

CHAPTER 1

ETHAN

I'm alone in the elevator.

It's the antique kind with iron bars and smudged windows. As it rises, creaking, through the building, I watch the floors pass, one after another. Slabs of cracked concrete give way to views of long, dark hallways lined with closed doors. It's midday, and most of the apartment's residents are at work or school. If I get in trouble here, I'll be on my own. But that works fine for me. I work better with no witnesses. Less chance of getting arrested.

The elevator stops on the sixth floor. The inner grate screeches, folds up into the wall. I open the exterior door and step out. The hall stinks of cigarettes, old laundry, and booze. Some guy slumped against a closed door mumbles in a drunken stupor; he clutches a half-empty Moscato to his chest like an infant. I spy on him for a second. He mutters and clutches his bottle. No sign that he'll wake or choke on his vomit. A non-issue.

At the end of the hallway is apartment 604. I glance back at the drunk, but his head is hanging against his chest, breaths slow and even. Soft snores? He's not getting up anytime soon. So, I reach into my pocket and kneel down on the grungy carpet, carefully slotting my lockpick into the keyhole. The first quakes of nerves hit me as I'm feeling around inside the lock.

Years I've been doing this shit. You'd think it'd get easier. But as Bill would say, "*The day you stop being scared is the day you gotta retire. The fear is what keeps you alive.*" I tend to agree with her. Fear, and a healthy dose of murderous intent, are all that keep me going on some days.

A few minutes later, the pins shift out of the way, and the lock gives a satisfying *click* as it opens. Before I can pocket my tools and twist the knob, the door to the apartment behind me, 603, suddenly opens as well.

Shit.

I turn fast and find myself looking up at a tired-looking middle-aged white woman dressed in cheetah-print sweatpants and a damn-near transparent tank top that does nothing to hide the fact that she isn't wearing a bra. She

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stares down at me, a twenty-something-year-old Hispanic guy clearly breaking and entering, an unlit cigarette dangling between her lips.

“Hey,” I say lamely.

She stares at me. “You a bounty hunter or something?” she asks, bringing a lighter up to her cigarette. Really, it’s the best conclusion she could have jumped to. It’s better than assuming the truth, which is: I’m here to murder her neighbor.

My smile feels stretched and flat. “What gave it away?”

The woman grunts and locks her apartment. “Well, have a good one.” As she passes the drunk, she gives him one swift kick in the thigh. “Get up and go inside, Marty. For fuck’s sake.”

Once the woman and the drunk are both gone, I exhale and let myself appreciate that the days of “*What are you doing, kid? Why aren’t you in school?*” are over. I’ve never had anyone assume I was a bounty hunter before. I’ve gotten criminal, jilted lover, and in one unfortunate case, male prostitute...I still don’t understand that, though. I’ll have to let Bill know about this one. Then I turn back to 604 and turn the handle.

Most people don’t know vampires exist. Used to be it was because vampires were so rare, but more and more of them have been showing up lately. We don’t know why. Entire nests cropping up out of the blue. Bill says you could hunt for an entire month and not come across a single vamp back in the day. Now, if you look hard enough, you can find one in just about any crowd. They seem to be incredibly good at concealing their existence, though. Through hypnosis, intimidation, and good old-fashioned murder, they’ve managed to keep the public at large from believing in them. To most people, vampires are what you see in horror movies and nothing more, and that works just fine for the bloodsuckers. The sheep are easier to stalk if they don’t know the wolves exist.

There’s been a lot of buzz in the hunting communities lately about the startling vampire population spike. Some say it’s because the population of humans has gotten so high—more people equals more food and all that.

Others say there’s some darker, more insidious reason. I think the vampires are just getting bold, not hiding as well as they used to. Maybe they think in the modern world, it’ll be harder for hunters to kill them without getting caught, or we’re not as scary as we were a hundred years ago when we carried torches and pitchforks. Either way, they’re dead wrong.

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It's pitch-black inside because of course, it is. I close the door behind me and stand in the entry for a moment, letting my eyes adjust. It smells bad in here. Not like the hallway did. This is a sharper odor—harsh cleaning chemicals not quite covering a rotten stink of death. I take a few seconds to adjust to that, too, breathing through my mouth as my eyes water, and I fight the urge to gag.

