savoring the memory, and my stomach performed an uncomfortable somersault.

“Delicious?” Oh, no. “I’m sorry, are we talking about hors d’oeuvres or humans here?”

“Both, kind of,” Arric said with the ghost of a chuckle. “It was a raucous good time, right until the end.”

“End?” Jax’s tone brought no argument for levity, but Arric and Izora were utterly unfazed by the tension coiling tighter with each word exchanged.

“Let’s just say we found a way to kill two birds with one stone,” Izora said, her expression smug. “Or, should I say, drain two evils with one bite.”

“By compelling them to come to an abandoned house,” Arric said, as if he were recounting a clever prank rather than a bloodbath. “Then we drank all their blood.”

Izora's exuberance was almost infectious, if it weren't for the gruesome context. "Why waste our appetite on innocents when there's a whole buffet of villains out there?"

"Because that's not how we operate," Jax said, his patience fraying like an overused rope. "We don't just go around playing judge, jury, and executioner."

"Ah, but see, we thought of that." Arric's eyes gleamed with self-satisfaction. "We made sure to leave no trace. In fact, we compelled a real-live serial killer to confess to the murders."

"Covering our tracks," Izora finished triumphantly, as though she'd just unveiled a masterful piece of artwork instead of a cover-up for mass murder.

"You *what*?" Jax's shock was palpable, a rare crack in his composed façade.

I couldn't even form words as I gaped at them.

"Look, we're not idiots," Arric said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "We know how to clean up after ourselves. Really, nobody's going to miss those scumbags."

"Arric," I protested, even as I struggled to reconcile the gravity of their actions with their blasé attitude.

"Come on, you can't tell me you're upset about a few less criminals in the world," Izora reasoned, her brows knitting together as if she genuinely couldn't comprehend my concern.

"There's a line, okay? We don't just cross it because we're thirsty."

"Thirsty and inventive," Arric said with a wink. "Besides, who's going to argue with the results?"

"Results?" Jax was ice-cold now, his authority as leader undeniably front and center. "This isn't about results. It's about control, and you two seem to have lost yours."

"Control is overrated," Izora said under her breath, but even she knew she'd pushed too far.

"Overrated or not," Jax concluded, his gaze locked onto Arric with finality. "You know better. You're supposed to be on the

council, which, but the way, I strip you of your position as of this moment. You're going to Milan to face the council."

"Milan?" Arric's playful demeanor vanished in an instant, replaced by something akin to panic. "But—"

"No buts." Jax turned to guide him toward the back door. "Let's go. Portal's waiting."

"Portal, schmortal." Izora huffed, rolling her eyes dramatically. As Jax and Arric disappeared through the doorway, her bravado faltered, and she looked at me, her expression a mix of defiance and confusion. "What?"

"Seriously?" I stared at her, incredulous. "You really don't get what you did wrong?"

She shrugged. "We were careful."

Of course.

"We didn't even bite them. No fangs were involved, darling." Her grin was as sharp as the blade she pantomimed with her fingers. "We merely made a few... strategic cuts. Artistic, really. The local serial killer will get all the credit."

Holy freaking crap. It was one thing to target those who deserved it, but this? This was theatrical, turning justice into some macabre performance.

"Artistic?" I said sarcastically. "What are you now, the Van Gogh of vampires? Because nothing screams 'masterpiece' like framing someone for your blood buffet."

"It's efficient." Izora shrugged nonchalantly. "It solves two problems at once. We get our fill, and the world gets rid of one more monster."

"Murder isn't a joke." I struggled to keep my rising anger in check. My thoughts were a whirlwind, each one colliding with the next—a chaotic symphony that clashed with the lingering scent of iron in the air.

"Your moral compass is so screwed up, it's pointing straight to hell," I said under my breath, my snark a thin veil over my shock.

“Ooh, feisty,” Izora chuckled. “Really, Hailey. We’re predators. It’s nature.”

“Predators *with* a conscience. Remember?” I leaned in. “Or did you forget that little detail while slicing and dicing?”

“Details, details.” She waved her hand dismissively. “They’re just nuances in the grand scheme of things.”

“Is that how you sleep at night?” I asked, though by the relaxed way Flint snoozed atop the couch behind us, it was obvious she had no trouble in that department.

“Sleep like the dead,” she said with a smirk, but the briefest flicker of something else passed through her eyes. A fleeting shadow of doubt?

