

Prologue

I hadn't heard from my parents for a while, and with all this ghoulish apocalypse stuff going on, I decided to go check on them. My dad is tough and has plenty of weapons, but ghouls don't die easily. When I pulled into their long driveway, I felt a sense of dread in my gut that I just couldn't shake. I knew something was wrong.

I drove my jeep down the eleven-hundred-foot driveway and parked behind my mother's SUV. The house was quiet... eerily quiet. The sun was starting to set, and no lights were shining through the windows that would show they were settling down for the night or starting dinner.

I thought, "Maybe they were out back?"

I wanted to believe they were out back, but my gut kept gnawing at me that they weren't. I walked up to the front door, and it was cracked open a bit. They would never leave their door unlocked, much less open, so I pulled my .45 out of the holster and cocked it as I crept in.

I walked past the foyer into the living room, a foul stench hit me. There's nothing like the smell of decomposing bodies. It sticks to clothes and hair like you wouldn't believe. It's repulsing.

I looked around but didn't see anything out of place other than the coffee table that was turned over, so I stepped further into the room. There they were, lying on the floor in front of the couch. Both their bodies were in one piece except for the empty hole in their chests where a heart used to be.

And then I realized, "Holy shit! Where's Kris?"

Kris is my younger brother. I'm fifteen years older than he is, so he's more like a son than a sibling.

I ran to his room, but he wasn't there. He wasn't anywhere. They got him. Those damn ghouls got him!

I couldn't leave my mom and dad like this, so I went to my dad's shop and got the dozer. I dug a spot big and deep enough for both of them and put them in it. I'll have to make some headstones later, but for now, that'll have to do. I couldn't risk those nasty, flesh-eating bastards coming back to reanimate my parents. There's no way I would ever let them become ghouls!

The reason I'm coming to you is that I have to find Kris. I can't do it alone. If we find him soon enough, we may be able to save him. I just figured, you know, if you could use your Psi abilities, I could use my chemistry knowledge, and we could find ways to torture information out of them.

You know more about their weaknesses than I do since you're a psychic vampire and all. I'm not part of the supernatural community. I didn't even know this stuff was real until ghouls started trying to take over.

What do you think? Will you help me?

Chapter 1

I was drained after leaving Ian's house. Once he'd agreed to help me find Kris it was like a hundred pounds had been lifted off my shoulders. Now I just wanted to sleep.

As I walked up the stairs to my second-floor apartment, a man was waiting at the top. He wore a holey pair of jeans and a dirty, white t-shirt with the sleeves cut off. The man's eyes were a muddy shade of green, and when the wind blew, there was a moldy stench coming from him.

"I get that it's the apocalypse and whatnot, but that's no excuse to forget personal hygiene," I said.

"You're Kate?" he asked.

"Who's asking?" I replied.

"Someone who knows where your brother is," he said.

As I reached the top of the stairs, I was able to get a better look at him. His skin was dark and patchy in several places, and the moldy stench was worse than any B.O. I'd ever smelled.

"You're one of them," I growled as I reached for my gun.

"I wouldn't do that," he said as he looked at my hand and slowly shook his head.

"What. Do. You. Want?" I asked through clenched teeth. "Who are you?"

"Name's Jagger." He nodded toward the door to my apartment. "That where you live?"

I stared at him through narrowed eyes but didn't respond. How did he know who I was, and why was he offering to help me?

"I don't wanna talk out here. I won't hurt you," Jagger said.

"Well, I don't wanna talk in there," I scoffed.

"It's not safe for either of us in the open."

“Sorry, dude. There’s no way I’m letting you in,” I said.

I walked to my apartment and unlocked the door. I stood in the threshold for a moment because I couldn’t decide if I was doing the right thing or not. After all, Jagger knew where my brother was. Then again, this was a ghoul, and they showed no mercy when it came to their dinner. I didn’t have a way to protect myself yet, so I stepped into the house and began to close the door.

“Wait,” Jagger said, holding out a business card. “At least take this in case you change your mind.”

“Ghouls have business cards now?” I asked as I closed the door.

The ghoul flicked the card through the crack just before the door closed all the way.

“Seriously,” Jagger called, “Think about it.”

I was too tired to pick up the stupid card, so I left it on the floor, went straight to bed, and quickly fell asleep.

I woke to my phone vibrating in my back pocket and realized I had slept in my clothes with my gun still on my hip. After fumbling for my phone, I pressed the green button and answered the call.

“Hello?” I said.

“You know ghouls are watching your apartment?” Ian said.