The UV flashlight I keep in my back pocket casts a beam of violet light across the bare floors and walls, making the whites glow, and the dusty surfaces appear speckled with electric-blue dots. I think it might have been a carpeted room once, but the owner has ripped it up, unable to keep up with all the *spills*. The boards underneath are ugly and covered in stains that show up black under the UV light. It's blood, of course. Wild splashes of it go up the walls and spatter the ceiling, each one the dying story of some poor victim this monster lured into its nest. I wonder if anyone has ever gotten out of here. But then I step into the living room, which is practically empty of furniture but full of blood stains, and I decide no. Probably not.

The kitchen is small and attached to the living room. A warm fridge that has never met groceries and more stained tile, like someone tried to dye it pink just by throwing buckets of paint around.

After that and the empty bathroom, there's only one other door to look behind. I approach it slowly, UV light in one hand and my silver knife in the other. Silver burns vampires like acid. If you stab one close enough to an artery, the toxic effect can even travel through their blood like poison and kill them hours later. It's pretty neat. But I usually try to finish them off before that.

The door to the bedroom (I assume it's a bedroom) doesn't want to open. The handle twists easily enough, but even when I throw some of my weight into it, it *thunks* against something and stubbornly stops. Only when I shine my light down at the floor do I see why.

"Jesus," I say quietly, stepping back from the body. He's lying face down, tangled brown hair splayed around his head. The blood underneath it makes a nasty *squelch* sound when I lift my foot. Still tacky. A fresh kill.

And then I whirl around. I don't know why. I never know. Bill says it's instinct. The same prey instinct that tells a mouse to stay still when the hawk is overhead. Because that's what I am in here. We might call ourselves hunters, but really, we're just the brave mice who lost too many of our friends to the hawk and have decided to take it down before it kills us, too.

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I turn just in time to see a dark shape descending from the ceiling. It lands noiselessly. If I hadn't turned, he would have dropped right on top of me and killed me before I could make a sound. There's no time to yell at myself for missing him. Vampires can blend into the dark if they try hard enough, and even the most experienced hunters can walk right by them. This one rises slowly into a standing position and watches me. Even though I can't quite see his eyes in this dark, I feel them on me. He's curious about me, not afraid. After all, why should he be? I'm just some big-boned, chubby dude in a hoodie who broke into his apartment. Probably a petty thief or, at most, a junkie looking to steal some shit.

He doesn't know I'm a vampire hunter.

Not until I turn my UV light on him, and his flesh explodes in a ball of flames. The heat blasts off him, licking the ceiling, turning it back. It might have set off a fire alarm if the vamp had bothered to have one in his shithole nest. But the fire goes out fast, like it's been smothered or drowned with water. Always does with vamps. They light up in a flash, but they burn themselves out like matchsticks. Don't know why.

The vampire howls in agony, thrashing, and punching. Then the flames start burning down, and even though his skin is red and raw and black in some areas, he's still alive. If it had been natural sunlight, he'd be dead in a second. UV hurts them, but it doesn't always kill. The alien sound of his wailing scream cuts off as I lunge forward, sticking my silver knife in his chest. I mean for it to be a death blow, but vampires are supernaturally strong; the myths get that part right. Getting a knife in the heart works – but only sometimes.

He staggers back as all the fresh blood he just drained out of the body in the bedroom starts oozing out of him. The shocked expression on his face morphs into something darker. "Fucker," he growls wetly. "I'll rip your throat out."

And he tries. The vampire yanks the blade out of his chest and throws it with a clang to the floor and leaps at me. I dodge out of the way, banging my shoulder into the wall and rattling my teeth, before I roll off of it and vault over the only piece of furniture in the hallway: an arm chair that looks like it's been shoved in here for the sole purpose of getting in my way.

The vamp jumps up onto the ceiling and starts crawling along it like some kind of fucking horror movie Spider-Man. I sprint for my knife and grab it off the floor. Just as an immense weight crashes down on top of me. My teeth

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crack together. A shooting pain like a needle stabs through both ears. A wrenching jolt of pain radiates from my spine to my ribs, so hot and bright that I might have even screamed if the vampire's weight wasn't pressing the air out of me. For a second, I'm truly terrified that my back is broken. I try to move my legs. They respond, scraping against the floor. The relief I feel is in dizzying contrast to the terror of feeling the vampire's weight bearing down on me.

He leans down, bringing his warm, wet mouth to my ear. I think he's going to whisper something into it. Instead, he licks the side of my face. Dragging his rough tongue up the line of my jaw, like a lover. His breath carries the coppery sharpness of fresh blood, and my mind instantly leaps to the corpse in his bedroom, and I gag.

