

Vampires Drool! Zombies Rule!  
By Rusty Fischer, author of Zombies Don't Cry

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Rusty Fischer

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Smashwords Edition

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Prologue

My name is Lucy.

I'm, well, there's no sugar-coating it; I'm a zombie.

Synonyms for my current state of being might include words like undead, the reanimated, the Living Dead, undying, immortal... take your pick.

What's that you say?

You wanna know what it's like to be... dead?

That's okay; you're not being rude for asking.

(I mean, not exactly.)

Lots of girls want to know.

(Heck, I used to want to know, too.)

And nowadays I'm not shy about telling them, either.

So I guess I'll tell you, too.

You wanna know what it's like to be dead?

Fine.

Step outside on the coldest day of the year - no fair if it's above 30-degrees out and bonus points if there's actually snow on your front stoop - and stand there for, oh, say an hour.

That's all; just one hour.

60 little minutes.

Now, don't rush through this hour like it's some kind of multiple choice test, either; own it.

Own every stinkin' minute of it.

Own the first minute, when it's still "fun" to be trying this little living dead experiment.

Own the fifth minute, when you're still warm from inside the house and your down jacket and puffy new socks aren't quite letting the cold in - yet.

Own the 14th minute, when the "fun" factor has worn off and the cold has seeped in and your toes are frosting over and you're starting to realize just how long 60 frickin' minutes can be.

Then own the half-hour mark, when your teeth and chin and even your eyelashes are chattering and you're wondering why you're out here in the cold when you could be watching TV with your feet up and a cup of hot cocoa in your hand.

Own the 45th minute, when you are flat-out over it and don't know how you're going to last the next 15 minutes.

But you do; somehow... you do.

Then, after that hour - after that long, cold, frigid, frosty hour - right about when you're dying to step back inside by the fire and warm up your hands and blow your dripping nose and slip that cup of instant hot cocoa into the microwave... don't.

That's right, don't go back inside.

Do not stamp your feet on the inside welcome mat, do not go straight to the kitchen, do not pour that packet of hot cocoa in a Christmas mug full of water and insert it into the microwave and, whatever you do, do not start looking around for last winter's bag of stale mini-marshmallows while the cocoa is nuking to a hot, velvety, frothy boiling point.

Instead, start taking off your clothes, one item at a time.

That's right; DO NOT go back in but DO, by all means, start disrobing.

First take off your fancy leather gloves, then your monogrammed ski cap, hoodie or parka, then your poofy down jacket, then your other jacket, then your sweater, then your shirt, then your bra (if you're a girl or... whatever), then your boots, then your ski pants, then your long johns or leggings, then your panties (if you're a girl or... whatever) then, finally, your socks.

Are you bare yet?

Are you completely unprotected from the elements?

Standing there in your birthday suit?

Do your goose bumps have goose bumps?

Is there snow, or at least frost, between your turning-blue toes?

Is your out-y and inn-y?

Is your hair - and I mean, all of it - frozen in place?

Good; very good.

Now stand there for another hour, and another and... get the picture?

That's right; now you've got it: Death.

Is.

Cold.

At least... it is for a zombie like yours truly.

It starts cold, it stays cold for a couple hundred years and - or so I hear - it ends even colder (if you can imagine).

Meanwhile our skin is cold, our faces are cold, our breath is cold, our feet and hands are cold, our stomachs are cold (and empty).

It sucks, at first, but like everything else in the Afterlife, you get used to it.

In fact, you get so used to it that you forget that your skin is roughly the same temperature as an ice cream cone.

So used to it that you get lazy and bump into people in the halls at school and are only reminded that your skin feels like an ice cream cone when they look at you funny and have to rub the spot of skin where they touched yours just to get it back up to its normal temperature.

So used to it that even after the school installs new paper towel dispensers in the bathroom that have those little red sensors that detect human body heat you stupidly put your hand under there expecting - actually expecting - a paper towel to come out.

And that, dear readers, is where our little story begins...

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## Chapter 1

That's right, we are both here today because of... a paper towel.

Not a whole roll of paper towels, not some super special paper towels like with shiny silver foil undersides or some fancy holiday print in honor of fall or monogrammed with my initials or anything - just one regular, generic, public high school issued stinking paper towel.

Specifically, we are here today because the powers that be at Barracuda Bay High School decided to switch out the old-fashioned, minding-its-own-darn-business, plenty-good-enough metal paper towel dispensers and go all high-tech instead.

What'd they replace them with?

Those fancy newfangled deals with the little red light under the dispenser.

And what does the little red light do?

It senses body heat.

And why does it sense body heat?

Because that's how it knows when to shoot out a new paper towel at you.

And what don't zombies have?

That's right; body heat!

So there I am, just popping into the C-wing girls room between 5th and 6th periods so I can "check my face" before sitting as close to Alex Foster as humanly possible in Chorus and, at first, I don't even notice the newfangled towel dispensers hanging from the bathroom wall.

I mean, why would I, right?

Who looks at anything but the mirror in the bathroom anyway?

Now, here's a little fun fact for you (you know, in case you're keeping score or something): zombies don't actually need to use the bathroom.

Well, think about it: we don't eat human food, don't drink human drinks and only eat fresh brains once a month or so, so... why would we?

But I do pop into the girls room to check my face every other period or so just to make sure the three layers of white pancake makeup I apply every morning haven't smudged to reveal the slightly gray, drying cement tone of my true skin color beneath.

(Slightly gross, I know, but yet another thing you kind of have to get used to when you're no longer among the living.)

Now, if no one's around when I do my checking, I just walk out the doors and don't look back.

I mean, I'm already dead!

What are a few million germs going to do to me, right?

But when people are around, live people, human beings - “Normals,” as we of the zombie persuasion call them - well, I have to play the part and that means washing your hands so girls don’t start spreading the rumor that you’re a non-hand-washer because that pretty much kills your dating potential right there.

And if it had been just a few of the knock-around girls from class I really wouldn’t have cared because, let’s face it, what they do in the bathroom is 50 times worse than not washing your hands (trust me on this one).

But it just so happens that Piper Madison and Bianca Ridley are in there, trying out the new hand dryers for the longest time, and here I am itching to sit next to Alex and these two prima donnas are just so tickled pink with these new paper towel dispensers that they must use two rolls just trying it out.

Meanwhile a line is forming behind me and, suddenly, I’m next; batter’s up.

And without even thinking about it, without even remembering Law # 3 of The 8 Absolutely Unthinkable, Unbreakable Zombie Laws (i.e. “Thou Shalt Not Reveal Your Zombie Nature to Humans Unless Absolutely, Positively Necessary”) I stick my hand over the little red sensor and - nothing.

Nada.

Zip.

Zilch.

Zero.

Now, five seconds earlier Piper and Bianca are spitting out paper towels left and right.

And if you’ve ever used one of these things well, then you’ll know there’s this VERY specific sound the shiny white machine on the wall makes when it a.) registers your body heat and b.) spits out a paper towel to reward you for having said body heat.

The first sound it makes, when it realizes you are actually human with a temperature of above 90-degrees, is a kind of “kachinga-chinga” noise and the next is a vaguely reassuring “whirra-whirra-whirra” as the paper towel comes out right before your very eyes.

And so when you put your hand under it the first time and it spits out a sheet, but that’s not good enough so you put your hand under again and it spits out another sheet, well, you get this very kind of soothing, instantly-recognizable “kachinga-chinga-whirra-whirra-whirra-kachinga-chinga-whirra-whirra-whirra” sound and it’s been going on for three straight minutes and suddenly - no sound.

And the equation is fairly obvious to anyone with an IQ of above, say, 30: Everyone else's hand = sound.

My hand = no sound.

And the lack of that sound is so obvious, it's like a whole other sound.

Specifically, the sound of a dead girl with no body heat trying to use the paper towel hand sensor machine.

(Okay, okay, so maybe that's not what it sounds like to the other girls, but that's sure what it sounds like to ME.)

"Great," one of the girls behind me - Fiona Rutherford - not-so-murmuringly murmurs, "Goth Girl broke it. She breaks everything. She's, like, the... Charlie Brown... of goth girls."

And because I'm a zombie, and because I can break anyone in this room in half with two tiny snaps of my cold gray fingers, and because I'm already dead and what else can they do to me, I turn around and snap at mousy Fiona Rutherford (who would have never said a word if she hadn't been standing there with three of her equally mousy friends to back her up, as if they possibly could), "I broke it? You think I broke it, Fiona? What about these two paper towel machine abusers right here? You think running through three rolls of paper towels for no good reason might have broken it?"

And by "these two paper towel machine abusers right here," of course, I'm referring to Piper and Bianca, who aren't too happy about it.

And there is my big mistake.

If I had just blown it off, scampered away and wiped my hands on my skirt like any other self-respecting zombie would have in a hot minute, I wouldn't be writing this right now and you certainly wouldn't be reading it.

But instead I called Piper Madison - sorry, THE Piper Madison - a name and at Barracuda Bay High that is a really big no-no.

(Okay, sure, I called Bianca a name, too, but she's basically just Piper's lackey so that doesn't really count.)

And Piper stops everything to look at me with her strikingly brown - I'm talking chocolate bar commercial brown - eyes and says, in that fake European accent of hers, "We didn't break anything."

And, just to prove it, she shoves me aside - hard - and slips one of her porcelain white hands under the dryer and, sure enough, “kachinga-chinga-whirra-whirra-whirra” out pops a fresh sheet of paper towel.

And then it’s like I’m not even there anymore, at least for Fiona and her two stupid Geek Girl, Math-a-lete, AV Clubbing friends, who “kachinga-chinga-whirra-whirra-whirra” their way into some fresh paper towels before sashaying their way straight out of the girls room.

And you can almost hear the Old West wind whistling through the bathroom - wait, was that a tumbleweed tumbling by just now??? - as the final girl shuts the door for the final time and suddenly it’s just me and Piper and Bianca and that stupid, stupid sensor.

“Nice going,” says Piper, sliding up against the back of the bathroom door so no more Normals will walk in and interrupt us - and I can’t get out.

“Yeah,” snorts Bianca, covering her blossomy bosom with her Sociology textbook. “Nice going.”

(I mean, is there a rule that lackeys have to repeat everything the Head Witch in Charge says, verbatim, like their own personal echo machine? I’m just asking here.)

“I forgot,” I say, not backing down. “I wasn’t even thinking.”

“That’s the problem with you stupid zombies,” Piper spits, the barest tips of her white glistening fangs poking out from behind her plump, red, so alive lips now that the coast is clear and it’s just us immortals in here. “You. Never. Think. Which is weird, considering the fact that all you guys eat is BRAINS!”

The thing about vampires, the angrier they get, the more their fangs get pronounced (kind of like Pinocchio’s nose when he starts telling a lie); that’s why they always have to act so cool, so they don’t “slip” and pull a fang-boner in front of a whole cafeteria full of civilians.

“We do think, Piper,” I say, defending the zombie race to the best of my ability (which isn’t saying much). “I just wasn’t thinking today; there’s a difference.”

“Yeah, well, now stupid Fiona Rutherford noticed, and who knows what that little junior reporter wannabe is going to do about it,” Piper points out pointedly.

(Try saying that three times fast.)

I forgot that, in addition to her duties as head of the AV Club and Supreme Mistress of the Math-a-letes, Fiona Rutherford is also on the staff of our school newspaper, the Barracuda Bay Bugle and freelances for the annual yearbook, the Barracuda Bay Beagle (try not to get those two mixed up).



“Piper,” I sigh, trying to look at my watch without her seeing me look at my watch (which isn’t exactly easy because vampires see everything), “you’re overreacting. It was, like, two seconds frozen in time. No one is going to remember anything. You think those stupid Nerd Girls care if I broke the new paper towel dispenser or not?”

“That’s just it,” Bianca leaps in, eager to please Piper, “you didn’t break it, and they saw that it worked for everyone but you.”

“You guys are paranoid,” I persist. “Just because you know I’m... what I am... doesn’t mean that’s the first thing admittedly nosy but not particularly insightful Fiona Rutherford is going to think.”

Piper pauses before sliding away from the door and preparing to fling it open. “You better hope you’re right, Lucy, because if you and your stupid cold, dead hands screw up the good thing we’ve got going in Barracuda Bay, I will personally make it MY Afterlife’s mission to make YOUR Afterlife the worst 2,000 years of your, well, your... Afterlife!”

“Too late,” I think to myself, but don’t say, as I let them burst through the bathroom door and out into the empty hallways.

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## Chapter 2

I’m late to next period, naturally.

And Alex Foster already has girls sitting on either side of him, naturally.

But then, Alex Foster always has girls sitting on either side of him.

(Naturally.)

That’s because he’s Fine with a capital H-O-T.

(But not in the way that you might think.)

I've been crushing hard on Alex Foster for months now, ever since he first walked into Chorus and melted my non-beating heart on the first day of junior year.

I know it's the oldest story in the book, the local crushing on the new guy, but I just couldn't help it.

And he's not, like, "hot guy" hot, you know?