“Right,” I turned away from her to hide my frustration.

The silence stretched between us, thick and heavy. I could almost hear the cogs turning in Izora’s head as she searched for another smart retort, another way to justify her actions.

“Jax thinks this is serious enough to involve the council.” I hoped to instigate a sliver of remorse—or at least awareness.

“Jax worries too much.” Izora waved her hand dismissively.

“Or maybe you don’t worry enough,” I said. “Ever think of that?”

Izora opened her mouth, probably to deliver another glib comeback, but stopped short. Instead, she looked past me, her eyes narrowing slightly as if seeing something I couldn’t.

“Anyway,” she finally said, her attention snapping back to me. “All this talk is making me thirsty. Care for a drink?”

“Pass,” I said curtly as I watched the faintest tremble in her hand. “You’ve had enough for both of us already, don’t you think?”

Izora shrugged, but as she turned toward the kitchen, her back stiffened ever so slightly. “Suit yourself.”

“Suit myself.” I watched her go. “Suit myself, indeed.”

What a bitch.

HAILEY

JAX'S PHONE SHATTERED THE UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE OF THE evening like a wrecking ball through drywall. I was closest, so I snatched it up, expecting Paige to be as calm and collected as ever—but tonight, her tone had the edge of a serrated knife.

“We found the necromancer’s lair,” she said without preamble, her words hitting me like a slap in the face with a cold fish. “He’s got an army that makes the cast of ‘Thriller’ look like a flash mob.”

“An army?” The image of zombies doing the moonwalk flashed across my mind before I shook it away. This was no time for levity.

“We need all hands on deck.” The line clicked off.

Jax’s jaw clenched. He nodded once, decisively, and started barking orders into his phone like a general rallying his troops. Within minutes, our normally quiet home resembled Grand Central Station at rush hour, minus the trains and overpriced sandwiches.

“Everyone except Claudia and Izora.” Jax looked at the motley crew assembled in our living room. “She stays with Flint and the baby vamps.”

“Like hell. I’m not staying behind,” Izora protested. “I can fight.”

“Your job is here, protecting them,” Jax pointed toward Zara, Alison, Avery, and Flint, who had his little angry gaze fixated on Zara. “We need you, Izora. They need you.”

She huffed after several moments of intense glare-offs. “If things go south, you call me. I’ll come.”

“Promise.” I crossed my heart with my fingers. “It’s just a quick in-and-out. No biggie.” I wasn’t sure who I was trying to convince more—her or myself.

“Right. No biggie,” Izora said, though her narrowed eyes spoke volumes. She knew better. We all did.

“Let’s move out,” Jax said, and like a swarm of bats out of hell, everyone moved closer to Kendra.

“New Orleans, coming right up,” Kendra said, her fingers dancing in the air as she chanted under her breath. A portal yawned open in front of us, swirling with colors that reminded me of Mardi Gras beads thrown from a parade float.

We stepped out into a big room that appeared to be in a basement. Paige waited for us. Grim, Nash, Owen and Janice stood behind her like sentries waiting to defend their leader. Xxanyoneelse?xx

Paige gestured to an old wooden door. We opened it and stepped through, walking into a long stone hallway. “Classy,” I muttered.

The air in the necromancer’s lair was thick with the kind of dampness that seeped into your bones and set up camp. The place had all the charm of a haunted house, complete with cobwebs that probably dated back to the Louisiana Purchase and a soundtrack provided by the moans of the undead.

“Watch your step,” Jax warned as we navigated through a dimly lit corridor. “Traps are likely hidden everywhere.”

“Great. It’s like an escape room from hell,” I said.

“Hailey, metal manipulation might come in handy if we encounter any surprises.” Kendra glanced over at me.

We turned a corner and a skeletal figure shuffled toward us, its eye sockets empty yet somehow fixated on our group. With a flick of my wrist, I sent a rusted out old metal sconce from the wall straight through its skull. It crumbled to dust with a sigh that sounded almost grateful.

“Nicely done.” Jax gave me a nod that sent a little thrill through me despite the grim surroundings.

High on my success, I walked right through what felt like sixty different spiderwebs, sending me into an inane dance to wipe phantom cobwebs from my hair.

After a moment, I calmed down, and we turned to go on down the dim passageway. “Stay sharp,” Jax said with a significant glance at me, and we fell into a tight formation, moving deeper into the belly of the beast.