I start to thrash, no matter how badly it hurts. Thrashing like wild person, like a madman. Normally, it wouldn't do any good. Vampires are so much stronger than we are, but I've already burned and stabbed this one. And I've got my knife. Even when he grabs my wrist and squeezes until the bone creaks, I'm able to nick his skin with it. And it must burn like a sonofabitch because he lets go, and I'm able to buck him off.

I scramble on my hands and knees across the hard floorboards, putting as much distance as I can between us, before getting up. I feel half-crippled as I pry myself up, using the wall for balance. But I still haven't lost the grip on my knife, and I hold it out in front of me, threatening with it until I'm upright. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse the vampire also struggling to get to his feet. The silver is working.

My shoulder and my back throbs. My chin stings where it tore on the ground. I back up toward the window, gripping a handful of the curtains, then remember they've been nailed down. I switch the knife into my other hand as the vampire stands, statue-still, on the opposite side of the room. He blinks hard, like he can't see right.

I could slice the curtains open with my knife and let in the sunlight. But then I'd have to turn my back on him.

Even suffering like he is, the vampire has a deep voice fit for radio. So pleasing that it makes my skin crawl. How many people has he lured to their deaths with that voice? "I think I'll turn you," he says. His breathing hitches. "And when you wake up, I'll you again."

I say nothing. Instead, I watch the vein on the side of his neck slowly turn black, imagining I can see the poison go straight to his brain. The silver in his

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blood spreads in branching paths of infection across his body like a net – or a spider web. Either way, he’s caught.

The vampire’s face darkens with rage. And he runs at me. Even dying, his speed is terrifying. But by the time his body slams into mine, with the force of a swinging sledgehammer, he’s already dead.



I stay on the ground for a moment, dazed and hurting. A hot dew has collected on the small of my back. I’m sure at least some of it is blood. Blood and sweat. I feel *scraped* as I slowly peel myself off the floor, scooching away from the dead vampire so his blood can’t mix with mine.

The body is a hideous sight. All charred, skin peeling and oozing. The stink of barbecued flesh and burning hair choke me, and I have to cover my nose as I lurch into the kitchen and begin pulling open cabinets and cupboards. Evacuation—or getting the hell out of here before the cops show up to investigate the screams—is sometimes more stressful than the hunt itself. And I have to move carefully like an old, decrepit man. I’m pretty banged up.

From a lower cabinet, I find a roll of sturdy black trash bags covered in dust. That will do. I pull off one—then, on second thought, grab another and take them back to the vampire corpse. Vampires have a nasty habit of turning to ash when they burn up completely. This one won’t do that—there’s too much of its body left for it to crumble—but little pieces of its skin are sloughing off in dusty chunks, and even after all these years, it makes me want to gag.

If I had my way, every vampire in the world would die the same gruesome, painful death.

Bill says I’m the most brutal vampire hunter she’s ever met. She says it like it’s a compliment—and also like she’s worried about me. But there’s nothing for her to be worried about.

I’m fine.

And every vampire I kill makes me even better

CHAPTER 2

ETHAN

The elevator shakes on its way down. It didn't do that going up. I close my eyes and plant a hand on the wall so I don't fall over. I don't like elevators—or any enclosed space—on a good day, and today has been anything but. I didn't sleep well last night (or at all), anticipating this hunt, and all I've eaten so far is a gas station hot dog and one of those bottled energy shots you get at the cash register. Needless to say, my nerves are shot.

The metal death box grinds to a stop too early, and my stomach plummets. But then I realize it has stopped before the ground level, and the door opens to a familiar face. It's the tired woman, still clenching that cigarette between her teeth.

She looks at me, then down at the human-shaped trash bags at my feet, and takes a step back. "I'll get the next one," she says wearily, shutting the door.

Yeah, that's fair.



I stick the two bodies—one vampire, one victim—in the trunk of my car. Then I get in behind the wheel and dial a phone number as I pull out of the parking spot. It rings only twice before picking up.

"Hey, kiddo." Despite my less-than-ideal morning, I smile hearing her voice. In the background, I hear a sound that I think is a coffee pot

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percolating. If it's midday, it means this is probably her third or fourth cup so far. Black, two sugars.

Mm, I could go for a cup of coffee myself right now. I might have inherited her caffeine addiction on top of the vampire-hunting stuff.