Which is funny because, obviously, I'm not the only girl crushing on him.

But he has this... thing... about him.

Well, he has many things going for him.

Like, for instance, that first day he walked into class he was dressed up.

I mean, going for an interview dressed up; pleated khaki pants, braided leather belt, penny loafers, brown socks, light blue cotton button-down shirt - everything but the jacket and tie.

Of course, the guys all snorted and ribbed him about it (to this day most of them call him "Ascot Alex," though I doubt half the guys at Barracuda Bay High know what an ascot is, only that it sounds snooty), but we girls just thought it was the cutest thing.

Turns out he'd only gone to prep schools, ever, up north, and this was his first public school; he'd just gotten into town a day or two earlier, and didn't really have enough time to check-out the local customs here in Barracuda Bay, so he'd just gone with his default wardrobe and, boom, instant crushes from girls all over the school.

Now, normally, I'm a straight-hair girl; short and straight, specifically; black if you can swing it, dark brown in a pinch.

So is it weird that Alex has these gorgeous light brown curls and I just can't stop staring at them?

Also, I like the jocks; always have.

Strong, not exactly stocky but thick; muscle-y, you know?

Not Alex; he's long and gawky, all elbows and knees and apples in his cheeks and a kind of short, pug nose - which I normally don't like, either.

But on Alex?

It's aces; just... positively... aces.

And he has these eyes, that are so green they're not green, you know?

They're like... candy... green; "Jolly Rancher green," I call it.

Although no one would know that because Alex is the crush of which I cannot speak.

Why?

That's right; it's a very big no-no and absolutely against one of The 8 Absolutely Unthinkable, Unbreakable Zombie Laws.

(# 6 or 7, I think, but don't quote me on it.)

Today he's got on wheat colored chords and a maroon rugby shirt with thin gold stripes and a kind of gold lion crest over his left nipple.

His skin is pale and he's hairless just about everywhere but his gorgeous curls (and did I mention his abnormally bushy eyebrows, which I also normally don't like but his are to die for) and if it wasn't for the sun highlighting the thin peach stubble on his chin I'd swear he hadn't reached puberty yet.

Now, just so you don't think I'm both a zombie AND a Chorus Geek, let me explain something first: Chorus is a class in name only.

Our temporary teacher, Mr. Hatcher, is about 23 and looks even younger, and his only musical experience was playing in a garage band while going to Teacher College.

He got picked to teach Chorus because our regular teacher, Ms. Highbrow, went and got herself pregnant and is bound and determined to take every single day of maternity leave she has coming - and then some.

(Not that I can blame her one minute. Sometimes I wish zombies could get pregnant, just so I could take nine months off from passing as a mortal and let it all hang out back home.)

Enter Mr. Hatcher.

Now we basically just find a seat and do crossword puzzles for 45 minutes every day.

I slump in and find a seat near the door, because if I can't hang with Alex there's really no reason to be in this room in the first place.

What's worse, now I have what Piper said to worry about.

Because what Piper didn't see, and what Bianca had her head too far up Piper's butt to notice, was the way Fiona Rutherford reached out to touch me on the way out of the bathroom just now.

Because, despite her catty little "She's the Charlie Brown of goth girls" comment in front of her friends, and despite the way she kind of had to gang up on me just so girls like Piper and Bianca wouldn't gang up on her, Fiona is actually a pretty nice girl.

We're not exactly talking Mother Theresa nice here, but nice enough to reach out with a reassuring touch when a rabid pack of catty girls is ganging up on you in the girls' room.

Which, in high school these days, is pretty much bordering on Mother Theresa nice, if you know what I mean.

And so when Piper and Fiona were concentrating on the paper towel machine and how I could have possibly broken it, and while her friends were busy trying to avoid me at all costs, Fiona reached out gently to reassure me and when she was intending to touch me on my sleeve her hand slipped - or maybe my arm moved, it happened so fast I'm a little vague on the details now - and she.

Touched.

My.

Hand.

My bare hand.

My cold, dead, gray hand.

Now, Fiona has never touched me before.

Fiona has never had any reason to touch me before.

So she's never felt my cold skin, never gotten a chill or a shiver simply from brushing up against me and here she is touching my hand and in a split-second her naturally pale, genetically mousy little face... changes.

Not in a disgusted way, not in a surprised way, not even in a mean way; it's even worse than any of those.

It's like her smart, Math-a-lete brain has suddenly switched into Detective Mode and so right away it's putting together clues.

Clue # 1, my hands won't work on the new paper towel dispenser.

Clue # 2, my hands feel like ice, ice baby.

And hands aren't supposed to feel quite that cold.

I mean, even when you're sick, and having the chills, humans still have a pretty high threshold of heat going on so... this is something bad; not normal, which in high school is bad.

So immediately our little detective Fiona knows, the minute she touches me, that something is wrong; very, very wrong.

She may not know what I am, exactly; she just knows that I.

Am.

Not.

What.

I.

Say.

I.

Am.

That being, of course... human.

And that's where all the trouble starts.

I know you would think that somebody like Fiona should have brushed up against and touched me before but I'm normally really, really careful about that type of thing.

And, really, with the way I dress there isn't that much opportunity for Normals to, you know, touch my skin.

From the black clogs to the black and gray striped leggings to the long maroon sleeves to the too-big hoodies, seriously, you'd have to be really determined to touch me to touch me, and so far nobody's been all t-hat determined.

(Especially Fiona Rutherford.)

And the fact that it was my fault that Fiona touched me today, well, that just makes it all the more infuriating.

I mean, of all the stupid, stupid blunders.

I should know better; I'm supposed to know better.

No, I mean, technically, as a zombie I am literally charged with knowing better.

Like, not knowing better is against one of The 8 Absolutely Unthinkable, Unbreakable Zombie Laws (i.e. "Thou Shalt Not Have Physical Contact with Humans Unless Absolutely, Positively Necessary").

But who could predict that, over the weekend the school would install newfangled paper towel dispensers?

And I'm thinking of all the ways Fiona's touch can come back to haunt me, in unwanted gossip, in unwanted rumors, in unwanted attention, when suddenly there is a knock on the Chorus room door.

And the minute I hear that knock, I know it's for me, and I know it has something to do with the bathroom, with Fiona... with my skin.

Of course, it could have been a knock signaling any number of things.

Some thug (in Chorus?) getting called to the office because he'd pantsed some freshman in the halls before class.

Albert Frostmeyer getting called up to the office because his mom had forgotten to pack his lunch (again).

Or simply Alex Foster getting called to the office on account of terminal hotness!

Yeah, right; it's for me.

I know it's for me.

It has to be for me.

That knock just has my name on it.

And sure enough, when Mr. Hatcher stands up and opens the door for the knock that bears my name, the person holding the note is none other than Fiona and she has this overly-concerned look on her pasty, doughy face as she hands it to the sub and waits for me.

For me.

And the sub lifts his head and, even after being our teacher for two weeks now he looks clear past me to some chick in the alto section and asks, “Lucy? Lucy Frost?”

\* \* \* \* \*

### Chapter 3

“What’s this all about, Fiona?” I snap the minute the Chorus room door swings silently shut behind us and we’re out in the hall alone, clomping toward the front office.

She’s already walking a few paces ahead of me, none too eager to touch me again, when she calls back cryptically over her shoulder, “You’ll see, Lucy.”

I catch up to her in three long, stiff paces.

(Now, zombies can’t exactly run but when we’re motivated we can move quickly enough.)

“I don’t want to ‘see,’ Fiona. I want to know right now what this is all about.”

She stops and turns and faces me, still careful to keep her distance, and her eyes are no longer scared but concerned and she says, stammering a little because she’s probably not so great at confrontation, “Nothing, Lucy, I just... your skin’s so... cold. And that whole... incident... with the paper towel dispenser—”

“Incident? I would hardly call a broken paper towel dispenser an ‘incident,’ Fiona. Gheez, overreact much?”

“It wasn’t broken, Lucy; it worked fine. For everybody but... you.”

“What is the big deal about the paper towel dispenser, Fiona? Seriously, I don’t get it.”

She shrugs. “Me either; it’s supposed to work on human hands, and it does, so... why doesn’t it work on yours?”

“Because it’s broken, malfunctioning, defunct, a dud... that’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

She doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, avoiding eye contact all the while, and then she adds, “Well, that’s not all, Lucy. I mean, after I touched you, and my hand nearly froze off, well, I took a closer look and, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way or anything but, Lucy, you don’t look... good.”

“Great, Fiona, thanks. I don’t know how else to take that but the wrong way. But I appreciate that. Way to boost the old morale there. Awesome. Thanks. Great. Super.”

“It’s just... your skin. I’m not sure you’re entirely healthy, is all.”

“I’m just fine, Fiona, seriously,” I snap, voice rising as my frustration reaches a new level of frustratedness. “I don’t need you, or Bianca or Piper or any of your Math-a-lete friends thinking I’m not fine, so you need to just stop, now, with all the handwringing and paper towel dispensing because I. Am. Fine. Honest.”

Even in the face of my harangue Fiona just stands her ground and when I’m through she just kind of says, quietly, so no one else will overhear, “I was concerned, Lucy, that’s all.”

And I kind of step back because I’ve spent my whole high school career here at Barracuda Bay staying out of the civilians’ way and half-expecting them to come after me with pitchforks and torches every day at school and suddenly this one... this one... is concerned.

About me?

But then I see the color of the Pass in her hand - a kind of minty green, and not the cool chocolate minty green like I used to get in the movies when I was alive and could still taste things like chocolate and mint and popcorn, but a kind of medicine-you-don’t-want-to-take minty green.

And I suddenly remember that in addition to all her other I-want-to-get-into-Harvard-so-bad junior year electives she is also the Counselor’s Aid for 6th Period and it snaps me back into the cruel reality of my... particular... situation.

“Okay, Fiona, well... thanks, that’s really... sweet... of you and everything but, what does that have to do with you taking me out of Chorus - and away from Alex Foster?”

And suddenly Fiona is no longer concerned but conspiratorial and she inches just a little closer and says, “So you DO have a crush on Alex Foster? I knew it. I think that’s... sweet.”

Sweet, huh?

That’s girl-speak for NOT sweet.



So I snap back, “Sweet? What’s so ‘sweet’ about it?”

And Fiona takes another step back, crinkling the minty green hall pass in the process and says, “Nothing, it’s just... you guys are such opposites, is all.”

Hmm, and there it is; right out in the open.

We’re “opposites” because why would a strictly hunky, straight arrow, A-list, prep school type with long legs and tight fists and clear eyes and dirty blond curls fall for pale, cold, heartless, rude, some might say moody “Goth Girl,” right?

And I open my mouth to say just that, to spit it out, word-for-word, just like that, but I don’t; I let my eyes do the talking and do they ever, smoldering all the way to the front office.

(Hey, my skin might be ice cold but I can still shoot red hot laser beams with my eyeballs. You know, not literally but... metaphorically... speaking, of course.)

Before we go in I stop her, risking another frosty touch to the shoulder, and say, “Fiona, what I meant was, why am I being called up to the office?”

She shrugs and says, “Well, you know I’m Mr. Thompson’s aide this period, right? And, well, the way your hand was, so cold, and the way the paper towel machine wouldn’t work on only your hand—”

“Arrggh, again with that STUPID paper towel machine? What IS the big frickin’ deal, Fiona? So my hands are cold, so what?”

“It’s not just that, Lucy, it’s... everything else. I mean, you and I have never spent much time together, sure, we have a few classes and I see you in the halls, from a distance, but when you put all the pieces together, the pale makeup, the black clothes, the cold skin and, yes, the paper towel dispenser, I think, is actually what they’re called, not a paper towel machine, anyway, I just mentioned it, casually, to Mr. Thompson and right away he wanted to see you up front so...”

“You mean, the same Mr. Thompson who has an industrial size bottle of hand sanitizer hanging from a clip on his fanny pack? The same Mr. Thompson who opens doors with his feet instead of his hands? The same Mr. Thompson who wipes a germ wipe around his germ wipe container before grabbing a new germ wipe? That Mr. Thompson? The germ freak of all germ freaks?”

“One in the same,” she says, brightening, like I’ve maybe won some type of booby prize or something for getting it right. “He thought maybe your symptoms sounded like the early stages of swine flu so—”

“They’re not symptoms, Fiona, they’re... just... me. That’s how I’ve always been; a little pale, running cold, no biggie. And what right do YOU have to go off telling anyone anything about me, anyway, you nosy little... little... snoop?”

And right when I’m about to break Law # 4 (or is it # 5?) of The 8 Absolutely Unthinkable, Unbreakable Zombie Laws (i.e. “Thou Shalt Not Injure a Human Unless it is Absolutely Necessary”) and pound Fiona Rutherford straight through the cinderblock wall of Barracuda Bay High, the door opens and a huge man with a fanny pack full of dangling hand sanitizer bellows, “What’s all the commotion out here?”

And then he sees Fiona and his hard face softens like he’s greeting his long lost daughter and then he sees me and it hardens like he’s seeing his other long lost daughter - you know, the ugly one who can’t read or write so good - and he says, “Oh yes, Lucy, it looks like we’ve caught you just in time.”