I was on high alert, and I felt faint vibrations of metal throughout the lair, ready to bend to my will should we need an extra edge. The mustiness of decay filled my nose, but underneath it, I caught the scent of something else—power.

As we crept deeper into the necromancer’s lair, a tableau of horror unfolded before us. The chambers were littered with arcane symbols and the remnants of failed experiments—vampires contorted into forms that defied nature.

“Guys, you seeing this?” Kendra said, stare fixed on a figure stretched out on a slab. A vampire—or what used to be one—its limbs elongated, and its fangs replaced with jagged obsidian. The result was a creature ripped from the darkest corners of imagination.

“Looks like our rogue necromancer has been busy playing Dr. Moreau with vampires,” I said, my stomach churning. This wasn’t just about raising the dead; it was an affront to the living.

“Turning vampires into... what? Super zombies?” Luke asked, gripping Ransom’s hand like a lifeline..

“Undead abominations, more like,” Ransom said, his face a mask of disgust.

“Abominations or not, they’re still people,” Jax said. “Or they were. We’ve got to stop whatever this is.”

“Right.” I nodded, pushing past the initial shock. “Fast, before he turns all of New Orleans into his personal army of nightmarish freaks.”

The faint clinking of chains drew our attention to a corner where the necromancer hunched over a dusty tome, his fingers tracing the ancient script. His hair was a white halo of disarray, and his eyes burned with an unholy light.

“Ah, visitors. Welcome to my gallery of justice,” he croaked, turning to face us with a bitter, manic grin.

“Justice?” Kendra scoffed. “You call this justice?”

“Imprisoned by your kind for most of my life.” He stood slowly. “A young man, full of potential, locked away because I threatened them simply by existing. I have suffered at the hands of those who deemed themselves superior. No longer. With my new creations, I will have my revenge.”

“Look, I get being ticked off about being grounded for an eternity, really, your anger is understandable but this isn’t the way to make friends or—”

“*Friends?*” He let out a derisive laugh. “I have no need for friends. Only vengeance.”

“Great, a geriatric supervillain with a grudge,” I said under my breath.

Jax squeezed my hand. “You’ve had a rough go, I get it. This isn’t justice; it’s madness. We can’t let you continue.”

“*Can’t* let me?” The necromancer sneered from across the cavernous room. “You have no choice. My army grows with every passing moment. Soon, there will be no stopping me.”

The cold, damp air of the necromancer’s lair clung to my skin like a shroud as we encircled the old man, whose eyes blazed with a fury that belied his frail frame. His magic crackled in the air—a tangible force of anger and pain.

“Looks like it’s nap time for you, Pops.” Kendra’s hands shook ever so slightly. “We can’t have you turning bloodsuckers into your personal puppet show.”

“Your sympathy is misplaced,” he said. “You think you’re noble, stopping me? You’re just another set of jailers,”

“Jailers?” Ransom said, his brow furrowed. “We don’t want to imprison you. We want to stop you from creating more

victims.”

“Victims?” The word cut through him, and for a moment, his fierceness flickered. “*I* was the victim, No one stopped them from taking everything away from me!”

“All right,” Luke said, his normally jovial face somber. “This ends now.”

HAILEY

“SOMETHING’S NOT RIGHT,” OWEN SAID, IN A LOW GROWL that matched the rumble in the sky above. “These vamps shouldn’t be this docile, not even with a strong necromancer controlling them. It’s like they’re stoned on vampire Valium.”

“Or maybe the necro has got a new toy.” I tilted my head as I caught a flicker of something—a shimmer in the air, like heat rising from asphalt, but colder, more sinister. There was something off about the rogue. Speaking of toys, I clenched my fists, feeling the pull of metal beneath the ground, the iron veins that I could theoretically manipulate if I had the focus of a ninja and the energy of a toddler after a triple espresso.

“An amplification device?” Kendra squinted at the necromancer. She stood beside me, arms crossed, her witchy senses probably tingling.

“Could be.” Owen scanned the necromancer’s form for any sign of the source. “If he’s juicing his powers, then all bets are off. We need to—”

“Find his battery pack and yank it,” I finished for him, nodding. Disrupt the power, break the spell, save the day, rinse and repeat. The fanged drones in front of us complicated things. They might be under some mojo, but they still had fangs and bad attitudes.