"Hey, Bill," I say. "I just finished the job over on Salt Street. Heading your way."

"All righty," Bill says. "I'll get Old Betsy fired up. Be careful on them roads. People are nuts nowadays."

"Oh, hey, before I go," I jump in. "The vamp had a victim in its nest. Male-presenting...hang on, I grabbed his wallet before I bagged him." It's on the passenger seat. I hold the phone between my ear and my shoulder and reach for it.

"Bagged him?" Bill repeats, frowning audibly.

"Trash bags," I clarify. "How else was I supposed to smuggle two bodies out of an apartment building at midday? Anyway, listen. The victim's name is Simon Childs, age twenty-nine. Seemed like a fresh kill; people might be looking for him."

Bill sighs like I'm a huge pain in her ass. "Okay, we'll figure it out. Just get here without getting pulled over by the cops."

"Do my best," I say. "See you."

I toss down the burner phone and focus on navigating the city traffic just as a Ford cuts me off. Bill was right. People are nuts. Although, unless the Ford has two bodies in its trunk, too, I'm probably crazier.



Bill lives outside the city but still close enough that she can call it her "jurisdiction." Not that vampire hunters have proper "jurisdictions." Or any real organization. If you can imagine, people who dedicate their lives to murdering the things that go bump in the night aren't too friendly by nature and not great at cooperation. Sometimes, we group up and make friends, like Bill and her pals. But plenty of us go it alone.

To be honest, I'm not sure which group I fall into nowadays. I used to be Bill's shadow (her friends called me her "mini-me" because we had the same stocky build and the same bad attitude. It annoyed me because I was thirteen and a prick, but I never said anything about it because even back then, I admired the hell out of Bill. Being her mini-me was far from the worst insult I'd ever received). Now that she's retired, I'm definitely more of a loner.

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I can't say I like spending time with Bill's hunter friends. They're too...*Superbowl* for me. The kind of people who make a spectacle of chugging beers, shout too much, and spout thinly-veiled homophobic comments, then take offense if you say anything. They don't know I'm bi. Bill does, and she's thinned the worst of the herd, but some pretty hardcore offenders still travel in her group. Not that I blame her. She's known them longer than she's known me, damn near her entire life. Most of those scumbags have saved her life during a hunt. Even if she sees me as kind of an adopted kid, she sees them as her brothers.

And who doesn't have a shitty uncle or two? So, I put up with it for her sake.

Anyway. If you looked at a picture of her cabin, you'd never know it was a mere fifteen-minute drive outside of a major city. It's a log cabin with exposed beams, a rocking chair on the porch, the whole shebang. It even sits in a patch of woods, down a dirt road. You can't find it on a GPS. You have to know it's there. I think that's why she likes it. Bill is, perhaps, a little paranoid about security.

I park in the grass and turn off the engine, slipping the key in my pocket, then pop open the door. Bill is just stepping onto the porch when I get out. She lifts her hand in a wave. In the other is a cup of coffee. "Morning."

"It's after noon, Bill," I say, clomping up the steps to meet her.

"Who the hell can keep track?" she grouches, and I smile. I can't help it. A natural side effect of hunting nocturnal monsters is becoming nocturnal yourself. We all get a bit turned around now and then.



Bill kept my old bedroom exactly the same. When I moved out, I thought she might gut it, turn it into a home gym or a study space like some parents do when their kids leave. She didn't, though. Even some of my clothes are still here, folded in the drawers. I shower and change, and then I head out to the backyard, where Bill is lounging in a lawn chair next to her industrial-grade incinerator, "Old Betsy."

"Feeling better?" she asks as I join her, putting my feet up on the box of firewood with a contented sigh. After my fight with the vampire, I felt like a grubworm, all greasy and stinking of smoke and other less pleasant things. Now, my skin is scrubbed pink and clean, and I smell like nothing, thanks to Bill's unscented shampoo. I keep telling her to get something that smells

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good, but she's stuck in her ways, and apparently, when she was growing up, all her family ever had was unscented soap. So now, all perfumed products make her nose itch.

"Why is your shower so much better than mine?" I ask, letting my head fall back. I could sleep for a couple of days, probably.

"Well water, kid," she says. "City water's got all kinds of shit in it."