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## Chapter 4

“You haven’t ‘caught’ anything,” I fume, foot defiantly up on Mr. Thompson’s desk a few minutes later as the three of us settle into his claustrophobic office.

Mr. Thompson is your classic career guidance counselor, complete with a bushy moustache, pleated khakis, braided belt, thinning hair, dandruff flaked glasses resting halfway down his greasy mid-day nose and a wall full of cute kitties hanging off trembling branches encased in their obligatory “Hang in there” inspirational posters dotting the walls behind his put-it-together-yourself brown wooden desk from Wal-mart (probably).

“As I was telling Fiona just a second ago, there’s NOTHING wrong with me, Mr. Thompson. Besides, what’s she still doing here? Isn’t this supposed to be confidential or something? You know, counselor-patient privilege or something?”

I shoot Fiona a look as she lingers triumphantly at the door, her rust-colored corduroy pants going perfectly with her off-white peasant blouse and garnet-string friendship bracelet she and all her Geek Girlfriends wear to show solidarity for the right to vote or burn our bras - or some such thing.

He gives her a look-see, too, but then lets it go and she just stands there, looking mousy and innocent and no wonder Mr. Thompson believed her when she showed up after my little bathroom incident, all “concerned” like and talking about paper towel dispensers and swine flu and preventative medicine.

“I’m not your doctor, Lucy,” he reminds me, looking pointedly at my foot until I take it down from the corner of his desk and put it back on the floor where (I tell myself) it’s more comfortable anyway. “And you’re not my patient, so this doesn’t have to be ‘confidential,’ as you call it. I’m simply concerned about your appearance and, now, Fiona here tells me that your skin is... cold. Would you mind if I... felt... it too?”

He seems to sense the absolute ridiculousness of his question as it schmarms its way out of his schmarmy mouth because he doesn’t even flinch when I say, simply, “Not likely, Mr. Thompson, no. I would consider that a pretty heavy duty invasion of my privacy, or person, or tibia, or something like that so, yeah, not today, thanks.”

He shakes his head instead and flips through an old school Rolodex-type circle of revolving business cards until he finds what he’s looking for, then scribbles something down on a sticky note and slides it across his desk, where it sticks to a few things (old suspension forms, a few Xeroxed report cards) which he then has to un-stick it from and, finally, instead of trying to be cool by sliding it over he just huffs and hands it over.

I look at it with a bemused smile on my face and it says: “Dr. Keith Richardson, Family Practice, 409-392-8816.”

I shake my head and say, with absolutely no conviction, “Fine, Mr. Thompson, I’ll give him a call when I get home today.”

He looks doubtful but says, “Please do, Lucy. I mean, I’m trying to say this delicately but... over and above Fiona’s concerns for the moment I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a few weeks now about your... your... appearance.”

“My appearance?” I ask, trying to sound offended.

After three years of being Barracuda Bay’s resident “Goth Girl” it’s pretty hard to even pretend what other people think matters anymore.

“Well, specifically, your skin color, Lucy. It just looks... unhealthy.”

I ignore his concerned eyes and stare at my ragged (midnight maroon) nails before saying, “Besides Fiona in the doorway there, Mr. Thompson, how many ‘healthy’ teenagers do you really know? So maybe I should eat a little better, get some more sun, I hear what you’re saying, but I’m not sure a male career counselor should be talking about this to me, do you?”

By the time I look up he is already thinking better of asking me into his office, and clearing his desk in advance of the last period of the day.

I think of going back to 6th period and actually do feel a little sick, to say nothing of 7th period and smelling all the awful cooking smells of Home Ec.

“Actually,” I say, clearing my throat and putting on a hangdog look for Mr. Thompson’s benefit, “I am feeling a little under the weather today, Mr. Thompson. Do you think I could have a pass to go home... early?”

Mr. Thompson looks like I just asked him for a double-spurt from the Gigantor bottle of hand sanitizer from the corner of his desk. “I’ll go you one better, Lucy. I’m going to give you a pass for the rest of the day and... the rest of the week. That is, until you bring in a doctor’s note confirming that what you’ve... got... isn’t contagious.”

He does a double squirt after handing over the pass, offering one to Fiona as well.

(She gladly accepts.)

I shake my head and say, “But this isn’t fair, Mr. Thompson. I have a big report due Friday, worth a quarter of my grade this semester. And I’m lab partners with Alex Foster in Biology; it wouldn’t be fair to him, either. You can’t keep me out of school just because you think—”

“Actually,” he says, pulling an official looking red memo from a tray on his desk, “according to the latest government mandate, and the severity of last month’s Canadian outbreak of the deadly N1V1-virus, I can.”

He hands me a copy to read, but I wave it off.

It wouldn’t matter what it says, anyway; he’s a teacher - sorry, counselor - and I’m a zombie and if there’s one thing I can’t do as a zombie, it’s make waves with a teacher - a counselor, no less.

I stand, look at Fiona and contemplate sending her through Mr. Thompson’s wall again but then, that wouldn’t help my case much, now would it?

“You take care of all that,” says Mr. Thompson to my back as I kind of slink out of his office, “and we’ll be right as rain.”

No doubt he winks at Fiona as she peels herself off the wall to follow me back out of the front office, but I don’t bother turning around to find out.

I hear her sensible brown pumps whispering behind me as I clomp back down the hall to my locker, and turn to meet her just past the library entrance.

“I don’t need an escort, Fiona,” I fume, just to fume. “And besides, don’t you think you’ve already done enough for one day?”

She cocks her head, her thick brown hair shimmering across one broad shoulder and says, “What have I ‘done,’ exactly, Lucy? If you really are sick, wouldn’t you rather know it now than... later? Maybe when it’s too late?”

I take a step - a BIG step - toward her and growl, “I’m not sick, Fiona. I already know I’m not sick. I... can’t... be sick, so just... butt out. You know my situation at home, you know I don’t have any extra money to throw around visiting some expensive family doctor, now I’ve got to come up with that before they’ll let me back into school. You think that’s going to help me, Fiona? Do you?”

We’re standing there, three inches apart, when she blinks twice and says, “I’m... I’m... sorry, Lucy. I forgot you live at... the Home. If you want, I can ask my Dad for the money and—”

“I’m not a charity case, Fiona,” I snap, just as the bell signaling the end of 6th period rings somewhere right above our heads.

I use the literal flood of students to wash me away from her, wash me all the way down the commons and back toward my locker before she can say another stupid word about another stupid thing and make this stupid day any worse.

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## Chapter 5

Suddenly, I have no idea why I asked Mr. Thompson for a pass out of 7th period.

I mean, it’s not like I detest Home Ec all that much, or it’s young, funky teacher Ms. Haskins at all.

I’m just not feeling it today, you know?

What I am feeling is a little Alex Foster “fix” and, lucky for me, I know just where to get it.

There is a door out of C-wing that, if you take it during the last period of the day, takes you to a place where nothing much ever really happens and no one really cares.

It's called Shop class; and Alex Foster has it just... about... now.

I clutch my pass to my thigh, and keep my head down, because I don't want to look too totally desperate, and although I don't have a car, and although I've never owned a car, fortunately the student parking lot borders the outside of shop class.

I take it slow, because my window of opportunity is pretty small here; either Alex will be hanging out near the abandoned oil cans outside of shop class like he does every day, or he won't, so the slower I go, the better the chances he'll—

“Lucy? What are... you... doing here?”

Bingo.

“Alex? What... why... I mean, I didn't know you had shop this period!”

(Careful, Lucy, don't overdo it.)

He's sitting on an oil can, hands where I can't see them, talking to a scruffy senior in a grease-stained jeans jacket.

(Eewwww, retro much?)

I stop, but don't approach.

“Yeah,” he says, as the senior snubs out a cigarette and wanders back into class.

“Or that you... smoked,” I say, a little hesitantly.

(Will wonders never cease?)

“Yeah,” he shrugs, dropping his smoldering cigarette to the floor, snubbing it out with his sneakers and waving the air in front of his face. “It's not something I really like to brag about it, you know?”

“I dunno,” I say, inching my way over but trying not to look too desperate to inch my way over. “It kind of adds a little... character... to your rep.”

“Really?” he asks a little hopefully, standing off his oil can as if preparing to meet a proper lady.

I love the way his smile is crooked, and always reaches his eyes.

I love the way the sleeves of his rugby shirt are pressed up above his gangly elbows, revealing forearms covered in soft blond hair that glisten in the late afternoon sunlight.

“Well, I mean, so long as you don’t inhale, of course.”

He snorts - a little leftover smoke rolls out - and says, “What are you doing out here? I thought you had Home Ec this period?”

He did?

He did?

He thought?

About?

What I have this period?

This is news to me, but I try to keep my excitement inside as I cross the threshold from “heading to my (nonexistent) car” and formally enter “the shop zone.”

I shrug, making sure he sees my pass, and lie, “We’re making tuna casserole this period and I can’t stand that smell.”

“Ugghh,” he groans, leaning back against his oil can now as I reach the nearest one, “me neither. My Dad makes it every Thursday and it’s such a big batch it’s in the fridge all weekend, though neither of us eat it. He usually ends up dumping it out on Monday morning, and I remind him of this every Thursday but he bakes another one anyway.”

I smile, but only halfway, because I know a.) his parents are divorced and b.) it’s probably not the most smile-worthy thing, growing up without your mom.

(And I should know.)

Without invitation, I kind of crawl up on the oil barrel across from him; he sits back on his.

Again, I hold the pass from Mr. Thompson where he can see it; he finally does.

“Is that a pass from Old Man Thompson?” he asks, big, beautiful, green eyes wide.

I shrug; no big deal.

“Man, I heard those were pretty hard to get. How’d you swing it?”

I shrug; this is the extent of my knowledge of flirting - the shrug. “I just told him I was allergic to tuna fish!”

He snorts. “Good one.”

We kind of don’t have much to say at the moment, but I don’t care; I just want to see him, to take him in, to be near him.

I don’t have much to look forward to in this world, not like normal teens have to get them through their days.

I don’t get to go through a drive-thru after school, because eating normal human food makes me sick now.

I can’t even chew gum, because it deadens what few senses I still have left in my mouth.

I can’t take a nap, because zombies never sleep, can’t go mack on my human boyfriend because it is literally against about 3 of the 8 Zombie Laws to date mortals, can’t really dish to my gaggle of girlfriends because I just have one, and she’s not really the “dishy” type; she being a fellow zombie as well.

So I try to get my “Alex fix” as often as I can, and if we have something to say, great; if not, well, his fluttering eyelashes speak 1,000 words, trust me!

“Hey,” he says, suddenly remembering, “what was up with you and Fiona in Chorus today? I didn’t even know you knew her.”

I kind of freak for a second.

I mean, he was talking to two girls at the same time when Fiona burst in, who knew he was even paying attention to me?

I feel the pass wrinkling in my hand and say, “Oh, that? I knew she was Mr. Thompson’s aide and I figured I’d float the ‘tuna fish allergy story’ by her first.”

I hold up the pass before finally shoving it deep in my pocket. “I guess it worked.”

He shrugs, smiles, kicks his legs against the side of the oil drum; they make a cheap, hollow sound.

I bet he did the same kind of thing when he was a kid in church.



“What are these, anyway?” I ask, eager to change the subject by patting the top of my oil can.

He taps the top of his. “Mr. Schaffer uses them for projects every once in awhile. He cuts them into, like, 12 pieces and we have to take the piece he gives us and make something of it.”

“Yeah, what’d you make?”

“A metal rose,” he admits a little sheepishly.

“Out of one of these?”

“Well, it wasn’t as big as all this but, okay, it was pretty big when I started.”

“When you started?”

“Well, I tried out a few different things, they didn’t work out so well, and when all I had left was a really thin strip, I hit on the rose idea.”

His voice has this lilting effect; it’s not gentle, just... soft.

His voice also matches his looks, almost... unsure.

It’s deep but soft, like he’s always afraid the wrong person might overhear.

I get a little sassy and say, “So... who was the rose for?”

Our oil cans are close enough together for me to kind of gently kick out and rub the side of his sneakers with my own.

“My mom,” he says, avoiding eye contact. “It was the last thing I made her before she and Dad split up.”

“Ouch,” I say. “Sounds like the end of a really sad Lifetime movie.”

“Or a country song!” he says, laughing through his nose.

(Which I also adore!)

He sighs when he’s done laughing, looks inside the shop room, toward the clock, and smiles back at me.

“What about you?” he asks. “I mean, are your folks still together?”

I kind of blank out because, hey, I wanted a little Alex fix but I wasn't prepared for the 5th degree.

Then I cock my head and say, "I thought everybody knew I lived at the Home."

He nods, uncomfortably, then stammers (adorably), "I d-d-do, I j-j-just, the way you are, the way you dress, the kids you hang out with, I always just figured you were going through your 'angry young girl' phase and there were folks back home waiting for you to get over it."