I glanced at Jax. “Any bright ideas on the non-lethal takedown of our fanged friends?” I asked, hoping his centuries of experience would have come with a manual titled ‘Necromancy for Dummies.’ These vampires hadn’t chosen to

be here. We didn't want to kill them for being enthralled by a necromancer.

"I think it's just a matter of getting close enough to kill the necromancer without turning into vampire chow."

"Leave that part to me." Owen stepped forward with resolve etched across his face. "I'm going to start severing the connections." He closed his eyes and raised his hands, fingers twitching as if he were playing an invisible piano.

The closest vampire shuddered, its eyes momentarily clearing before it shook its head violently, like a swimmer trying to get water out of his ears. One down, a throng to go. And one more on our side.

"See? Easy as pie," I said, though the sweat beading on Owen's forehead told a different story. This was going to be like defusing bombs while riding a unicycle.

"Sure, if the pie is filled with razor blades." Owen grunted, moving onto the next vampire with a grimace of concentration. Another vampire blinked back to their senses, looking around in confusion.

The scent of ozone prickled my nose as lightning crackled from Kendra's fingertips, illuminating the darkened cave. The vampires under his thrall had formed a barricade of fangs and fury between us and our real target. Suddenly they weren't looking so out of it.

"Any luck on that power source?" I ducked as a vampire lunged, narrowly missing my throat. With a flick of my wrist, I called upon my metal-manipulation ability to yank a steel pipe from the wall, swinging it like a baton to throw Mr. Bitey back into the shadows.

"Still looking," Jax said as he shoved three vampires back at once.

Owen grunted, beads of sweat tracing the concentration lines on his forehead as he battled the invisible puppet strings that tethered the undead minions. "Hailey, my focus—" he said, but was cut off by a snarl from a newly freed vamp who

decided to express their thanks through a guttural growl rather than words.

“Never mind,” I said, spinning to face another assailant. “Keep dancing. It’s working.”

The fight was an absurd ballet; vampires were everywhere, and each time one shook off the necromancer’s influence, they retreated, confused and disoriented. Not really able to help us at all.

Our goal was to reach the necro without turning this into an undead massacre, but with the way things were going, it was like trying to thread a needle while riding a rollercoaster—blindfolded and upside down.

“Kendra, can you amp up the light show? Maybe give these guys a sunnier disposition?” I hoped her witchy mojo could speed things along.

“Very funny.” She zapped another vamp with a bolt that tickled more than terrified. “I’m not a walking tanning bed.”

“Can’t blame a girl for trying,” I said with a half-grin as my forearm stung. A quick glance confirmed a shallow scrape—courtesy of vampiric claws. “Ouch, watch the claws!”

“Less sarcasm, more ass-kicking, please,” Jax boomed across the room, his own fight sounding like a tempest confined to a teacup.

“Fine, fine.” I sighed, sending a metallic ripple through the ground, creating a domino effect that knocked several vamps off their feet. “Happy now?”

“Ecstatic,” Jax said.

Owen’s frustration was palpable as he continued his work, beads of perspiration mingling with flecks of blood from a nick on his cheek. His hands moved with purpose, each motion stripping away the necromancer’s hold on an enthralled vampire.

“Come on, you bastard,” Owen said under his breath, his gaze locked on the shadows where our true enemy lurked. “Show me your secret.” He finally broke the control over a burly

vampire who stumbled backward, almost comically wide-eyed.

“Nice job.” I cheered, then turned to the bewildered vamp. “Welcome back to team Free Will. Now, if you could kindly help us get to the guy who’s been playing puppeteer with your life, that’d be great.”

“Owen, two o’clock,” I said, flinging a silver dagger with a flick of my wrist, manipulating the metal to whirl around a lumbering vamp.

“Got it.” Owen cut through the cacophony of snarls and grunts, his hands weaving an intricate pattern in the air as he worked his necromantic mojo. Then, without warning, the room erupted in a surge of power, like a punch to the gut.

“Hailey, look out!” Kendra’s words pierced the chaos just as an unseen force barreled into Owen from behind. He careened forward, his concentration shattered, and the energy he’d been channeling snapped back with a crack that echoed off the walls.

“Owen,” My heart plummeted to my boots, and for a split second, time slowed to a torturous crawl. He hit the ground hard, a jagged piece of rebar protruding ominously from his side.

“Son of a—” I slid to his side and pressed my hands against the wound in a futile attempt to stem the tide of crimson that bloomed across his shirt like some grotesque flower.