I hum and enjoy the cool air on my clean face. The birds chattering in the woods behind us. The cicadas. It smells like pine and soil. And smoke from Old Betsy—a good kind of smoke. The vampire's in there now. When he's done cooking, there'll be nothing left. Not even bones.

"Ethan," Bill says. I turn and open one eye. She's looking at me much closer than I expected her to be. "Are you okay?"

I blink, taken aback. "Huh?"

She gives me a look that warns me not to play dumb. "You know I hate being cliché, but how come you don't drop by anymore? I haven't seen you in damn-near three weeks. How've you been?"

I give a laugh, one that I don't really feel. "Yeah, I'm fine. I've been working."

"You still bartending?"

"I was. But I've been a no-call, no-show for the last couple of days, thanks to this prick." I kick the side of the incinerator. "So, I'm probably unemployed again." That's the nature of being a vampire hunter, unfortunately. When you hear about a bloodsucker in your neighborhood, you tend to drop everything to make sure it dies swiftly. Otherwise, you spend all your time reading obituaries and watching the news, wondering if the dead body the cops found got there because you went to your day job instead of hunting it down.

Bill is frowning at me like a mom. She looks nothing like my actual mom did. Bill is a hefty, big-shouldered woman of sixty-three with her brown hair cut shorter than mine. She's genuinely kind of terrifying in a fight. A real force of nature. And although she smiles a lot, she has more frown lines than smile ones.

I don't think about my actual mom's face anymore if I can help it. The last time I saw it, it wasn't the kind of thing you'd want to remember. But she was...pretty. Soft and round with dark hair and brown skin, the longest eyelashes you've ever seen. Her parents, my grandparents (they died even before she did), were born in Mexico. So were my dad's great-grandparents.

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“You still seeing that girl?” Bill asks me. “Victoria?”

“Nah,” I say, like it doesn’t mean much. Which is true, most of the time.

“Really? What happened?”

“What always happens?” I kick the incinerator again. Bill pats my arm.

“Sorry, kid. I wasn’t crazy about her anyway.”

I roll my eyes with a smile. “You don’t like anyone, though.”

“That’s not true. I like you all right.”

“You raised me, Bill. That doesn’t count.”

“I like Old Betsy.”

“Old Betsy is a machine and also doesn’t count.” Then, I suddenly say, “You should get a pet.” I worry about her out here alone, sometimes. In the woods by herself. She says she doesn’t get lonely. But I say that too, and I’m not sure I believe either one of us.

“*You* should get a pet,” she retorts, just to be difficult.

“I don’t have time for one,” I say. I’ve always wanted a dog, actually. But Bill’s never been a big animal person, and I can’t even keep a job. Or a significant other. How the hell would I take care of a dog?

“I am sorry about Victoria,” she says after a while. “Seemed like you liked this one.”

I shrug. “I’m over it.” I am.

I think.

“What do you think we should do with the victim?” I ask, changing the subject on purpose.

“Well...can’t turn it over to the police, now that you’ve had your grubby little mitts all over it. You should have left it there, kiddo.”

“I couldn’t. There was a neighbor, this woman, who saw me. And I’m not desperate to be linked to a murder—especially if it’s one I didn’t actually commit.”

“Still might happen if we’re not careful,” Bill says. “Feels wrong, but we could feed him to Old Betsy once the vamp’s done cooking.”

I shake my head vehemently. “He’s human. He might have a family looking for him. They deserve something to bury.”

Bill doesn’t argue with me. “What do you want to do?”

I don’t have to think long. There’s only one thing I really can do. “I’ll dump the body somewhere,” I tell her. “Someone’ll see him and call the cops. And they’ll find his family.”

“If you get caught, you’re going to jail.”

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“No one’s gonna catch me,” I say. Believe it or not, I have experience with this kind of thing. I dumped my first body at the ripe old age of fourteen. Shoved it out of the back door of Bill’s van onto the side of a deserted road.

“I don’t know, kid. I was watching *Forensic Files* last night, and they caught this guy just because of some tire tracks his car left in the mud and a piece of rope fiber on the body. I know we’re careful, but they’re getting smart.”

“Well, luckily for me, I didn’t use rope. And I’ll park far away from any mud. Happy?”

“Smart ass.”

I get up and stretch, then start back to my car. “See ya, Bill. Thanks again.”

“Don’t call me for bail money!” she shouts after me.

“I will!” I yell back.