"Really?" I ask, and I probably should be offended but I'm not, for some strange reason.

He kind of blushes, afraid that maybe he's said too much; then nods.

I look down at my outfit - a rather subdued, by my standards, black on gray on black number- and ask him, "How is it that you think I dress, exactly?"

I'm just giving him the business, but suddenly he gets all squirrely for real.

"Oh no," he says, waving his large, pale, long-fingered hands in front of his broad but flat chest, "I'm not going there!"

"No comment, huh? Well, and my friends? What's up with that?"

"Nothing," he says, and it's funny because mostly we talk just in Chorus, where he's more quiet and subdued, and here, with his sleeves rolled up and swinging his legs back and forth so close they almost touch mine, and his big crooked grin fixed on, it's almost sensory overload; like he's a whole other kid, with a whole other personality, altogether. "It's just... Ethan Steele? I heard he went into the juvenile detention center last summer. And Dana Latherow? I heard she got caught boosting cars the summer before that!"

"What?" Now even I'm laughing - and he's laughing - because it sounds so crazy when he say sit out loud. "This is nuts; those two are pussycats, seriously, you'd like them."

He says, "Yeah, but would they like me?"

Then he tugs at his preppy shirt.

"Sure they would," I insist.

(And, actually, they really would. Of course, he'd have to die first, and then get reanimated, but they'd love another zombie in town.)

“Yeah, right,” he grumbles. “They’d probably only pretend to like me until I agreed to go out to some abandoned field with them where they’d sacrifice me on some altar or something.”

Now I’m snorting, I’m laughing so hard; the laugh-so-hard-you-slap-your-thighs kind of laughing so hard.

“Hold up,” I say. “Are you calling me a Satanist, or yourself a virgin, because, I dunno, I’m pretty sure neither one is accurate.”

And he blushes so long, so hard, that I’m pretty sure I know why and, wow, does that make me like him even more.

“Alex?” comes a stern voice from the open doorway of the shop class.

(We’ve been laughing so hard, so long, I’ve forgotten we’re still at school!)

“Mr. Schaeffer, hi,” he says, abruptly leaping off his oil drum and sinking his sneakers in the gravel beneath. “This is—”

“I know who that is, Alex, I just don’t know why she’s here, or why you’re still out here. Bell’s about to ring, son, haul your butt back inside and tell your little girly-friend here to run along back to class before she gets a demerit, too.”

Mr. Schaeffer - a burly, stocky man in coaching shorts and a faded green golfing shirt - huffs off and turns away, and Alex kind of blushes and says, “Man, I didn’t realize I’d been out here so long. Time flies, huh?”

“Time flies when you’re insulting people, sure,” I say.

He laughs and kicks up a little dirt awkwardly, like he doesn’t know what to say - or how he should leave it.

“Listen,” I say, breaking the tension as I turn to go. (“Always leave first,” isn’t that what Dana always says?) “You should swing by the Home sometime, Alex. I know it’s not much to look at but Ethan and Dana aren’t so bad once you get to know them. Besides,” I call over my shoulder, “I promise they won’t sacrifice you or anything!”

His snort is all I hear as I force myself not to look back while I walk away.

Okay, well, I have to look back eventually because I’m walking into the student parking lot and, since I don’t have a car, it’s gonna look pretty stupid if I walk up to one and it turns out to be one of Alex’s friends, or even Alex’s car!

When I sneak a peek over my shoulder he's still kind of lingering by his oil drum, not quite looking at me, not quite looking away, either.

It takes him a pretty long time before he finally returns to class.

That kind of makes me happy.

Even if half that time was spent smoking one last cigarette.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 6

I'm not surprised to see Ethan Steele and Dana Latherow waiting for me when I turn up at my locker at the end of the day, their faces taut, their eyes dull, their expressions grim.

Watching them as I approach my locker, I think - not for the first time - how glad I am they're on my side.

Ethan isn't exactly huge or anything, but he's a scrapper.

It's well known that zombies have, like, 0.2% body fat - trust me, it's one of the only benefits of the Afterlife - so everything Ethan has either bulges, curves or juts.

He has wheat-colored hair that's close-cropped to his perfectly round head; it goes well with his milk chocolate eyebrows and dark chocolate eyes.

His cheekbones are male-model prominent, his cheeks vaguely hollow, his faded black T-shirt hugging his tight, firm pecs and barely containing his cannonball biceps.

His skin is marble pale and hairless, his gray jeans baggy and sagging at the waist and tapering down his long legs to his paint-splattered black sneakers.

Dana is curvy and tall, and surprisingly feminine for a girl with no meat on her bones, but all kinds of intimidating just the same.

Most zombies don't smile much; I mean, what for?

But Dana looks like the type of gal who never smiled much when she was alive, either.

Her hair - this week - is dyed auburn with black streaks, her eyelashes thick with triple coats of mascara, her black lipstick a mirror of her deep, black eyes.

She has hoops dangling up and down both earlobes, with alternating fake ruby and diamond studs.

Today she has on a snug black velour track suit, over a white shirt with “Tramp” spelled out in pea-sized rhinestones.

“So?” Dana asks first, her dead black eyes cold and impatient as she looks me up and down.

“How’d it go?” Ethan asks second, finishing her sentence like they’re some old married couple.

Normally, we would look at each other and grin (like I said, there’s not a ton to smile about when you’re dead, but grinning isn’t exactly off limits), but there’s nothing normal about this stupid, stinkin’, rotten, no good day.

“How’d you guys find out already?” I sigh, avoiding their eyes as I take twice as long to dial in the combination for my locker.

Sometimes it’s nice being one of only three zombies at Barracuda Bay High; sometimes it can get a little cloying.

This is one of those not-so-nice, a-lot-like-cloying times.

Ethan smirks with his crooked grin and says, “Believe it or not, Piper told us herself.”

That actually IS pretty shocking.

I mean, it’s strictly forbidden, according to the Truce of the Living Dead (which, just because they’re not zombies, vampires actually are), for vampires and zombies to communicate with each other - unless absolutely necessary, of course.

(And, yes, if you’re keeping track, it IS one of the 8 Absolutely Unthinkable, Unbreakable Zombie Laws. Just don’t ask me which one at the moment; I’m a little preoccupied what with getting kicked out of school and potentially “outed.”)

“She was pretty ticked off,” adds Dana, in a way that makes it sound like it’s my fault she was ticked off.

“What does SHE have to be ticked off about?” I snap, slamming my locker shut and standing awkwardly with most of my books stacked in my arms.

Although it’s not an actual law, it’s strictly forbidden for zombies to own a backpack, you know, for the uncool factor alone. “I’m the one who can’t come back to school until I get a doctor’s note clearing me from being a health hazard to Barracuda Bay.”

“What?” asks Ethan, chocolate brown eyes growing an extra shade darker as he inches closer to get a better look at the note in my hand. “They can’t do that!”

I shrug, too stressed to go into it right now.

“We can help you with that,” says a voice from over my shoulder and when I turn, Piper has already snatched the note out of my hand. “We have a doctor on call to handle just this type of thing.”

I go to snap it back but it’s well known that vampires are about twice as fast as zombies (and I was never exactly Speedy Gonzalez when I had a heartbeat) so it’s no great feat for Piper to hold the note just out of reach.

“I’m fine, Piper,” I bluff. “I’ll handle it myself.”

“Don’t be so quick to turn her down, Lucy,” says Ethan, of all people, a guy who hates vampires so much he once spent nearly half of his summer lawn mowing money on a voodoo doll that looked just like Piper - in vain, unfortunately.

(Though he still has the special edition “Piper and Bianca Yearbook Photo” dartboard in his room at the Meriwether Home for Wayward Boys and Girls, where all the good zombies live.)

“Yeah,” adds Dana. “If they can get you a note, even if it is from some grody vampire doctor, Mr. Thompson won’t care.”

“You’d do that?” I ask Piper. “For me? For... us?”

She sneers, “Of course not. The last thing in the world I’d do is help you worm smelling chunks of walking meat. If I do it at all, and that’s still a big ‘if,’ it’ll be to save my own skin, not yours.”

The worst thing about vampires is looking at them.

Ugghh.

Gawd.

Seriously?

They are so... gross.

I know everybody thinks they're all sexy and hot and alluring but, come on over to my side of the Afterlife and I'll show you a thing or two that'll put you off vampires well... forever.

Seriously, just watching Piper talk turns my shriveled stomach.

As a zombie, as another Immortal, I can see right through her pasty skin to the black blood running through every vein in her body.

But vampires aren't like you and, well, they're certainly not like me.

The minute they "turn" into the Undead it's like their veins double up on size so they can carry as much blood as possible to their hungry, evil hearts.

So with my super zombie x-ray vision I can literally see the veins and their black blood; it's like tunnels of warms crawling all over their bodies, right beneath their skin.

You know that invisible guy in Anatomy class?

The big plastic one that sits on the teacher's desk where you can take out his liver and his pancreas and even his brain and put them back in?

And the veins in his clear plastic arms and legs are red and blue?

Yeah, it's like that; just... live and in person.

Seriously, it's like a road map of nasty up one leg and down the other, up her arms, down her throat, around her face, wow, if you could use zombie vision you'd be squeamish, too.

In fact, many times during the day I'll sit there in class watching the blood worms pump beneath Piper or Bianca's skin and the whole class is sitting there, clueless to the vampires in their midst and I think, "Can't you clowns see this?!? Why aren't you as totally freaked out as I am here?!?"

Then there are the fangs; those slick, sharp fangs that we can see all the way back up her root canal and into her jaw line, pointy and long and just waiting for her to get the slightest bit ticked off so they can point past her gum line, down beneath her lips and straight into the air, where they quiver and shake until drool - actual drool - runs down them.

But the worst part of it all, far worse than the fangs and, yes, even worse than the blood wormy vein slugs crawling all day long are the eyes.

When you can see them, truly see them like we zombies can, vampires have these beady yellow eyes; like cat's eyes, almost, only they glow all day long, even when it's not dark out.

So it's a combination of revulsion and relief when I finally turn from Piper and say, "Whatever the reason, if you want to take care of that for me, for us, for you... whatever... well then, I guess I'd appreciate it."

Piper and Bianca share a laugh, their yellow eyes glowing, their fang buds glistening.

"How hard was it for you to use that word?" asks Piper knowingly.

I grin and say, "Pretty darn hard and, I'm not trying to be a jerk or anything but, I've got a Social Theory test I really need to take tomorrow so..." I hold out my book for emphasis "... I need to know if I should study tonight or not."

"Study," says Piper, pocketing Mr. Thompson's sticky note and turning on one polished high heel. "We'll get you the doctor's note before school tomorrow, no questions asked."

I say, "Sweet, you wanna just bring it by the Home on your way to school because that would just about make my—"

"Puh-lease," Piper pouts over her shoulder and even from across the commons I can see blood worms pulsing up and down the back of her neck, "it's bad enough I have to speak to you two days in a row let alone swing by that trumped-up dive you zombies call a home."

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 7

For once, much as I hate to admit it, Piper is right.

We do live in a dive.

(And a dumpy one at that.)

The Meriwether Home for Wayward Boys and Girls is actually one of those old school Florida roadside hotels the state bought years ago and turned into a modern version of an orphanage.



You know the type.

Heck, you and your family have probably driven past a few dozen of the same type of identical roach motels on your way down to Disney World, Daytona Beach, Miami or the Florida Keys; as in, driven RIGHT past them - and straight to the nearest Holiday Inn.

Holiday Inn it ain't.

There are two floors, no elevators and vending machines that rarely work at the top of each of the four sets of stairs.

Most of the parking spaces are empty because most of the residents of The Meriwether Home for Wayward Boys and Girls either a.) Can't drive, b.) Can't afford a car or c.) Could drive before they got arrested one too many times and had their licenses taken away.

Now, don't get me wrong, "the Home" as we zombies like to call it, isn't exactly without its amenities.

There is a kidney-shaped pool in the courtyard, with a deep end that's pretty shallow and a shallow end that's really shallow, plus a few sets of rusty old-school patio tables and chairs surrounded by a low chain link fence.

The neighborhood isn't so bad, either.

I mean, don't get me wrong, it is a ROUGH neighborhood, but not for the Living Dead.

There is a 24-hour Stop 'N Shop right around the corner, to help fill those endless nights with last-minute puzzles or playing cards or scratch-off Lottery tickets.

There's a Laundromat next to the Stop 'N Shop, which comes in handy because the two "complimentary" washers and dryers at The Home haven't worked since 1972 when they were first installed (probably).

And, if you're feeling extra guilty about the sins of your past life, there's even a church right next door, The Chapel of the Holy Redeemer, complete with an all-night confessional and 24-hour gift shop, where for \$5 measly bucks you can buy rosaries, mass cards and/or all the holy water you can cart away.

(You know, if you're into that type of thing.)

The rooms are doubles, not co-ed, with girls sharing with girls and boys sharing with boys.

Since zombies never sleep or eat and generally wander around 24-7 and tend to get on each other's nerves if stuck together for long periods of time (kind of like ferrets), the Florida chapter of the Council of Elders squared it with the folks who run the Home to make sure each of us had our very own space.