“Hailey, we need to move,” Jax bellowed, grabbing a thrall by the scruff and tossing him aside like a ragdoll. The poor vamp landed with a thud and a bewildered expression that would have been hilarious under different circumstances.

“Right. Right.” I shook my head to clear it, the acrid taste of fear coating my tongue. “Kendra, can you—”

“I’m on it.” She was already chanting even as her hands shook. Goddess bless that woman and her unflappable spirit.

“Hailey, I’m not feeling so hot.” Owen gasped, his pallor turning a shade of white that rivaled any ghost I’d ever seen.

“Shh, save your strength.” I shot him with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. It probably looked more like a grimace. “You’re going to be fine. You hear me? Fine.”

“Jax, any bright ideas that don’t involve turning me into a pincushion?” Owen’s question floated weakly from the makeshift stretcher Kendra had conjured, his eyes fluttering like moths against a flame.

“Actually, yeah,” Jax said. “Kendra, you think you can portal him straight to Ava? She’s got the healing touch.”

“Hailey, keep those vampires off our back for a bit longer, will ya?” Kendra said, her hands already weaving through the air, fingers tracing the outline of what would become our escape hatch.

“Piece of cake,” I said, shoving another couple of vamps away while Paige, Grim, and Nash kicked butt with Ransom and Luke. “You guys get going. I’ll play rearguard.”

The air crackled as Kendra’s spell took shape, a shimmering doorway flickering into existence. It looked like someone had hung a disco ball in the void—flashes of light and shadow dancing together in a silent rave.

Jax picked up and carried Owen’s prone form through the portal.

“Focus on not dying,” I said, the words a poor shield against the fear clawing at my insides.

The night was electric, alive with the kind of tension that made my fangs itch—an odd phenomenon, like a sixth sense for impending doom.

HAILEY

THE DIN OF BATTLE WAS LIKE THE WORLD'S WORST orchestra, all clashing cymbals and off-key violins if violins shrieked like banshees. I gritted my teeth, a snarl escaping me unbidden, as Ransom, broad-shouldered and bristling with the kind of intensity that made seasoned vampires take a step back - growled beside me.

"Enough of this," he said through fangs that had long since unsheathed in his fury. I watched, somewhat in awe and entirely not ready to dive into the fray myself, as he gathered himself like a dark storm about to break. With a leap that would have any Olympic high jumper green with envy, Ransom cleared the ragtag vampire-zombie frontline and soared over the heads of their bewildered army.

"Show off," I said under my breath, even as I admired the sheer power it took to vault like that. He was a blur, all muscle and vengeance, aimed directly at the necromancer who was orchestrating this undead mess like a maestro of mayhem. The rogue was chanting, hands weaving spells that made my skin crawl, but Ransom was on him too quickly, claws outstretched, aiming for the jugular.

"Go for the throat, that's my boy." I cheered, momentarily forgetting that this wasn't some twisted spectator sport. Any hopes of a swift victory were dashed as quickly as they'd come when the shambling horde of vampires, more bone than flesh, did what could only be described as the Monster Mash shuffle to regroup and counterattack.

“Crud muffins,” I cursed as they moved with unnatural swiftness, forming a wall of decay between Ransom and his prey. Just like that, the tide turned from triumph to frustration.

“Retreat,” said a voice — probably mine, though it was hard to tell over the pounding in my ears and the copper tang of blood that filled the air. Ransom was already in motion, backflipping away with an agility that made me briefly wonder if he had been a gymnast in a past life.

“Ransom, you big sexy hunk of vampire, don’t you dare become undead pâté,” Luke yelled.

As he landed near us, a collective sigh rippled through our side. We might not win every skirmish, but we sure as sunrise weren’t going to lose Ransom without a fight. His chest heaved.

“Nice of you to join us again.” I gave him a light punch on the arm as Luke practically climbed him. “Did you have fun playing hopscotch with the undead?”

“Your concern is touching,” Ransom said, his tone dry enough to start a brush fire.

“I got close enough to grab something off of him, though I don’t know what it is.” He held the mysterious object up as Jax shoved another round of vampires back. A skull, small and unassuming but pulsating with an energy that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention.

I reached out, feeling the thrum of power from the skull. The sensation was like licking a nine-volt battery, but with less commitment. “What’s with the creepy keepsake?”

“Could be our ticket out of this mess,” he said, passing it to me. At his touch, the thing vibrated, its energy intensifying.