CHAPTER 3

ETHAN

I wait until nightfall before driving out to the woods. It's a warm night, and the air is still. Not a breath of wind blows as I park (well away from any mud, as promised) and open the trunk. An owl is hooting somewhere in the distance, and besides that, the only sound is the steady *ding, ding, ding* of my car, warning me the key is still in the ignition. Inside the trunk, the victim's body is still wrapped up in the black garbage bag, the odd angles of his body (elbows, knees) stretching the plastic. I feel horrible. Being killed by a vampire is a shit way to go. But at least he wasn't in pain.

I've never been bitten myself (a mark of pride for me), but Bill has. And a lot of her buddies have. And they always say the same thing about vampire bites. They feel good. Like, *good* good. Which, to me, is infinitely creepier than if they hurt. I shudder just thinking about how everything concerning vampires is a mind game. The way they hunt, the way they present themselves as people and blend in with society. The bite is another part of that. Their fangs inject a venom into your bloodstream that activates the pleasure centers of your brain or something. If it feels good, you don't fight as hard.

It's disgusting.

I shake myself.

"Last stop, buddy," I say, reaching in to pull the victim out. Dead weight is heavy, but he doesn't weigh much. He was about my height and much

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skinnier, practically skin and bones like he was a sickly person or maybe a drug addict. Maybe that's why the vamp chose him. If he was an addict, maybe living on the streets, there would be fewer people looking for him. And no one would be surprised to find him dead somewhere once the vampire was done with him. It's sad but true.

See? Vampires are shit.

I'm able to lift him up and out of the trunk without too much grunting. Then it's a short stumble down a grassy bank, and I lay him down gently in a patch of dry grass, a spot where I hope he'll be spotted come morning—by joggers or dog walkers. I pull off the bag and crumble it up, tucking it under my arm, then stand back and wonder if I ought to say something.

In the movies, people always look peaceful in death. But this man doesn't look peaceful. He just looks dead. And tired, somehow. Like the dark circles under his eyes have been there all his life. He's my age, which might make it worse. He wasn't old. But he was pale and gaunt, with long dark-brown twisted hair around his face from his ride in the trunk.

"Sorry it had to end like this, man," I say quietly. "Pretty sure when you signed up to be an organ donor, you didn't mean this." I stick my hands in my pockets and look around. The back road is still deserted, still quiet, and I feel bad about leaving him alone, but I should go. I sigh and turn back to the body one more time. "I hope your family finds you soon," I tell him. Then I bend down to stick his wallet back in his jeans.

Just as I'm slipping it into his pocket, the body gives a sudden, sharp spasm—scaring the absolute piss out of me.

I jump back, wrenching my hand away so hard that the joint in my shoulder pops. He falls still for a moment, and I stare at him in disbelief. Thinking, *please tell me that was just a muscle spasm*. Sometimes, dead bodies will make small movements for up to twelve hours after death. Maybe—

Then the body does it again, *harder* this time, and a groan rips from his throat.

I jerk back even further because, oh, shit. Oh, *fuck*. He's turning.

Jesus Christ, he's turning!

I've never seen anyone turn before, and it's fascinating in a sick way. I'm in such a state of shock that I miss my knife twice before managing to get my fingers around the hilt, and even when I do, I can't tear my eyes off him. I've definitely never seen a *dead body* come back to life! I know it takes time for

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the change to happen, but usually, it's only an hour or two. This guy's been dead for a lot longer than that.

Before my eyes, he opens his mouth and sucks in a breath. It's ragged and sounds like it gets stuck halfway, then he twists his body and coughs—a deep, harsh sound, like choking up seawater.

I'm still frozen in horror and morbid fascination when his eyes open—and lock on me. And every muscle in my body constricts in terror.

His head lifts slowly. A strand of curly, brown hair falls across his face. He's still struggling to breathe like his lungs are full of fluid. And as he studies me, disoriented and waking up, I move my knife behind my back so he won't see it. I'm already off my game from the shock and lack of sleep. And he's a new-blood, which makes him that much more dangerous and unpredictable. Better if I could take him by surprise.

I shouldn't be alone for this. I should have thought of this, but who the hell has ever heard of a vampire taking *this* long to turn? You never face new-bloods alone. Their new hunger makes them insane, much fiercer than a fat, satisfied bloodsucker like the one I killed today. His Maker. But I'm trying not to think about it so my heart will stop racing. No need to bait his hunger...

The vampire blinks, groggy. Then starts to push himself up. Dirt and grass cling to his clothes. There's a leaf in his hair.

