

It always starts with a body.

But usually the body doesn't look like this.

"How long do you think they've been dead for?" Johnson, an analyst, asks.

I look over at him as he walks up to me. "Nguyen said they're thinking about a hundred years. They'll have a better idea soon," I say as I look at the mummified corpse sitting in the chair.

I've spent weeks of my life trying to hunt down the killer of a dead woman and this is what I stumble on instead. A mummified corpse in the basement of the suspected killer's house.

AKA: Her neighbor's house.

When I hear footsteps on the stairs, I turn to look as my superior heads down them, making me stop. Why would he be here? "Alright team, head on up, we're transferring the case to Unit Zero," he says as I stare at him in disbelief.

I shouldn't be surprised, seeing as the brooding man behind him definitely isn't human.

No one hesitates to stop what they're doing and go upstairs where they'll discuss things momentarily with Unit Zero and wash their hands of the whole thing. Without a complaint, they'll move onto another case.

I, on the other hand, refuse to move as I stand there, highly irritated. *I* was one of the first on the scene of the dead woman. *I* spent weeks tracking down every tiny piece of information I could. *I* figured out the neighbor had been watching her. *I* got permission to enter the house, and found the corpse.

This was my case, dammit!

And I'm going to stomp my feet like a toddler to keep it if I have to. My supervisor turns around and heads up the stairs as BroodyMcBroodypants comes waltzing down. Clearly, he's too good to attend the meeting upstairs. Although... I guess with his superior hearing, he might not have to.

"Lieutenant, there's still a... human down here," the vampire says as his golden eyes catch on mine. Mine have to be filled with fire, and anger, and the teeniest tiniest minuscule amount of lust because the man is gorgeous.

But that's their thing. Vampires radiate beauty mojo or some nonsense that turns people on and makes them respect them. I'm unsure if it's the appearance us humans are attracted to or the fact that they are so very not good for us. Like could murder us with a flick of their finger, not good for us.

"Detective Hayes, come on," my lieutenant says.

"I refuse," I say as I fold my arms over my chest.

The vampire looks amused. "Lieutenant, there's a human child down here. Please make it leave."

I walk right up to the vampire and instantly regret it. Not because I'm afraid of vampires, hell, I was raised by one, but because I have to crane my neck to look up at him. He seems delighted by this fact.

"Number one, I'm not a child," I say, refusing to back down.

"Your height made me think you were. I'm am so deeply apologetic. Whatever could I do to make up for it?" he asks.

"Number two, this is my case. I did all the work."

"Come on, Hayes!" the lieutenant says as he passes through the door onto the first floor.

The vampire waves at me. "Shoo."

I stare at him.

He stares at me.

I raise an eyebrow.

He narrows his eyes.

What an absolute asshole! Who could ever like this man?

“Fine, have fun taking over my entire case that I’ve worked really hard to solve,” I say as I turn from him.

“I will,” he says as he heads over to the corpse.

I sigh but I head up the stairs, knowing that there’s nothing else I can do once the higher ups decide to move the case out of homicide. I reach the top where I grab for the door handle with a gloved hand.

It refuses to turn.

“Cute, Johnson. Lock me in with McFanguphisbutt,” I say as I knock.

Silence.

I knock again before turning around. “Mr. Vampire.”

“Church.”

“I haven’t gone for years, why?” I ask, one hundred percent aware that it’s his last name and I’m being a smart-ass.

“It’s Mr. Church.”

“Alright, It’s Mr. Church, the door is locked, and I can’t get out.”

He walks up the stairs and grabs the handle. When he does, I hear a snap and he jerks his hand back. “What the hell?”

“What was that?” I ask.

“The door is electrified.”

“Wait... what?” I ask, relieved *I* didn’t touch the door again. If I had, it could have fried the tech I use to walk. That would have been splendid doing a head dive down the stairs because my leg decided to stop working. Then *everyone* would know about that and suddenly more of my past would be out in the open than I’d ever want anyone to know about.

Church pulls out his phone and before I can ask what he’s doing he says, “I’m telling them upstairs what’s going on.”

“Got it,” I say as I head back downstairs and freeze. “Hey, It’s Mr. Church, we might have a problem.”