(Of course, they left out that whole "because they're zombies and will disrupt the sleep patterns of your mortal orphans" part.)

At this hour the Home is deserted, the rooms dark, the pool empty except for the lonely family of ducks who float around most days and which Dana and I feed from time to time.

As usual, Ethan and Dana follow me into my room, which because of its bare walls and stripped down furnishings seems to be the hangout room of choice.

Each room at the home comes complete with two double beds, a table, two chairs and a lamp - TVs are optional and you have to get them on loan from Mrs. Hellman (yeah, like the mayonnaise) in the front office.

(I try to stay out of her hair as much as possible, so I don't have a TV.)

I also don't like clutter, so the minute I moved into the Home a few weeks before freshman year started, I got rid of everything that wasn't nailed, bolted or sealed tight; the second bed, the lamp, the TV stand, the alarm clock, even the ice bucket!

I shoved the lone single bed into the corner to leave me as much pacing room as I could finagle for those long, lonely 10-hour nights spent walking back and forth, back and forth across the faded orange carpet.

And since I never use it, the only reason I kept one bed in the first place was so people wouldn't keep asking me, "Hey, where do you sleep?" every time they walked past my room.

I kept the little table and the two chairs because that's where I set up my laptop and do my homework (and, I confess, play the occasional game of Diner Dash 18), but gradually Ethan brought his chair in, too, and so now we all have a place to hang out after school and on weekends.

Dana went the other way; her room is cluttered with everything mine is not.

She uses her second bed as a combination scarf-slash-belt-slash-accessory table, has her closet and dresses jammed to the gills with her frilly Goth-inspired but not quite outfits and has covered every available inch of counter space with makeup, makeup and - believe it or not - more makeup.

She painted the walls purple (Shhh, don't tell Mrs. Hellman), added silver mirrors from the thrift shop down the street and covered her lamps with maroon scarves, which gives her room a kind of psychic-at-the-carnival feel.

Everywhere you look, where there isn't makeup or belt buckles, that is, are tiny jeweled boxes in all shapes and sizes that she's collected throughout the years.

There's nothing really inside of them, old movie tickets, phone numbers that are probably no longer even in service, a single earring she's hoping to find the match to someday, she just likes the way the light catches them in the afternoon.

I'd call Ethan's room a "man cave" but man do I hate that term, so I'll call it a "bachelor pad" instead (although that's not a whole lot better).

Ethan works odd jobs when he can and spends every single penny he earns (the Council of Elders gives us a monthly stipend - kind of like zombie welfare - so we don't really need money) on computers, monitors, joy sticks, joy chairs and video games, so walking into his room is like navigating a sea of wires, cables and potentially neck-breaking chords strung here and there.

He gets movie posters free from the Mom and Pop video store two blocks over, and hangs them up to cover the holes he's punched in his walls when he gets really frustrated at losing a new game.

They're all zombie movies - Zombie Bride 3, The Cheerleader Who Wouldn't Die, Date with the Living Dead; his little inside joke that no one really gets but Dana and I (and isn't all that funny to begin with).

The other residents of the Home come and go, literally.

Most don't stay long and, if they do approach us (something we don't generally encourage), don't hang out regularly.

It's not that we're unfriendly, just not overly so.

Plus, unlike the kids at Barracuda Bay who don't pay us much mind, at the Home there's nothing for the other kids to do BUT check us out, and the closer we get to people, the more likely they are to discover our pesky little secret.

So today, like most days, like most nights, like most mornings, like most seasons and weekdays and holidays and weekends, it's just the three of us.

Not that I mind, exactly.

Dana hasn't been around long - only a couple of semesters - but we clicked right away.

She showed up about halfway through sophomore year, and I knew the minute I saw the words on her ironic black T-shirt under her purple paisley vest over her maroon skirt and black fishnet stockings - "My eyes are up there" - we'd be fast friends; and we were.

I mean, we are.

Although she is sexier than me, more feminine than me, taller than me, curvier than me, we still share makeup tips, graphic novels, funny YouTube videos and accessories just like human best friends; sisters, even.

Unlike most zombies, her eyes still have a little green left over the deep black they will eventually become.

Her skin is grayish, like mine, like Ethan's, but somehow... not quite like ours, either.

There is still a lifelike quality to her, as if her body hasn't quite gotten the message that she's long since dead.

Her limbs don't seem quite so stiff, her skin not quite so gray, her eyes not quite so dull.

As a result it's a lot easier for her to "pass" at school, which is just as well because according to Law # 5 of The 8 Absolutely Unthinkable, Unbreakable Zombie Laws (i.e. "Thou Shalt Not Associate With Other Zombies Unless Absolutely, Positively Necessary") Dana, Ethan and I aren't technically supposed to hang out at school together.

That's fine with me.

I was a loner as a human, so it wasn't such a big transition to the Afterlife, but Dana has pictures of her old self in her room and they are so night and day from who she is now it's not even funny.

(Well, it actually is funny so, scratch that.)

I mean, to look at this hardcore, tough-talking, sassy-walking, bully-punching chick now you'd think she'd always been a toughie but, in fact, in her past life she was a real doll; bowties in her pigtails and khaki slacks and pastel blouses and braces!

Braces!

It helps that she's made a few human friends at school; nothing special, nobody she'd ever bring around the Home, that's for sure, but at least she hasn't had to cut humans off cold turkey like I have.

And Ethan?

Ethan is Ethan; like no zombie you've ever seen, alive or dead.

He keeps his dirty blond hair cut close to his skull, sometimes closer than others on account of he does it himself with a pair of electric clippers he bought for \$2 at the pawn shop around the corner from the Home and they only work about half the time; and the rest they work twice as well, so he never can tell just how close a shave it's going to be until he's done and looks in the mirror.

It could be long or short, his hair, because you never see it anyway thanks to his perpetual hoodie.

And this guy wears a hood like nobody's business.

I mean, it's like Ethan was born to wear a hood, like Obi Wan Kenobi or Darth Vader, you know?

And he likes the wide kind, too, the kind that puddle on his shoulders and cast his face in shadows and come way down over the top of his head so only his shiny aviator shades, blunt nose and thin lips stick out when he cruises silently through the halls at school like a shark slicing through a school of fish.

He is bad without being too terribly bad and good without being too terribly good.

He showed up a few semesters before Dana (the Elders don't like to "clump" zombies by having them all show up at the same school together on the same day because, well, obvious much?) and we kind of started hanging out at the Home just because we were the only ones still awake after the official "lights out" at 11.

One of the great things about being a zombie is you can see in the dark; I mean, there IS no dark, not for zombies.

So when I say I threw out my lamp, it wasn't because I'm an anti-hoarder and can't stand clutter, it's because, really, why would I keep something around I didn't need?

And zombies don't need lamps.

The minute the sun goes down, the sky takes on this, well, it's hard to describe but it's this yellow sheen, like when Ethan switches to night vision goggles in one of his video games - not that I sit around watching Ethan play video games all day - but I've seen him do it once or twice and that's what it's like just the same.

And all night long, it's like it's still daytime out; at least for us.

So even when I'm pacing around my little empty hotel room at night, with no lamp and the light in the bathroom turned off, it's still light.

Not like noonday bright, but bright enough; like mid-morning or late afternoon.

Even if I'm in the graveyard doing Reanimation Patrol, it's like it's the middle of the day.

But now it is the middle of the day, and the mood inside my cramped little room is anything but "light."

"I don't know, Lucy," Dana is saying, her left foot fidgeting on the bare linoleum floor.

(Oh, I didn't tell you? I ripped up the carpets, too. Sorry, Mrs. Hellman; you can keep my security deposit!)

"That was a pretty amateurish move, trying to use the hand dryer like that."

Huh, shows how much Dana uses the C-wing girls' room.

"It's not a hand dryer, Dana; it's a hand towel dispenser."

"Same difference," Dana snorts, but it's not an "I'm so mad at you I could snort" snort, it's more like a "How could you be so stupid?" snort.

(Which I've just decided is a lot worse.)

"The point is," she sneers, "it's like coming to school without three coats of makeup on or something."

I make a kind of clicking noise with my tongue against the roof of my mouth and let out an anguished, "Don't you think I know that, you guys? I'm ticked off enough at myself already."

"Maybe so," adds Ethan, "and we're not trying to kick you when you're down but, what were you thinking?"

"I wasn't thinking, Ethan, that's just the point. I've used that bathroom 8,000 times and never thought twice about it. How should I know they went and changed the dispensers overnight?"

"Well," Dana points out, playing with one of the jeweled coasters she gave me for Christmas last year, "it's kind of your job - our job - to pay attention to those kinds of details."

“Yeah, I know that, Dana; I get that. I just, I slipped up, guys, I’m sorry.”

“What if the Council finds out, Lucy?” Ethan asks pointedly, his dark eyes judgmental. “I mean, they could split us up, they could send you to Afterlife Academy; they could send all of us to Afterlife Academy. I’m just saying, it’s not just you anymore; you have other... people... to care about.”

I shoot Ethan a look, because he normally doesn’t talk like that.

I mean, for Ethan, that’s about as sentimental as he gets.

I kind of gasp, look at them both and say, “I would never want anything to happen to you guys, ever. You know that, right?”

Dana looks from Ethan then back to me and rolls her eyes.

She knows I’ve been crushing hard on Ethan for years now, knows he’s made a few comments along the way that indicated he might, maybe, could, possibly, sorta, probably feel the same way, and she gets a big kick out of the occasional moments of not-so-sexual tension that crop up from time to time.

“What Ethan’s saying, Lucy, is that we have to look out for each other, that’s all. We can’t afford to get... lazy. Ever.”

I groan, leaning back against the wall.

“I’m sorry, really I am. I’ll make it up to you guys, I promise.”

“How?” Dana asks, cutting me a dark look; few chicks can cut a dark look like Dana Latherow.

“How... what?” I ask, looking from one to the other and back again.

I mean, what do they want me to do, turn myself into the Council of Elders because some stupid chick got a bee in her bonnet about my cold skin?

Ethan sighs, looks at Dana, who sighs, and he looks back at me and asks, with a rough edge to his voice that I don’t hear often, “What she means, Lucy, is... what are you going to DO about it?”

“Do about it?” I ask. “What’s there to do about it? The vampires are getting me a doctor’s note,” I can’t believe I just said that out loud, “and by tomorrow Fiona will have forgotten all about it.”

Well, one out of two ain’t bad...

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 8

I won't say I'm "up" early the next morning because, let's face it, I never sleep in the first place so there's nothing to get "up" from.

What I guess I mean to say is, I'm "out" early the next morning.

It's dark out for humans at 5 something-something a.m., but to me it might as well be sunrise already.

The pool is probably pretty cold this time of year, mid-October, but to my cold skin it's practically like a sauna.

I can feel every ounce of its warmth seep into my pores, into my skin, into my bones and despite the grim, somewhat hardscrabble surroundings of the Home, it's nothing short of luxurious.

I'm in a black and white pair of Ethan's old baggies and a black long-sleeve T-shirt Dana quit wearing because it had a tear in it (the horror!), way around the back but, as she said before I rescued it from the trash heap, it simply "wasn't up to her standards."

Ethan calls the getup a "man-kini," Dana calls it a "trunk-ini," but I just call it functional; the baggies are big enough to move around in and the T-shirt's not quite see-through.

So if somebody does happen to see me - not that anyone ever has, ever - this early in the a.m., say the pool guy or the paperboy or the milkman (do they still have those?) I'll look like just another early bird getting her workout on.

The deep end is hardly that, and that's where I take up residence just around this time each morning for my "exercises."

It's not exercising so much, but more like keeping limber.



As the muscles of the Undead age they also stiffen, to the point where even our withered veins and creaky tendons are like muscles and bones themselves.

It can feel a lot like getting metal bars shoved down each arm and each leg, so that if you're not careful to limber up every freakin' day you might as well forget about bending your arms at the elbow and your legs at the knees; they pretty much get useless.

Hollywood gets just about nothing right when they make those zombie movies Ethan loves so much, but the one thing they do seem to "get" is how stiff we are - IF we don't keep limber, that is.

So here I am, predawn, stretching my stiff legs and waving my stiff arms around in circles like the old folks at some high-rise condo doing water aerobics to keep fit.

Yes, I look stupid; sure I look like a dork.

Why do you think I'm out here at five in the morning instead of prime time, when the rest of the world could see me acting the waterlogged fool?

I try to keep my arms and legs beneath the water so they won't make splashing noises and wake up the rest of the kids, at least the Normals anyway.

Ethan is probably deep into another early morning session of online gaming and Dana's probably blogging, her new passion, so the early morning is pretty much "Lucy time," and that's exactly how I like it.

Above the surface the pool looks like a wave machine what with all the stretching and spinning and un-stiffening going on below, but in just 25 minutes every morning you, too, can be a more natural-looking zombie!