“Not surprised,” I mumbled. “One was waiting for me last night when I got home from your house. Said he knows where Kris is. Left me a business card and told me to think about talking to him.”

“He left you alive?” Ian asked.

“Sure did,” I told him. “I wouldn’t let him in the apartment, and he didn’t want to talk outside. Said it wasn’t safe for either of us. I shut that shit down *real* quick.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Don’t know. Just woke up. Hadn’t had a chance to think about it yet,” I replied.

“I think you should talk to him,” Ian said. “If he was going to kill you, he would have tried last night.”

I pulled my gun out of the holster and rolled over on my back. My brain was still half asleep, and I knew it was a bad idea to make any decisions before I’d had a shower a couple cups of coffee.

“Still there?” Ian asked.

“Yup,” I yawned. “Hey, how do you know ghouls are watching me?”

“Cause I’m right outside. I was coming to tell you what I found.”

“Well, come up then... Or should I come to you?” I asked him.

“Nope, I’ll come up.”

I slid off the bed, stumbled to the front door, and leaned my forehead against the cold metal. I’d only been there for a half a minute before I heard a tap. I unlocked the deadbolt and let Ian in. His curly, blonde hair and light blue eyes made my heart jump. Suddenly, I was fully awake and aware of my morning breath and bedhead.

“I’ve gotta brush my teeth,” I called over my shoulder as I ran down the hall to the bathroom.

“You can’t stay here anymore, Kate,” Ian said. “I don’t know what they’re doing, but you’re not safe.”

“Yup,” I said as I tried to keep from spewing toothpaste out of my mouth. “I know.”

“Maybe you should talk to that guy. At least see what’s up. I can go with you if you want.”

“I don’t know if he’ll be as forthcoming with you there,” I said after I wiped my face with a towel.

“Well, you need something to defend yourself with,” Ian said. “Like, maybe some fresh blood or something. I don’t know how you’d get him to drink it, though.”

I walked to the living room after brushing my hair and putting it back in a neat ponytail.

“Does it have to be swallowed?” I asked.

“I think it just has to get into their system somehow,” Ian replied.

“So, what about a syringe?” I suggested. “I’ve got a couple here from when I was a nurse. I can show you how to draw my blood, and that’s that. Instant ghoulgone.”

“Let’s do it,” Ian nodded as he walked to the door and picked up Jagger’s card. “Get him on the phone.”

I took the card and dialed the number.

“Yo,” Jagger said. “Jag here.”

“It’s Kate,” I said as I rolled my eyes at his greeting.

“Decided talking to me was in your best interest, huh?” he asked. “I guess you noticed all the ghouls then.”

“It’s pretty obvious that talking to me is in *your* best interest,” I responded. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t have left me alive.”

“I have no desire to kill you, Kate,” Jagger laughed. “But we can’t meet at your place now. No one can see you with me.”

“Where then?” I asked.

“How about the river by the train bridge?” he suggested. “No one’s down there anymore, so we don’t have to worry about ghouls finding us.”

“When?” I replied.

“Noon,” Jagger said. “That gives you a couple hours to lose the posse.”

“See you then,” I said and hung up the phone.

“He said noon,” I told Ian.

“Where?” Ian asked.

“The train bridge on the river,” I replied as I walked to the drawer in my kitchen that held all my first aid stuff.

“What are we going to do about those guys out there?” Ian asked.

“We’ll try to sneak past them, and if we can’t...” I said as I held up the syringes and wiggled them in my fingers, “We’ll take them out. Now, come here. It’s super easy. All you have to do is find the vein, stick the needle in carefully, and pull back on the plunger.”

Ian joined me at the table and reached for the syringe as I popped off the cap.

“You sure I should be doing this?” he asked.

“Well, it would be much easier if you did,” I said. “Hold it at an angle, not straight down, and you’ll feel when you’re in the vein. Don’t put it too far in, or the vein will blow.”

Ian inserted the needle with steady hands like a pro. However, as he began to pull the plunger back, and my blood slowly filled the syringe, I noticed how green he had turned. His hands became shaky, and he started to sway. I caught the syringe just as he gave up his breakfast all over my dining room floor.

“What the fuck, Ian!”

“Uuugh,” he wretched and looked up at me with watery eyes.

I held my breath and finished drawing out my blood and then popped the tourniquet with my teeth and removed the needle.

“Let me get this straight,” I said as I broke open a pack of gauze. “You can drink blood, but you can’t look at it?”

Ian grabbed a roll of paper towels and wiped up the vomit from the floor.

“I’ve never been able to look at it,” he said. “And I don’t need blood all the time, I just need energy. I only drink it when I have to.”