Church appears beside me so quickly it’s like he teleported next to me as he looks over at an open doorway that definitely hadn’t been opened before. In fact, none of us had even noticed it since it’d been behind a bookshelf like in one of those old *Clue* style movies.

“Secret door?” I ask as I eye it from a safe distance.

Church shakes his head. “They’re passages. When vampires were rare and easily hunted, they’d hide in spots like these to try and stay out of sight. Many of them lived in these passages and would only come out at night to feed. It’s how the folklore of us *only* coming out at night started.”

“The real question is why that door up there is locked with an electrical current going to it and this door just mysteriously opened up for us to head inside. I would have to hypothesize that this is a trap,” I say.

He glances at me. “You don’t have to hypothesize anything. It’s clearly a trap.”

“God, you’re so smart. Do you just... can I have your autograph so I can tell everyone I

met the smartest man alive?"

"Sure," he says as he pulls out a pen. "Where would you like it?"

"Right on my heart, preferably," I say.

Since my heart isn't showing, he writes it on my chest instead. I feel like it's mostly him digging his pen into my flesh, but I'll take it. "There."

I look down at the scribble on my chest. "Narcus... beautiful name."

"It's Marcus," he growls, even though I *know* it's Marcus. He's been talked about around the department more than once. "*Oh what pretty eyes he has!*" Or "*He's so mysterious and sexy!*" Blah blah.

"Oh... I liked Narcus better."

He ignores me.

"Thank you, Narcus. I'll cherish this until death."

"Which won't be long with the way you're going about things," he says and then heads right through the doorway into the dark, narrow passage. Did he really just tell me that *I'm* going to die early and then goes into the obvious trap?

"That's a trap, remember?" I call after him.

"I'm very aware. I'm guessing he brings his victims down here. Scares them with the dead lady, opens the door. They run inside after finding no way out of the basement, and then he does something fun in here."

"Fun indeed. I can't wait to find out," I say as I head in after him.

"No, you stay out there. I can't die easily like you can," he says as he tries shooping me out of the tunnel.

"I'm like a cat. Nine lives and I've only lost eight so far," I say.

He holds his hand up to about the middle of his abdomen. "You must be this tall to enter this ride."

"Cute," I say as I glare at him. "I'm going with you."

"No, I'm not explaining how I got you killed. It would be a waste of breath and paperwork. Now go examine the corpse or twiddle your thumbs or do whatever you humans like doing."

"We like avocados for some reason."

"Go eat an avocado then."

"I don't have one. *But* there might be one at the end of this tunnel."

He sighs. "We're wasting precious time."

"You're the one talking!"

That's when the trap door swings shut, immersing us in complete darkness.

"See? Now I have to go with you," I say as I pull my flashlight out and turn it on just in time to see Church come back toward me. He tries squeezing past but the hallway is very narrow so instead of moving past, we get completely wedged up against each other.

"Shit," he grumbles, the front of his body pressed very firmly against mine.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Usually I ask for a date before we hit second base, but I like your drive."

"Suck your tiny body into the wall," he says as he puts a hand against my face and tries smashing me into the wall. He might have to write up a report on how I died, where he'll be required to explain that he's the one who killed me.

Because of that, I push myself into him more. "I just can't. My weak human body won't respond."

“I’m filing a complaint after this.”

I look at him in disbelief. “Complaint about what? That you were headed in the right direction but decided it’d be best to go in the other direction and got stuck? Explain to me again what part is my fault?” I ask even though I’m pushing off the wall at this point just to smash him into the other side.

He finally manages to squeeze through and literally punches the door open. It flings off the hinges and flies into the room. “Huh... I might have punched that a little too hard.”

“A little?” I ask curiously. “Like ‘a little’ is putting a dent in it.”

“I opened a path for you. Now go.”

“Oh! Thank you, that’s really sweet, but I’m going this way with you,” I say as I head off. He quickly grabs me and pulls me out of the tunnel before setting me on my feet in the open room. Then he pulls a quarter out of his pocket. “Human child. Here is a quarter. See? It’s shiny. Do you like shiny things?”

“I love them!”

“Good. Now play.”