Hey, I may never look as loose and languid as Dana on a bad day, but at least I can—

I smell the vampire before I see her, and stiff or not I'm up on the deck and approaching the rusty pool fence in two seconds flat - I told you zombies can move with the quickness when they want to - when Piper suddenly appears from behind the shack size pool house where they keep the grindy old pump and cleaning supplies.

In the pre-dawn darkness she is even more hideous than usual, her violent yellow eyes more violent and yellow, her veiny skin a disgusting atlas of thick black lines that pulse and throb as all roads lead to her black, twisted heart and then right back out again, like a never-ending conveyer belt of just.

Plain.

Nasty.

And yet stepping back and looking at her objectively, as a “Normal” would (i.e. a living, breathing human being), I know that in real life - whatever that is anymore - she is considered strikingly beautiful.

I kind of get that.

Vampires don’t “age” like zombies do; since they require constant nourishment from live victims and have actual blood (as black and gross as that blood may be) running through their veins 24/7, their bodies are eternally limber and lifelike.

Indeed, Piper is almost glowing, with or without my zombie super-vision; her skin is an almost radiant granite color, so plush and warm I can almost see the heat waves shimmering off of it.

Her lips, perhaps assisted by the double sets of fangs hiding in her upper and lower jaws - yes, vampires have two sets of fangs, try to keep up - are thick and plump but don’t have that “fake” look.

Her body is lean and lithe under her designer jeans, belly-riding crop top and suede jacket, her hair clean and thick and tucked, just so, behind her ears with the white beret tipped just so.

Yes, I said “beret.”

A quick note about Piper: she’s about 387-years-old, give or take a decade or two, and she’s been through so many fashion fads and fallacies, do’s and don’ts that it’s like she just doesn’t care what people think anymore.

And, of course, by not caring she in turn is by far the most fashionable girl at school.

(Even though I can’t see it, I mean... a beret? A white beret? In October? Please, even my trunk-ini is cooler than that.)

Although if it wasn’t for the Truce of the Undead I’d like to rip her head off and try bowling with it in heavy traffic, I have to love the way she seriously screws with the Normal girls’ heads, particularly when it comes to fashion.

Wanna know why vampires are always the coolest kids at school?

Because the first thing they do when they get to a new school is kill all the cooler kids.

I am absolutely serious about this; it is a proven strategy among the vampire race.

One by one, over the course of, say, several months so it's not some overnight thing where they'll draw a lot of attention, they will very dedicatedly go about dispatching the two most beloved, feared, respected and admired teenagers on campus, which we all know are a.) the head cheerleader and b.) the captain of the football team.

That's it; that's all it takes.

It's like wiping out the president and the VP in one swoop and, bam, suddenly the whole country is in anarchy mode.

Two popular teenagers gone and, Shazam; the school doesn't know where to look.

It's all very strategic and, you know, aside from the whole two teenagers being dead thing, you kind of have to hand it to them; it works like a charm, every time.

And it's not just about fashion; it's about dominance.

For the vampires to exist, to hunt, to "pass" in a new town, they must be above reproach.

No one can question them, and who does no one dare question?

That's right; the coolest kids at school.

So it's a matter of self-survival; if the vampires kill off the old cool kids, by default they become the new cool kids.

Hence, no one messes with them.

Is Piper particularly cool?

I mean, on her own, if you were to put her under a microscope and dissect her cool-ability?

No; not really.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chapter 9

She has absolutely horrible taste in music, no sense of humor, isn't very bright and is duller than dirt.

Seriously, I once overheard a conversation where she talked about nothing but how she arranges her panty drawer - for an entire free period.

And it wasn't just like, "Let me start talking about keeping your thongs separate from your Brazilian cuts and then I'll move onto something else," like we all do from time-to-time (don't get me started on the whole topic of powder foundation versus cream), it was a full-on 50 minutes of nothing but panty drawer arranging specs.

But since she and Bianca and their vampire friends systematically and over time - so as not to make it look too suspicious - killed off the cooler kids one by one, well, by default she's the coolest kid left.

So now everyone follows her, and she leads them in so many different directions it's hard to keep up.

One week she's dressing like a rock star, so all the wannabes run out and buy rock star clothes, begging their moms for advances on their allowance to buy white vinyl boots and pink micro-mini skirts and navel rings and extensions and then, next week, she's pulling a supermodel vogue with skinny jeans and shimmering blouses and spiked heels and scarves, so all the popular girls have to go buy an entirely new wardrobe.

This week she's dressing like a French movie star with little hip-hugging leather jackets that flair at the waist and calve-high boots and fuzzy white (ick) berets and gaudy brooches, so gawd knows the town's vintage consigner stores are going to run out of the same by tomorrow night - and then where will all the pretty mortal things be?

God knows Piper doesn't need the slight rise in her boot-like heels to give her height, but the extra inch or two doesn't hurt as she towers over the poolside fence and glares down at me with an almost feral expression in her cat-like yellow eyes.

(I've never seen their "real" color, but I've overheard the humans call Piper's eyes hazel.)

"Don't dry off on my account," she oozes, literally, the words spilling hot and wet from her mouth as I watch the vile green vapor that is vampire breath ooze from between her lips.

(Yes, vampires have vampire breath and it is rank; at least, to zombies. No, scratch that; I'm pretty sure it's vile to the entire world.)

"Although," she adds, dangling a signed doctor's note in one of her long-nailed fingers, "you don't want the ink to smudge on this very important document."

“You got it?” I ask, tousling my limp brown hair and struggling not to reach out and grab it right away.

“Didn’t I say I would?” she asks with a challenge in her voice, pulling the note back just a smidge to tempt me even further.

“Sure, you ‘said’ you would, but...” I let the sentence die off as I slip into flip-flops while tying the generous - and stolen - Holiday Inn towel around my waist.

“But what?” she slithers, backing up all the more. “You still don’t trust vampires?”

I look around to see if any civilians are listening, as if the slobs from “the Home” would ever get up before the last possible minute before school anyway.

“It’s not that, Piper, it’s just, in all my years at Barracuda Bay you’ve never even spoken to me, let alone offered to get me a doctor’s note so I can get back into school. So, I’m just kind of wondering, why are you being nice to me all of a sudden?”

She snuffles, apparently satisfied with my answer when, of course, what I really wanted to scream was, “OF COURSE I DON’T TRUST FRICKIN’ VAMPIRES YOU FRICKIN’ VAMPIRE SCUM!!!”

I count to five inside my head to calm myself, then look over her sleek vampire head to the blinking cross that tops the Chapel of the Holy Redeemer, using it to center my chi (or whatever) and take my mind off of separating Piper’s head from her neck (gorgeous though it may be).

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she sighs, straightening her hair under her fuzzy white beret. “I already told you, getting you back into school is the fastest way to clear all this up so nobody asks anymore probing questions.”

I nod. “Okay, I get that; sure.”

“But next time,” she warns, still keeping the note just out of reach, “try to be more careful, okay? I don’t like to call in favors unless I have to, especially for a... zombie.”

She hisses the word the way most people say, “Cockroach.”

Or, “Puss.”

Or, “Boil.”

My hands are dry now, my joints limber, my eyes clear, the morning racing past 5 now and approaching 6.

I see Piper itching to get away now, see her beady yellow eyes focused on a car I hadn't noticed before, idling there in the distance.

I shift my stance to get a better look, the flip-flops making sucking noises on the wet pool concrete as I spy Bianca's trademark Jaguar sitting in neutral by the newspaper box at the corner.

"Got a hot date?" I ask, snatching the note from Piper's hand when she's not looking.

She smiles languidly and says, "Does picking up Alex Foster for school count?"

I shrug, making sure the note's legit before folding it up and holding it tight.

"Only if you're a petty witch who can't get her own man," I purr between clenched teeth, fixing her with my not-exactly-un-scary zombie glare.

Piper just smiles even wider and says, "What do you care anyway, Lucy? You know zombies can't date mortals, isn't that one of your stupid 9 laws—"

"8 Laws, Piper, and who says I want to date him? I just like spending time with him is all."

"Me too," she says cryptically before stepping off the rough concrete slab that is the pool and onto the even rougher blacktop that makes up the Home's parking lot.

From behind, without the yellow eyes and blood-black squiggles so visible, she looks normal; well, far from normal.

Who am I kidding?

She looks beautiful.

The kind of beautiful even a sweet kid like Alex Foster can't resist.

"I guess the feeling's mutual," she calls over her shoulder.

Ugghh, and I hate myself for even taking the bait but can't refuse it as I ask, "Yeah, Piper? How so?"

And she turns, just as I knew she would; just as she knew she would.

And she smiles, oozes is more like it, and says, "What, haven't you heard? He just asked me to the Fall Formal next week. Kind of late notice, I suppose, and of course he wasn't the first mortal to ask, but... what can I say, I'm a sucker for the guys who play hard to get."

I watch her sashay away, her butt cheeks perfectly rounded like an apple ripe for picking, and no wonder Alex would rather spend time with a blood-pumping vampire than a dried out old zombie hag like me.

Still, the Fall Formal?

I mean, I know we hadn't talked about it, specifically, and of course I would never ask him, but, the way he's been talking in Chorus the past few weeks, asking me if I was going, who I'd go with if I was going, it was kind of like he was, I dunno, hinting around that he'd ask... me.

And, not that I would admit it to anyone, least of all Dana or even Ethan, but I'd even taken the bus to the mall and scouted out a few formal dresses, keeping my eye in particular on a sleek little black sleeveless number with a maroon under hem.

And... and... now?

For him to ask Piper Madison at the last minute?

I just, it's too much; I can't process anymore.

Not one thing more.

I'm still watching her butt when I realize it's not her butt in front of me anymore, and when I travel from her zipper up past her cashmere sweater to the curl of her fang-peeking smile I realize she's turned around.

Smiling, licking her fangs, she says, "One more thing, Lucy. If Fiona does anything else to make waves for the Living Dead here in Barracuda Bay, and I mean one little, tiny, stinkin' thing, you can be sure I'll take care of—"

I think of chubby, mousy, nosy Fiona, with the dimples and the hair and the plain Jane clothes and the do-good instinct and interrupt, "No, no, I'll take care of it, seriously. And without sticking my teeth in her neck and sucking her soul dry, too."

"You better," she threatens before turning on her heels and stomping - no, that's not the right word - before stalking to her VFF (Vampire Friends Forever) Bianca's car and oozing into the buttery leather of the passenger seat.

As soon as her door shuts, Bianca guns the engine and squeals away from the curb.

I'm not surprised to hear the bushes to each side of the pool gate slither and shake as Ethan and Dana slowly emerge, both holding the ancient wooden stakes we carry with us at all times - just in case.

Dana's has a pearl handle and a sharp edge, just like her.

Ethan's matches his personality as well; it's rough hewn with no fancy handle other than a half-price auto rag he's duct taped to the non-business end for comfort.

Its point is blunt and worn but he's so strong it doesn't matter; I've seen him shove that thing through a vampire's chest so quickly, so effortlessly, it looked like a warm knife through butter.

"Glad to know somebody's got my back," I say sarcastically, flipping and flopping toward them as dawn finally breaks, suddenly realizing I've been standing all this time in my no-one's-ever-supposed-to-see-it man-kini!

"Always," says Ethan, checking out the doctor's note as I unfold it and slide it over the fence.

He nods approvingly and passes it to Dana, who also gives it the seal of approval from between her hooded eyelids and thin, maroon lips.

"She's right about one thing," Dana says as we mount the concrete stairs up to our rooms.

"I know, I know," I say. "I'll take care of it, first thing this morning."

Ethan nods as we reach my room, walking three doors down to his own room to get ready for school.

Dana lingers near my open doorway, handing back the note.

"I couldn't help but overhear what our friend Piper had to say about Alex, Lucy," she says, cold shoulder meeting the cold metal strip lining my door.

I stare into the bleak, white, mostly empty room and feel the cold grip of another endless day in Barracuda Bay wash over me.

"What?" I ask a little defiantly, looking away from my cold room and into Dana's even colder eyes. "Now I've got to give that up, too?"

She kind of steps back, surprised, and says, "No, that's... not... what I was going to say at all. I was going to say, her telling you about the Fall Formal like that well, that's a cold thing to do. You know, even for a vampire."

And with that she slinks away, leaving me with the day's first - and likely only - smile.



\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 10

The headline is the first thing I see after sliding the forged vampire-friendly doctor's note across Mr. Thompson's cluttered desk at school later that morning: "BREAKING: Zombies Are Walking the Halls at Barracuda Bay High!"

He's on his sleek metallic cell phone, one crooked, hairy-knuckled finger still up in the air in the universal "wait right there until I get off the phone with this much more important person than you" position.

I wait until he turns around to consult his old school, big square and black numbers wall calendar behind him and slide the crisp, folded-over morning paper out from beneath his lukewarm cup of coffee.

At first I couldn't see it, because it was right under Mr. Thompson's coffee cup, but not only has stupid, naïve, has-no-idea-the-kind-of-vampire-beat-down-she-just-opened-up-on-herself Rutherford hasn't just named me as the "Zombie," but has also used my sophomore yearbook picture right.