I take one lurching step closer. *Don't let him get to his feet!*

But he gets up faster than I expect him to, as vampires are wont to do, and I back up again, gritting my teeth. *This is bad. This is so, so bad.*

He shakes his head like he's trying to wake up from a deep sleep. Then looks at me again, squinting and blinking hard. "Where—" He sways unsteadily. "Where am I?"

I don't answer. My brain is too overloaded trying to calculate the fastest way to kill him without getting my ass bitten in the process. But it's harder than it should be. I can't think clearly. I'm so stupid. The moment I saw him starting to turn, I should have stabbed him. There's no way to know if someone who has been bitten is going to turn. Usually, they don't. There's no way to check, no physical symptoms. Even the fangs don't sprout until after they've come back to life. His will be coming in now.

I shouldn't have let him change. I should have killed him when I had the chance. Now, he's on his feet, and the hunger is going to hit him soon, like a

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goddamn freight train. Any moment now. And I'm alone, sleep-deprived, and way out in the middle of nowhere.

This is really bad.

"Sorry," the vampire says, rubbing his face. "I can't remember...who are you?"

I squeeze the knife behind my back. *Focus*. There's only one play here. I step closer. "It's all right," I tell him, willing my voice to be calm. "Relax. You're okay."

He drops his hands like they're too heavy and shakes his head again like the water in his lungs is now filling his ears. He's confused, but he's getting fidgety. Pretty soon, the fog will clear, and the hunger will rush in to replace whatever is left of his former self. What he is right now, standing here looking so pitiful and sleepy, is just a ghost. The kindest thing to do is to put him out of his misery before he hurts someone.

"It's okay," I say soothingly, inching closer. "You're gonna be okay."

When he looks at me again, his eyes are clearer. I see him see me, the dark woods around us, the distant car, and my one hand hidden behind my back. And something clicks in his head.

Fear.

He starts backpedaling toward the trees. "Stop," he says, raising one hand.

I don't have time to stop, so I try to smile. It takes a second of frantic thinking to remember what his name was. "Simon, right?"

He trips over something, probably a root or stone, and almost falls. "How—" He frowns. "Who are you?"

"I'm Ethan," I say, still moving closer and closer. "Ethan Jimenez. I'm just trying to help."

He doesn't believe me. And he's scared. I'm not used to the vampires being afraid of *me*. Maybe that should feel...I don't know, satisfying? After all these years of losing sleep over these creatures, finally, one of them is afraid of me. But it doesn't. He hasn't hurt anyone yet. He doesn't know where he is or what has happened to him. And he's frightened. Frightened of *me*. I don't like that feeling, but I don't have many other options. I have to kill him. If I don't, he absolutely will hurt someone.

"Ow..." He lifts his hand to his throat and swallows thickly. Pain flickers across his face.

I work hard to control my breathing, the expression on my face. He's starting to feel it. The hunger.

DANIELLE BIRD

I want to say, *brace yourself. It's about to get a lot worse.* But of course, I don't. I'm almost close enough to stab him, but I'm within biting range now too. And I'm trying to be quiet, putting my feet softly in the grass and holding my breath. *Don't freak out,* I silently will him. *Don't freak out. Hold on a little bit longer.*

“What is that?” he asks loudly, like he's trying to talk over a loud noise. “That...banging sound?” Then he looks at me. I reach out. His eyes follow my hand until it settles on his shoulder. I give it a pat. I smile. His gaze slides from my hand, down my arm, to my neck. And they linger there. My pulse is jumping in my throat, and I feel him watching it. Like a cat watching an insect it wants to pounce on.

“I don't hear anything,” I tell him, friendly.

And then I stick my knife in his stomach.

Like an idiot, I think I've won. New-bloods are meaner and more violent than their older counterparts, but they also tend to be weaker. They haven't had enough to drink yet, so there's nothing powering them up, nothing to fortify them against attacks.

Except, he doesn't even flinch. The silver blade has punctured his insides. His skin is burning, giving off smoke and crackling where it's beginning to peel away...but a heartbeat after I stab him, which *should* have incapacitated him, I feel his fingers wrap around my hand, trapping it against the knife that's still in his gut, gripping so hard I can feel the handle against my bones. His fingers are cold as death and stronger than steel. I couldn't fight against them even if I had time to—which I don't.

He bites me.

At least it doesn't hurt.