“Thank you so much!” I say as he heads back into the tunnel and I rush after him. “How far do you think this goes?”

He ignores me. Clearly, he’s done trying to keep me safe. I don’t blame him. Together, we move down the narrow passageway before reaching a small room.

“Hmm...” the vampire grumbles as he assesses the room. There are blankets in the corner, a half-empty gallon of water, and trash. “He must have been locking people in here. How long was the neighbor missing before her body was found?”

“Two weeks.”

“I can smell her here. I can also hear someone outside it. These rooms generally had two exits so they were never cornered.”

I rap on the wall as I start to walk around it. “Why would he open it for us? Is he really planning on abducting us?” I ask.

“He could easily abduct someone of your...”—he eyes me—“stature. But me, on the other hand... what a joke!”

“Yes! You’re far too manly and powerful. I bet even your eyelids have more muscle than my entire body,” I say.

He nods like this is a known fact. “They do.”

I snort and rap on the next wall, but before I can go on, the vampire holds a hand out.

“There,” he says before walking over to it and listening.

“If I catch the guy first, the case goes to me.”

Church looks over at me. “The guy is a vampire. Vampire cases go to Unit Zero.”

“Yeah, but I did all the work.”

He turns toward me. “Do you want to be eaten?”

“Do you want to be staked?”

“Yes, I’d love to be staked if it meant getting away from you.”

“Hold still then,” I say, but instead of holding still, he elbows the wall, putting a hole in it. Is this a thing he does? Just goes around punching things?

His fist flies through the drywall and he starts pulling chunks away, opening up the hidden passageway.

As he pulls back to assess the small hole, I slip right through it and continue down a new

hallway.

He grabs for me, but he can't fit his much inferior body inside. "Hold up! What the hell are you doing? I can't fit through yet!"

"Shouldn't have giraffe legs then," I say as I light my path.

"I'm going to giraffe leg you," he growls, and I realize that the hundreds of years he's been alive has done nothing to help him in the threats department.

Really, I don't have to worry because he maims the wall fast enough that he reaches me before I walk two feet toward a closed door.

"He's running," Church says. "Get the door open."

I pull the unlocked door open and Marcus zooms on in with his annoying fast legs while I try my hardest not to hate the world for making me short *and* slow.

The room is filled with computers and recording equipment where the man was clearly watching his victims and probably getting off on ruining lives. I run down another narrow hallway, neither vampire in sight. By the time I reach the stairs I'm wondering why I made such a stupid deal with the vampire. Sometimes, my mouth betrays me, and I say ridiculous things.

When I reach the top, I find that we're in the barn that's behind the house and Church is standing there with the vampire on his knees, handcuffed.

"I thought maybe you stopped for a cup of coffee along the way," Church says.

"Two, actually. The first one I would *not* recommend!" I say.

And because Church is too busy harassing me, he doesn't notice the man lean back far enough that he manages to grab something out of the straw littering the ground. He throws himself backward and Marcus jerks back in surprise. Freeing himself from Marcus, the man slams into me, driving me to the ground as he bites down onto my left arm. I yank out my gun and shoot him right in the side with a tranquilizer as Marcus tears him off me like a grumpy and fang-filled knight in shining armor. This is why the vampires in the fairy tales are all evil.

Even with the tranquilizer, it always takes them a moment before they go down, especially when they're already hyped up. But by the time Marcus is done with him, I'm not sure if the tranq put him down first or the enraged vampire.

"You alright?" I ask as he pulls a hay hook out of his leg.

"Peachy. Maybe if you hadn't distracted me, none of this would have happened."

"I hope I never have to work with you again," I say as I get to my feet and dust myself off. I notice a sheep staring through a gate and judging me.

"The feeling is mutual. Now if you can get him back to the house, the case is yours," he decides.

"Of course I will," I say as I walk over to the vampire who is *out*. I grab his arm and promptly realize he weighs twice as much as me and leaving him in the barn is definitely the best bet. "I'd rather leave him here. Out of the... clouds... you know? Don't want him to get cold or something."

"Good plan."

"Are you alright?" I ask as I wave at his leg.

"It's already healing."

"Good. How would you do your brooding look if you were wounded?"

"Did he bite you?" he asks as he reaches for my arm, which I quickly pull out of his reach.