“It’s about to go full-on Pandora’s Box on us,” I turned the skull over in my hands. It was cold, colder than the grave, and stared into my soul with its empty eye sockets.

“Or it could be the key to controlling these puppets,” Ransom wiped some random gunk off his sleeve as I handed the skull back to him.

“Hailey!” a voice cut through the cacophony, and I spun on my heel to see Kendra bulldozing her way toward us, her face set in that familiar I-mean-business expression.

“Kendra!” I shouted back, dodging a particularly drooly vampire hell-bent on making me his midnight snack. “Welcome back to the party.”

“Get this far away from here,” Ransom said, thrusting the skull into Kendra’s hands. The object pulsed with energy, a hum vibrating through the bone that made my teeth rattle. “I think it’s powering their control. Without it, we might stand a chance.”

She nodded sharply, wrapping her fingers around the skull, her knuckles whitening.

“Consider it gone.” Her gaze met mine, and there was a flicker of uncertainty there. She was new to tapping into Rhiannon’s power, and responsibility was heavy in her brown eyes. “Geez it’s powerful.”

“Be careful,” I said, the words tumbling out amid the din. “No heroics, okay?”

“Heroics are Howard’s department,” she said with a smirk. “I’m just the delivery service.”

Kendra didn’t hesitate; she was already murmuring an invocation, her free hand drawing glowing symbols in the air. The ground beneath us trembled, and I had to steady myself against the surge of power that emanated from her.

As Kendra vanished from sight, presumably with the skull safely in tow, I had a momentary pang of worry. But I pushed it aside, focusing on the fight at hand.

As the portal’s echo faded, I pivoted back to face the undead horde, wondering if they’d noticed their precious artifact had just been FedExed to another dimension. The answer came quickly and in the form of pure pandemonium.

“Uh, guys? I think we broke them,” I said as the vampire army stumbled around like toddlers after a sugar rush. Without the skull’s power, their movements became erratic, jerky—even

slapstick. One vamp ran headlong into the wall, shook his head, and then did it again as if expecting a different result.

“Looks like someone hit the off switch on their brain. If they had one to begin with.” Jax ducked as a vampire lunged at him and tripped over its own feet. He glanced at me with mirth in his eyes. “You know, I’ve heard of losing your head over a pretty girl, but this is ridiculous.”

A vampire who must’ve once been a marathon runner in life—or undeath—zoomed past me, his arms flailing wildly, only to crash into another bewildered vampire.

“Is it wrong that I’m slightly disappointed?” Jax asked, catching up to me as we sidestepped a pair of vampires chasing their own shadows. “I was hoping for a bit more... I don’t know, ‘Night of the Living Dead,’ less ‘Three Stooges.’”

“Disappointed? As long as my neck stays bite-free, I call this a win.” I guided a disoriented vamp away from walking into another with a gentle push. “Let’s regroup with the others and figure out how to clean up this mess. Hey, maybe someone should put out cones or something. Safety first, right?”

Ransom snorted, shaking his head as we made our way through the dazed vampires toward where the rest of our team was hopefully not getting mauled by the undead.

The rogue necromancer stood defiantly amid the chaos he’d created. His undead minions, once his puppet soldiers, now tumbled around like toddlers in a three-legged race gone horribly wrong.

This was ridiculous. “Time to turn this ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’ rerun off.”

“Right behind you,” Jax said, cracking his knuckles with relish.

The rogue necromancer’s army was disoriented without his control, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t snap at anything that moved. Right now, that was us.

“Hailey, watch out,” Grim said over the din just as air whooshed beside me. Instinctively, I ducked, narrowly

avoiding the wild swing of a vampire who clearly hadn't gotten the memo about his boss losing the remote control.

"I owe you one," I said, sidestepping another flailing bloodsucker before sending him stumbling backward.

We fought our way through the pandemonium, and the pulse of the necromancer's dark energy drawing nearer. It was like a beacon of bad vibes, and I had every intention of snuffing it out.

The rogue necromancer's eyes widened in realization. The undead were turning on him, their natural instincts unleashed by Kendra's taking the skull.

"Attack," the necromancer bellowed, but his command fell on deaf ears—or rather, no ears, considering his former troops were more interested in their newfound freedom than listening to yesterday's orders.

"Looks like your fan club just canceled their membership," I said as Jax and Ransom closed in, their movements a deadly dance of precision and power.