“A vamp who’s afraid of blood...” I laughed. “Now that’s irony.”

I gave him a minute to recover and to clean my floor as I split the blood up into four syringes. Since I wasn’t able to stick myself, I’d have to make do with what I had.

“There’s about five CCs in each syringe,” I said as I held them out for him to see. “Think that’ll do it?”

“Oh my god,” he said after he looked and then quickly glanced away. “Yeah, that’ll do.”

Ian sat down and put his head between his knees, and I realized that showing him the blood wasn’t the best idea.

“My bad, Ian. Probably shouldn’t have done that.”

“I think it’s time to go,” he said.

“Agreed, but how are we supposed to get past them?”

Ian walked to the window and peeked out.

“We just walk to the car,” he said. “There’s no other way. We need the Jeep to get to the river. We’ll have to take a chance.”

I ran to my room, grabbed my .45 off my bed, and holstered it. I shoved the syringes in my back pockets as I ran back to the door, took a deep breath, and swung it open.

“It’s now or never,” I said.

Ian and I walked down the stairs to the parking lot on high alert.

“So far so good,” I whispered.

“If we make it to the Jeep, we’re home free... hopefully,” Ian said.

It was odd because we did just that. We got to my Jeep, we opened the doors, we got in the Jeep, and we cranked it up. Still... nothing.

“Here goes nothing,” I said.

I put the Jeep in reverse and backed out of my spot. When I drove out of the complex, I looked in my rearview mirror.

“Why aren’t they following us?” Ian said.

“You’re the freaking psychic,” I scoffed. “Why aren’t you picking anything up?”

“They haven’t touched anything I’ve touched,” Ian said. “All I have is this-- Where’s the card?”

“What card?”

“The card with the ghoul’s number,” he responded.

“I left it in the apartment,” I told him. “I didn’t think I’d need it again. If I need to contact him, I can just redial.”

“Damn,” Ian said. “Would’ve been nice to get a read on the situation.”

“Do you see them?” I asked. “Any of them following us?”

“Not that I can tell.”

“Well, that’s a good thing,” I said, “Because it’s a quarter till right now and no time to lose them.”

We drove in silence the rest of the way to the river. I knew Ian was anxious about not getting a read on the situation, and I was just nervous in general. There was no telling what was going to happen when we got there, and I had no interest in a partnership with a ghoul. But as Ian said, I needed to hear him out.

I pulled on the dirt road that ran parallel to the river and slowly made my way to the train bridge. We reached our destination and parked near the trees. Ian unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to me.

“I’m coming with you,” he said. “If he wants me to leave, I will when I see you’re safe, but I’m shaking his hand first. I’d like to get a read on him.”

“Fine by me,” I said as I swung my door open and threw off my seatbelt. Let’s do this.”

We walked to the underside of the bridge and were dumbfounded. Jagger was sitting leaned against the pilings, a hole in his chest, heart missing, stinking up the place, and dead as could be. I thought Ian was going to puke again, but instead, he ran to the ghoul and touched his hand.

In a matter of seconds, three things happened: Ian stood and flashed back to me, my brother walked into view, and I realized he was a ghoul. All the breath left my body. I deflated like a balloon.

“Hey, Kate,” Kris said. “Looks like you were a little late for the party.”

I couldn’t speak, and Ian had to hold me up.

“Kris?” Ian breathed. “What did they do to you?”

“Nothing that I didn’t want them to do,” he said. “You know... If you can’t beat ‘em and whatnot.”

“You... You asked them to do this?” I stuttered.

“I sure did,” he shrugged. “Tried to get the folks to go along with it too, but they wouldn’t, so I had to take care of that.”

I thought I was going to vomit, or faint, or kill him, but either way, I got a surge of energy, and I reached for the syringe in my back pocket.

“You killed them?” I asked.

“Yup,” my brother said. “Ol’ Jagger here was gonna spill the beans. He’s one of the ancient ones. Most of those guys don’t want this whole takeover to happen.” Kris kicked Jagger’s foot. “Dumbasses. They have no idea how good we’ll have it when this is finished.”

I started to lunge at my brother-turned-ghoul, but Ian held me back.

“Don’t,” Ian whispered. “Not now. You don’t know what I know. If you want to get out of here alive... Don’t.”

“Listen to him, sis,” Kris grinned.

I steadied myself and shook Ian off of me.

“What do you want?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“I have their hearts,” Kris said. “Now, where are our parents’ bodies.”

Chapter 2

“He said noon,” I told Ian.

“Where?” Ian asked.

“The train bridge on the river,” I replied as I walked to the drawer in my kitchen that held all my first aid stuff.

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