"No, I'm good. I think I have a little sheep shit on my back, but besides that, I'm perfect."

"Eh. I'm not sure perfect is the word I'd use."

I glare at him. "I'll go get the others. Watch our friend."

"Got it," he says as I head to the door and pull it open. Once outside, I roll up my sleeve to examine my arm. My fingers are still working right so I can't imagine the vampire hurt anything when he bit me, but Watson would strangle me if I ruined his precious prosthesis.

The fake arm looks fine... ish, so I call it good and hope my doctor won't notice the teeth-sized imprints.

I suppose Church is right. I should let the vampires play with the vampires.

The issue is that not everyone knows that. Especially not *him*. And if I had a vampire like Church by my side, maybe *he* would leave me alone and stop hunting me.

I look back at the barn and see Church inside the doorway peering down at the vampire on the ground. As if noticing me looking, he glances up and catches my eyes with that piercing golden stare.

And just how could I go about getting the vampires to help me?

At this point, I'm not sure, but I am nothing if not determined.

Oh, Marcus Church, you have no idea what's coming for you. This will definitely not be the last we see of each other.

Present

"Remember that time you fondled me in the hallway of that basement?" I ask Marcus as we sit in the car staking out the building.

"No," he says as he stares at the club, like it's more interesting than me.

"Remember when you were so enamored by my dashing good looks you let a man a fraction of your age ram a hay hook... a *hay hook* into your leg?"

He glances away from the place to look at me from where I sit in the passenger seat. "Can I say no again?"

"Then it'd be a lie."

"Then no."

I grin. "Did you know, at that point, that we'd forever be destined to be together?"

"Don't you have like... things to do?" he asks. "Like extensive stakeouting?"

"You're the only thing I have to do."

He starts laughing. "We already did that. Yes, I remember when I met you even if I was wishing I hadn't at the time. You were very... pesky."

"You used the wrong P word."

"Peewee."

I glare at him.

"Perverted."

"Close, but you're still so far away."

"Piddling."

"Now you're farther away. Want a clue? It's perfect. I was very perfect."

He groans. "No, that can't be right. What about pushy?"

I shrug. "I'll give you that one. You never realized that day would be the best day of your life, did you?"

"It definitely wasn't the best day of my life. We've had *much* better days," he says as he leans forward and kisses my cheek. "What brought this up?"

“I like to look back at times when I annoyed you because they bring me so much joy.”

“Oh... that sounds like something you’d do. While I think of pleasant memories with you like our first date or our first assignment as partners, you think of things that caused me annoyances.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “Our first date? You mean the one where you took me to a vampire-only restaurant and tried intimidating me? And you just suckled on your wine glass of blood while telling me I’d be dessert.”

“Half of that didn’t even happen.”

“Or the first assignment where you tried *eating* me?”

“That was an accident.”

I start laughing. “This is why I like you so much. We have the same morbid sense of humor.”

His eyebrows knit. “Do we, though?”

“Yes.”

“I convinced myself for hundreds of years to never get involved with a human. What has happened to me?” He sounds disappointed in himself, but all I see is improvement from the man he was.

“Maybe, but I promise you that the time with me will be the most memorable years you’ll ever have,” I joke.

He gives me a huge smile. “I’m already convinced they will be.”

I stare at him, surprised by the moment of seriousness. “Really?”

“Of course. Do you really think I’d break my only rule if you didn’t make every day special in your weird and twisted way?”

I smile as I glance up. “That is so... Oh my god, I forgot what we were doing and the guy is like a block away and running!”

“Dammit! You’re so distracting!” he yells as he jumps out of his car and takes off.

“I’ll be right there,” I say as I crawl into the driver’s seat. Who needs to run when they can drive?

So there I am, chasing down a vampire with my sexy vampire hot on his trail while wearing the biggest, stupidest grin I’ve ever worn. It might be the reason why, when the runner dodges into traffic, I don’t see him until I’ve nailed him with the car.

He’s a vampire, so he’ll be fine. Marcus’s car, on the other hand?

Marcus looks over at me with wide eyes.

I blow him a kiss.

He frowns even more.

It’s clear we’re meant to be.