Under.

The.

Headline.

So now there's no mistaking it: Fiona has called me a zombie.

In print, out loud, and, in this day and age, no doubt online as well.

I shake my head, just shy of trembling, and begin reading:

Cold hands.

Pale skin.

A certain stiffness to her gait.

Could our humble little high school star in the next Living Dead movie?

Only time will tell. One thing is for sure, though: this reporter has breaking, firsthand knowledge of a new “zombie-like” virus spreading like wildfire around Barracuda Bay High.

Who is “Patient X” in this latest outbreak? None other than our very own junior Lucy Frost has come down with an “unknown affliction,” according to her doctor, that results in freezing cold skin and a pale, almost ghostly pallor.

In short, one of our very own COULD JUST BE A ZOMBIE.

Okay, maybe not really, but students are still urged to avoid all physical contact with Lucy until further notice, and to report to their teachers - or the school administration - if they see Lucy showing evidence any of the following signs: hives, trembling, nausea, vomiting, external bleeding, chafing, coughing or, of course, stumbling through the halls looking to snack on your brains!

Although no evidence exists - yet - that this new strain of bug might be contagious, cautious school officials were so alarmed by Lucy’s condition yesterday that they literally barred her from attending school until she could secure a doctor’s note. As of this printing, there is no word as to whether or not “Zombie Lucy” obtained a physician’s permission to attend school...

Zombie Lucy?

Really, Fiona?

Zombie?

Lucy?

I stop reading, snatch the 10-page edition of our stupid school newspaper and stand from the wobbly pleather chair across from Mr. Thompson’s desk.

He’s not done with his call but he sees me, sees the paper in my trembling hands, puts two and two together and slides the open cell phone across his shoulder so the other person can’t hear and stands up, too, saying, “Lucy, I’m sorry about that; it was... premature... to say the least. Not to mention immature and well, frankly, extremely catty. We’ll get Fiona to print a retraction in the next edition and—”

But it’s too late; I know it’s already too late.

A retraction?

A retraction?

What good is that gonna do now that the cat's already out of the bag?

I ignore Mr. Thompson, who follows me all the way to his doorway but not a step further, and stumble out of the front office, across the hall and directly into the library, where the normally jovial Mrs. Klinger clings protectively to her desk as I stride right past her to the row of computers just south of the magazine rack.

It's no surprise why she's holding her breath and covering her mouth; a quick glance at the desk in front of her reveals today's "cover story" and my beaming, gleaming yearbook photo from last year.

Great, so now even the "nice" teachers are going to be afraid of me?

Stupid Fiona and her stupid headline and her stupid, so-called "reporting" skills!

The library is crowded this time of morning with kids killing time in the last few minutes before homeroom Tweeting or updating their Facebook pages or getting the local surf report ('cause that's how we roll in Barracuda Bay), and as I stroll down the line of student desk chairs looking for an open seat at a live computer terminal I don't find one.

Instead, I make one, literally dumping a timid freshman out of the last seat in line and taking his place.

"Hey," he shouts with a squeaky freshman voice before I flash him one of my patented zombie growls and off he goes, scampering to slide into the arms of his Gamma Man backpack on his way to complain to Mrs. Klinger.

I ignore them both and Google the term "zombie + Barracuda Bay," hoping against hope that the online edition of the Barracuda Bay Bugle hasn't gone live yet - sure enough, there it is, the very first hit I get (naturally), posted less than an hour ago.

What's more, several other high schools - looking for a quick and easy morning story without actually, you know, sitting down and writing one for themselves - have "lifted" Fiona's "scoop" and posted it on their online editions as well!

I shake my head and step from the chair, storming past the still trembling freshman and even Mrs. Klinger as the kid looks from the morning paper to my face and says, "Hey, that's the girl with the mysterious virus everyone's talking about..."

I cringe and flee the library, not realizing until I'm almost to my locker that I've been balling the newspaper from Mr. Thompson's desk into a golf ball size wedge of paper with every step.

Like overly protective grandparents, Ethan and Dana are hovering there, tripping over themselves to shove their own copies of the Bugle in my face and asking, simultaneously, annoyingly, cloyingly, “Have you seen???”

“Yeah, I’ve seen it,” I snap, not bothering to stop at my locker but instead storming straight to Fiona’s homeroom class.

They follow closely, shouting out warnings as we stomp through the crowded halls.

“You know the Council of Elders has a whole team of Sentinels who monitor the internet looking for crap like this,” says Ethan. “They’re bound to see it.”

“Maybe it hasn’t posted yet,” says Dana hopefully.

“It has,” I say, dashing her hopes. “I’ve just come from the library and it’s spreading; quickly.”

We round the final corner in the commons and dash down D-wing.

I see Mr. Simpson’s open door and barrel right through it.

At the first sight of me - Dana and Ethan don’t want to be seen as “guilty by association,” so they hang back, just out of sight around the corner - half the class flinches.

Flinches; it’s like half the class does the wave - with their faces.

Sheesh, I didn’t think anyone read that rag the Bugle; let alone the students!

As if she hasn’t just signed her own death warrant, Fiona sits in the middle of the class, basking - for once - in the positive attention of her classmates.

It’s like, overnight, she’s become Piper - of the geeks in homeroom, that is.

(And you can tell she more than kinda likes it.)

Her newfound fan base (most of whom have never even spoken to her before) now pepper her with questions and she volleys back answers like a pro.

Here is the quick snippet I hear before the rest of the class gets wind of my presence and shuts down like an old folks’ home after an early bird dinner:

“Did you really get frostbite just from touching her, Fiona?”

“Practically; see the blister on my finger?”

“Do you really think she could be a... a... zombie, Fiona?”

“You tell me!”

“How’d you know which doctor she went to?”

“I was right there in Mr. Thompson’s office when he ordered her to go. You should have seen her face, man she was soooooo ticked... oh hi, Lucy!”

She stands hesitantly when she sees me, and only then do I realize that the rest of the kids in homeroom have literally pulled their desks around hers in a kind of semi-circle, like she’s some strange new version of the campfire storyteller.

No wonder she’s happy to see me; I’ve made her popular!

“Fiona,” I say, managing to keep a lid on it (for the most part) and ignoring the questioning look from Mr. Simpson as he watches the proceedings with some amusement from his big brown desk at the front of the room, “we need to talk - now!”

“Mr. Simpson?” she asks, although she is already headed out the door with me.

He grumbles his permission and quickly goes back to reading the 900-page World War II book he has open on his desk; the same 900-page World War II book he always has open on his desk.

Fiona is smart enough to close the classroom door behind us, but not smart enough to anticipate that Ethan and Dana would be as ticked off at her as I am right now.

Not to mention standing right around the corner.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What - what - w-w-what are YOU guys doing here?” she stammers, taking a step back and reaching for the safety implied by the nearby classroom doorknob.

Without hesitating, without pausing, without even thinking about it, Ethan and Dana grab Fiona’s arms and Ethan says, “Haven’t you heard, Fiona, we’re ‘zombies’ too!”

Even when she shivers from their joint touch and tries to back away, they literally pick her up like one of those department store mannequins (only, this one’s moving - a lot!) and drag her around the corner of D-wing to the empty girls’ room.

Ethan, showing no sign of bashfulness in lingering near the sanitary napkin dispenser (which, even as a girl, I tend to avoid just on general terms), opens each of the four stall doors to make sure they are, in fact, empty.

Satisfied, he whirls on Fiona and says, “How could you do that, Fiona? A ‘zombie’? The ‘Living Dead’? How could you write that stuff? It’s not even true!”

“It’s all true,” she says defiantly, not backing down even when Ethan slowly pulls down his wide, dark hood to reveal the deep black depths of his deep black eyes.

(I’ve seen it before and even I’m backing away as he does it.)

“Really?” asks Dana, wrinkling her copy of the Bugle as she reads aloud, “None other than our very own junior Lucy Frost has come down with an ‘unknown affliction,’ according to her doctor, that results in freezing cold skin and a pale, almost ghostly pallor.”

Dana lowers the paper, all the better to give Fiona a glimpse into her own pair of deep, black eyes before practically bellowing, “WHAT doctor, Fiona? What DOCTOR?”

Fiona blushes - oh, to blush again - and says, “Okay, every part but THAT is true, right Lucy?”

“Fiona,” I begin, struggling to put into words the gravity of her situation, of our situation, “Fiona I just...”

But what do I say?

I look to Ethan, to Dana, for help but they, too, seem to be hesitating, to be stopping just shy of telling poor, trembling, chubby little Fiona why we’re all so upset.

It doesn’t take Barracuda Bay’s own “cub reporter” to figure it out on her own.

(Something I kind of wish Ethan and Dana had thought of before rushing to my aid in the first place.)

“Wait a minute?” asks Fiona defiantly, not afraid to speak her mind even when surrounded by three angry, dark-eyed, pale-faced zombies. “What do YOU two care if I fibbed about Lucy in the stupid school paper for anyway? Why would YOU two care if I fudged facts a little and called her a ‘zombie’ just to spice things up a little in that weekly rag? I didn’t even know you three were friends!”

And, of course, she’s absolutely right.

Why would Ethan and Dana care?

I open my mouth to speak, to spill, to break one of the 8 Unbreakable Zombie Laws and flat out confess to all kinds of crimes of the zombie kind when the bathroom door bolts open and in stride none other than Piper and Bianca and man are.

They.

Ticked.

Off.

So ticked off they roll right past me, right through Dana and, if Ethan hadn’t been posed in a standoff directly in front of Fiona, this story would have ended right here.

As it is he senses them, turns and grabs each one by the neck before literally picking them up and carrying them all the way across the bathroom and into the far wall.

Even I am impressed by the quickness of his actions, by the stark and severe reality of seeing his bone pale arms flying into action.

And trust me, vampires aren’t exactly easy to get the drop on; those suckers are ready for anything - and FAST.

Ready for anything, that is, than my ticked off ZFF (Zombie Friends Forever).

Fiona kind of blanches, as if someone’s just tapped the back of her ample calf with one of those beer spigots and drained out all the blood.

She kind of whimpers and backs away and the severity of Piper and Bianca’s reaction, the way they stormed in here ready to take over, makes me wonder what I might have done if I’d been alone in defending poor, mortal Fiona.

The vamps are screaming now, hissing, their feet like claws scraping at Ethan’s thighs, the big fat slugs of black blood literally boiling beneath their skin as their fangs slide out, hissing as they try to gouge Ethan in the throat.

Dana and I both watch Fiona's face break into a spasm of horror just as her mouth pops open to let out one of her patented, girlish screams - she lets one fly every pep rally, so we've been there, heard that.

Dana is closer and quickly clamps her cold, pale hand down over every inch of Fiona's mouth while I rush to help Ethan.

Bianca has managed to wriggle loose and is just about to slide one of her thick black nails - yeah, they slide out when they get angry, too - right across Ethan's face when I grab her arm and yank it back behind her so far - so fast - she falls to the dirty bathroom floor, where I quickly slide my foot across her neck to hold her still.

Even so she bucks and writhes, making me constantly apply more force and/or adjust my position; it's kind of like being a rodeo rider, only this bull can bite.

Meanwhile Dana has yanked a black and white scarf from around her waist - she wears them as belts sometimes, trust me, it's cuter than it sounds, at least on her - and has effectively gagged Fiona so she can help us fend off two very, very angry vampires.

(Or, at least, not alert the whole school to their presence with one of her pep rally lung bursts.)

Feeling Dana at his side, Ethan lets Piper fall gracelessly to the floor, where like a 100-pound scuttling crab she quickly grabs Bianca's hand and yanks her free of my size 8 black hi-tops.

It happens so quickly, so decisively, it reminds me why we steer clear of the vampires at all costs; they're just straight up bad to the bone.

They stand shoulder to shoulder, fangs glistening, eyes bulging and glowing, skin gurgling, hissing at us, bent at the waists like the animals - the hungry, soulless animals - they are.

But they are outnumbered in here, at least... for now.

Zombies may not have fangs or any of the other vampires' super powers, but we're still no pushovers when it comes to Battles of the Living Dead.

Ethan alone could waste both girls, but not without getting nicked in the process and although it's a little known fact that zombies can be turned by vampires, just like humans, it's not pretty and it's certainly something we don't want to lose Ethan to.

So he's wary, Dana's wary, I'm wary and Fiona is absolutely petrified.



“You can’t protect her forever!” spits Piper, her fangs slowly receding into her mouth as she apparently settles on a cease-fang for the moment.

“Maybe not,” I say, “but we can look out for her today.”

“And then what, Lucy?” Piper asks. “Right now your Council of Elders is probably sending a team of Sentinels to clean this mess up. No doubt the Vampire Congress is sending a team of Marauders to do the same. So let’s say you protect her all day, Lucy, which is highly unlikely. But let’s say, by some heroic zombie feat you three manage to keep her away from us all day long... then what?”