The necromancer's army descended upon him. Growls and hisses filled the air, a cacophony of righteous fury as the vampires swarmed him.

"Any last words?" Jax asked, his tone almost conversational as he held the necromancer in a grip tighter than a lid on a pickle jar.

"Curse you all," the necromancer said, but it was too late. The vampires were relentless, overwhelming him with the savage intensity of those wronged.

"More of a cliché than a curse, but okay." Tension released from my body as the necromancer's form slumped to the ground, motionless.

Another one bites the dust. It was sad, really, the lengths he'd gone to for revenge. Very, very sad.

The necromancer's lair, now shrouded in an eerie silence, was a macabre gallery of the grotesque. As I picked my way through the labyrinthine passages, the scent of singed magic

and decay clawed at my nostrils. Kendra, with her usual tenacity, had already begun flipping through the rogue's collection of dark tomes, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"Find anything useful" I asked, kicking aside a skull that had rolled under foot like some kind of morbid soccer ball. Ew.

"Mostly beginner's stuff," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "There might be something worth salvaging. We can't have these recipes falling into the wrong hands again."

"That's the truth," Ransom said from behind a pile of what looked suspiciously like mummified body parts. His lighthearted tone belied the ruthless efficiency with which he dismantled the rogue's contraptions.

"Hey, look at this." Jax beckoned me over with a grim expression, holding up a chain of talismans that writhed and twisted as if alive. "Think these were controlling the undead?"

"Looks about as trustworthy as a two-dollar watch," I squinted at the sinister trinkets.

"Put them in my bag," Kendra said. "I'll destroy them if I need to, but it was mainly the skull controlling the horde."

"Right." Jax nodded, and gingerly dropped the trinkets into Kendra's big backpack.

"Next up: making sure no one can pull a Lazarus on us again."

"Already on it." Kendra gestured toward a heavy tome open on a pedestal. "I'm placing binding spells on every entrance to this godforsaken place. Only those we approve can get in—or out."

"Good. Last thing we need is another vampire flash mob," I said as I surveyed the dim chamber, ensuring no stone was left unturned—or unsmashed, as it were.

"Okay, let's wrap this up." Pride swelled for the ragtag family we'd become. "We've got a vampire community to reassure."

"Roger that, boss lady." Ransom saluted mockingly before returning to his task of neutralizing the remaining traps.

“Everyone,” Jax called when we finished, his tone the embodiment of leadership—and maybe just a hint of exhaustion. “Time to head home.”

“Home,” I said softly, the word wrapping around me like a comforter fresh from the dryer.

We made our way out of the lair, the sounds of our footsteps echoing in the hollow space. It was a symphony of closure, each step punctuating the end of an ordeal, the rhythm of resolution.

“Today was one for the books.” Kendra slid her arm through mine as we walked. “By books, I mean the kind you hide under your bed because no one would believe it otherwise.”

“Or the kind you leverage for a movie deal.” Ransom grinned like a man who’d already spent his imaginary Hollywood paycheck.

“Only if I’m played by someone fabulous,” Luke said, flipped invisible strands of hair over his shoulder. “With way less apocalyptic craziness in the sequel.”

LUKE

THE OPULENCE OF THE VAMPIRE PALACE IN MILAN WAS LIKE A slap across the face with a Gucci glove—over the top, extravagant, and unapologetically lavish. *I loved it.* I stood beneath arches that soared toward the heavens, gilded with enough gold to make Midas green with envy. Marble floors reflected the grandeur above, polished to such a sheen that for a moment, I half-expected to see Narcissus admiring his own reflection.

“Someone took ‘Live like a king’ way too literally,” I said under my breath, the sound echoing off the towering walls adorned with frescoes depicting historic feasts, battles, and what could only be described as vampiric debauchery.

“Quit your gawking. We’ve got serious matters to attend to,” Hailey whispered, her tone somber yet laced with that familiar snark.

“Yeah, yeah.” I tore my gaze from a particularly risqué image of a vampire count that winked back at me. “Just taking it all in.”

“Take in less, focus more,” Jax said.

The aftermath of the trial hung in the air like a dense fog, chilling the already cold marble underfoot. The council had convened, their faces etched with judgment. Dominic stood, regal and impassive, while Amaya’s eyes darted around the room, as if looking for an escape from the gravity of the situation. Arric’s spot was glaringly empty, his absence a stark

reminder of the consequences that awaited those who strayed too far.

There wasn't much we could do to Iroza. The only one who could take her out was Ransom since Izora transferred Pete's power into him for that reason. She didn't understand how to blend in with humans since she spent the last several centuries in a sleep spell. Arric, on the other hand, has lived among humans his whole life and was fully aware of the rules that allowed us to coexist undetected.

"Everyone here knows this isn't how we wanted things to end up," Hailey said with a blend of empathy and resolve. "We've got a verdict to deliver, and no matter how much it sucks, we can't let personal feelings get in the way of justice."

"Are you two ready?" Hailey asked, turning to the twins, Avery and Allison, who stood side by side, a united front in the face of uncertainty. I put one hand on each of their backs.

"Ready as we'll ever be," they said in unison. There was a resilience there too—a steely intent that matched Hailey's own.

"Then let's do this." Jax stepped forward to join Hailey. They were a duo in every sense, complementing each other's strengths, covering each other's weaknesses.

"Remember," Dominic said before they could continue, his gaze sweeping over the council members and resting on Hailey and Jax. "No matter the outcome, there can be no interference. The farm is a sentence, not a sojourn."

"Understood." Jax nodded, though his jaw tightened just a fraction. "We wouldn't dream of breaking the rules," he said, though the glint in his eye told another story—one of concern and an unwavering commitment to support those under his charge, even if it meant bending a rule or two.

"Let's hope not," Dominic said, though there was a hint of respect in his otherwise stoic demeanor. Dominic cleared his throat. "Avery and Allison, the council has reached a verdict. You are hereby sentenced to one year of rehabilitation on The

Farm. This sentence is non-negotiable and effective immediately.”

Avery’s face drained of color, her lips parting slightly in shock. Beside her, Allison clutched her sister’s hand, their knuckles turning white.

“Is there... is there no other way?” Avery trembled like a leaf in the wind. She looked around the room, eyes wide, seeking an ally, a loophole, anything.

Allison’s gaze was fixed on Hailey, a silent plea that spoke volumes. This wasn’t a battle Hailey could fight for them.

“None,” Dominic said flatly. His expression remained impassive, but there was a glint in his eye—a flicker of something that might’ve been sympathy if I didn’t know better.

Avery’s hand found mine, behind her, squeezing tightly.

“Can we visit them? Ensure they’re... coping?” I asked.

“Contact with the outside world is forbidden during their sentence,” Dominic said, his tone final. “They must learn to live with the consequences of their actions without reliance on others.”

Hailey bristled beside Jax. She was all bubbling laughter and snark on a good day, but now she was a tempest barely contained.

Jax squared his jaw. “We respect the council’s decision,” he said, though his voice held a steely undertone that suggested otherwise. “We will await their return. They are still part of our family, and we don’t abandon our own.”

Dominic acknowledged him with a nod. “Family is important.” His words were a sobering reminder of why we were here in the first place.

Hailey smiled softly at Avery and Allison, “We’ll be waiting. Hey, I expect you both to become expert farmers. I want my tomatoes extra juicy when you get back.”

Her attempt at humor earned a watery smile from the twins. Very small. Avery and Allison nodded, their resolve knitting

together like the unbreakable bond they shared.

“Be strong.” They’d need every ounce of strength for the year ahead.

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ABOUT LIA DAVIS

Lia Davis is the USA Today bestselling author of more than forty books, including her fan favorite Shifter of Ashwood Falls Series.

A lifelong fan of magic, mystery, romance and adventure, Lia's novels feature compassionate alpha heroes and strong leading ladies, plenty of heat, and happily-ever-afters.

Lia makes her home in Northeast Florida where she battles hurricanes and humidity like one of her heroines.

When she's not writing, she loves to spend time with her family, travel, read, enjoy nature, and spoil her kitties.

She also loves to hear from her readers. Send her a note at lia@authorliadavis.com!

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ABOUT L.A. BORUFF

L.A. (Lainie) Boruff lives in East Tennessee with her husband, three children, and an ever growing number of cats. She loves reading, watching TV, and procrastinating by browsing Facebook. L.A.'s passions include vampires, food, and listening to heavy metal music. She once won a Harry Potter trivia contest based on the books and lost one based on the movies. She has two bands on her bucket list that she still hasn't seen: AC/DC and Alice Cooper. Feel free to send tickets.

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