“Are the three of you going to fight off an entire army of the living dead? By yourselves? Face it you three, none of us - not the vampires, not even the zombies - can afford to have this girl among the living. Not anymore; not after what she’s done - not after what she’s seen. If we don’t get her, the Marauders will; if the Marauders don’t, your Sentinels will. She’s cooked, one way or the other.”

Suddenly Piper is Piper again; the human Piper, the passing Piper, the pretty Piper.

Her fangs are gone, her blood slugs are thinner and slugging slower now and she... she... smiles.

(Gross.)

And she takes a step forward, and so do I, and in the middle of that tiny girls’ room we stand toe to toe and she says, “So why not save yourself the trouble and hand her over now? We promise to make it nice and quick, Lucy.”

“No, Piper!” I say. “No, not at all. It’s not her fault; she didn’t know what she was doing. She’s just some stupid... Normal... who had no idea what she was getting herself into. I’ll just explain that to the Sentinels and they can explain it to the Council and—”

“Lucy,” comes a gentle voice from behind me, just as a gentle hand settles on my tense shoulder.

I turn to see Dana smiling at me.

“Lucy, she’s right. For once, Piper’s right. I don’t know about you, but I’m not looking forward to explaining to the Sentinels why we couldn’t stop some stupid nerd Normal from blabbing our secret to the whole school and, now, the whole internet. I say let’s just hand her over and let the vampires deal with her.”

“Dana?” I ask, looking at her with a fresh pair of eyes.

This?

This!?

From my ZFF?

“How could you? I mean, she’s just a... a... girl. A stupid Normal girl. And you’re going to hand her over to... them?”

Fiona is looking from me to Dana, from Dana back to me, her eyes wide, her mouth pleading behind the black and white gag.

Dana looks at her unforgivingly and says, “I know she’s just a girl; and I feel bad about it, really I do. But play this all the way through to the end, Lucy. I mean, what’s our exit strategy here? Even if the vampires don’t get her, even if by some miracle we manage to save her life all day long, what then? The Sentinels won’t let her live. Now that she knows what we are? Now that she knows what Piper and Bianca are? Now way. On what planet? Face it, Lucy, she’s done for, one way or the other. Why get involved?”

I look at Dana in a new light; and not just the dim bathroom lighting that makes us all look twice as dead - and half as human.

I mean, I know she can be tough and menacing and violent, when provoked, but I’ve watched chick flicks with this chick, laughed at those adorable baby ads for Etrade.com, held hands during the scary movies Ethan forces us to watch every weekend.

We have been friends, trusted each other, and yes have been forced to do some violent stuff against both vampires and zombies in that time (hey, it’s our job), but never before on... humans.

Normals.

Before I can answer Ethan kind of takes a step forward - as if he can sense the tension - and says, “Lucy, just... think about it. I’m not saying we have to hand her over to them, but someone’s going to want her. Trust me, I’m all for kicking a little vampire butt; a little vampire butt. You’ve gone up against the Marauders before; you know what they’re like. And the Vampire Congress won’t just send one Marauder; they’ll send a team. Do you really want to end it all, right here, right now, because of... her?”

And now my stomach really drops, because for all Dana’s blustering, Ethan has always just been a very mellow fellow.

I mean, he doesn’t go out of his way to make friends with mortals, but he’s not openly hateful toward them like Dana can be.

Not to mention... gross!

This is the guy?

This is the guy I thought I could one day, maybe, hopefully... spend forever with?

A guy who would toss up a human girl, just like that, just to save his own butt (fine though it may be)?

My head reels, the room wheels, I'm surrounded by monsters and it's all my fault.

"Hey, you're the ones who messed this all up," I blurt. "I told you I would handle it, I told all of you I would handle it, and I would have. All I was going to do was talk to Fiona, tell her some stupid story, that I had some disease and didn't have long to live, and if she could just keep it to herself, I'd really appreciate it. But oh no, you two had to pull a Zombie John Wayne and ride in on your white horses and save the day, and now look at her; she knows because you wanted her to know."

"That's ridiculous, Lucy," scoffs Ethan, while Dana says nothing, all while avoiding my eyes.

"Is it, Ethan? I touched her by accident; you guys grabbed her by the arms and dragged her in here. On purpose! You guys told her you were zombies, straight up. And you..." here I whirl on Piper and Bianca, still licking their half-fangs in the corner. "You two barged in here, fangs out, ready to tear this girl to pieces! None of you has tried to hide anything, at all. You say you're trying to help, all you're doing is making it worse."

"She started it, Lucy," says Dana quietly. "Don't forget that."

"She was kidding, Dana. Did you even read the article? I mean, all the way through? It's called sarcasm; irony."

"Call it what you will, Lucy, she was treading on dangerous ground even mentioning the Z-word."

Ethan's eyes are calm but his face is frozen; it's like his mind is made up and now all he's doing is trying to win me over to his side, whatever it takes.

"Yeah, Ethan, okay but... she didn't know that. Not until you two showed up and proved it to her!"

The room falls silent; I'm tired and spent.

I don't believe I've ever been this sad, this angry, since, well... since I caught the Z-disease and found myself alive again.

Piper and Bianca say nothing; they've made their point.

Dana looks at me and finally says, "That's all well and good, Lucy, but it's not going to change the fact that her story's on the internet, that the Sentinels are probably reading it RIGHT now and will be here by the time school gets out. TODAY. Not tomorrow, when you've had a chance to sleep on it. Not next week, so we can all run away and be long gone in time. Today, seven, eight hours, tops. So I'll ask you again, Lucy, why don't you just hand her over and let the vampires deal with this?"

"Because we're not like them, Dana," I growl, jerking my thumb behind me to indicate Piper and Bianca. "Because just because we're not alive doesn't mean we're no longer human. They're monsters, Dana; we're just dead humans. There's a huge difference."

And then Piper laughs, and laughs and laughs.

I hear the door open and turn and suddenly she's standing in it, light from the hall behind her spilling in across the black bathroom tiles as she says, "We'll see who's a monster by the end of the day, Lucy. I think you'll be surprised at just how monstrous you might get when the Sentinels arrive and it's your butt on the firing line, and not just Fiona's."

Then she looks me right in the eye and, as if we are the only two in the room - the only two in the universe - she says, "Who knows, Lucy, you might even become one of us by the time it's all over."

Then she turns, grabs Bianca and leaves without another word.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 12

I turn to Dana and snap, "What's wrong with you?"

She shrugs; won't look me in the eye.

Just then the bell rings and, as if on cue, Ethan yanks the gag out of Fiona's mouth and asks, "Now what? I mean, much as I wouldn't mind being a fly on the wall when girls start sharing bras and making out or whatever you guys do in here, we can't just hide in the girls' room all day."

Fiona shoves him away, climbs into the nearest stall, slams the door and locks it tight.

"Stay away from me!" she shouts as Dana instinctively goes to guard the front door in case any more civilians find out about us.

"I don't care what Lucy says," she whines from behind the still-vibrating stall door, "you guys are too monsters! I can't believe I was right, that I was actually right all along. But no," she murmurs, almost to herself, and under the bathroom stall door I can see her pacing back and forth, back and forth, as she works it all out, "I wasn't right; I wasn't even close to right. I just thought you were sick, Lucy. I was just trying to help you; now I know you're... you're... dead!"

I sigh, push one finger on top of the latch and snap it by pushing down no harder than you would to push in a thumb tack on a cork bulletin board where you're hanging a picture of your best friend.

(You know, if you still had one, that is.)

The latch drops to the floor where it dances around a little on the black floor tiles before coming to rest at Fiona's feet, which have suddenly stopped.

I yank open the door, reach in, growl in her face, "We can't be late" and literally march her to the door.

Before Dana lets her out of the bathroom she looks at Fiona and says, "If you say one word, to anyone, about ANY of this, Fiona, I will personally hand you over to the vampires myself, understand? You may think we zombies suck, but you have NO idea how bad vampires suck. And I'm totally NOT being punny right now, either."

Fiona trembles out a nod and I grab her by the arm, keeping her tight as Dana and then Ethan scatter behind me, staying close enough to do damage control should Fiona bolt - or scream something stupid like "zombies want to eat your brains!" at the top of her lungs for the whole crowded commons to hear - but not close enough to blow our cover.

At least, not yet.

I march Fiona to her locker and, as she opens it, ask her, "What's your schedule for the day?"

Instead of answering like a normal human being would, Fiona merely opens her locker and points to the warbling door; her schedule is crisply and perfectly laminated to the inside of the open door.

(Geek.)

I look at it, start to get the picture and ask, “How did you get, like 6 out of 7 electives? I only see one academic course on here!”

She shrugs, grabs a book, then a color-coded notebook, with trembling hands and admits, “I’ve already gotten early acceptance to Duke. I could have gone there this semester if I felt like it, but my Mom wanted me to round out my collegiate resume a little more before I left. The school agreed and, so... there you go.”

I shake my head and look at her classes: AV Club.

School newspaper.

Counselor’s Aid.

Back to the AV Club again.

PE.

More AV Club.

AP English.

Incredible.

And she could already be in college?

At Duke, no less?

Incredible.

Just... incredible.

“Okay, listen,” I say as I march her to her first class, literally arm in arm like we’re suddenly best buds or something. “You and I, we’re shadowing each other all day today, okay? I don’t know if you were paying attention back there, but basically the whole vampire and zombie world is out to get you and, lucky me, I’m pretty much the only thing standing between you and the firing squad. You’re welcome!”

“Now, you tell your teachers whatever you want to, mumps, measles, boy crazy, girl crazy, whatever, but I am coming to each and every class with you today. I don’t know how we’re going to survive, or even if we are, but I need some time to think up a plan and I need to keep you protected, so...”

“What about YOUR classes?” she asks, ever the student.

“Seriously?” I ask. “Just... seriously? I’m talking Vampire Versus Zombie Armageddon here and you’re worried about whether or not I’ll get detention for skipping classes.”

But Fiona kind of looks at me like I’m stupid and says, “Lucy, I just don’t think it looks really good if you suddenly start skipping all your classes. I mean, you’re the one talking about keeping up appearances, so—”

I stop just before walking into the AV Club door and say, “Fiona, I’ve been a junior at four different schools by now; I think I can skip a refresher course in the American Revolution and Trigonometry, okay?”

She rolls her eyes and I can’t tell if it’s because that’s her default way of laughing at a joke or she just doesn’t believe me.

Whatever, she doesn’t need to believe me - she just needs to stay alive.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 13

The AV Club is hardly a class; it’s four geeks - Fiona included - and a broom-closet sized room full of DVD players, dusty computer monitors and twisted up mouse chords.

I ignore the geeks and their wide eyes as I storm into class and ask, “Where’s your teacher?”

As if on cue, Fiona and her three classmates point to another broom-sized room within the first broom-sized room where a man I’ve never seen before - not out in the halls, not on the first day of school when all the teachers stand in front of school to show “solidarity,” or something, not at pep rallies or hurricane drills - is hunched over a computer station with two keyboards and three monitors.

He doesn't turn his back, doesn't even move, for all I can tell.

"Is he going to flex over me being in here?" I ask Fiona, but one of the geeks answers instead.

"He literally hasn't moved in the three years I've taken this class, I doubt he'd even notice if we show up anymore, except then he'd have to deliver these DVDs and push play himself."

"Alex?" I ask, trying not to gush.

The "geek" in question is tall and slender, with a mop of dirty blond curls that manage to fit his sharp, angular face.

He's got on wheat colored chords and a purple and blue rugby shirt and battered sneakers and I have never, ever been so glad to see his dazzling face in my life.

He's also no stranger; it's "my" Alex - Alex Foster.

"Hey Lucy, what are YOU doing here?" Alex asks, his adorable dimples rising and falling with each syllable as he smiles at me warmly.

"Duh, pretty boy," says another geek, ruining the running across the flowery fields into each other's arms moment. "She obviously read Fiona's article and is here to prove that she isn't a zombie. Right, Lucy?"

"Shut up, Roger," says Fiona, glaring at the portly geek in the oh-so-ironic "Don't Hate Me Because I'm Beautiful" XXLL (and that's being generous) T-shirt.

Ignoring Fiona as if she isn't even there, let alone staring daggers at him, the big guy puts down the vending machine Danish he's been noshing, wipes his hands on his double-wide jeans and extends one of them to me.

"Roger Standish," he says, a blush rising to his face.

I take his hand.

I normally wouldn't because, well, for obvious reasons but my cover is blown now, my Afterlife likely over so... what the beans?

"Lucy," I say, gripping his hand.

Oh, that hand.

It is warm and soft and moist and heavenly, like plunging my hand into a loaf of half-cooked bread while it's still in the oven.



I want to get lost in that hand, stay there until the heat seeps into my entire body.

His eyes bulge at the sudden infusion of cold across his palm but he never flinches, never pulls back, never frowns or yelps or tries to yank his hand back.

When I finally release him he takes a step back, looks from me to Fiona and says, "Well, at least you got ONE fact right in your article, Fiona."

I laugh and look at the last geek, the frail, skinny girl in the corner wearing last year's sweater and last decade's bell bottom jeans.

She doesn't get up, doesn't move, but lifts a small, frail hand and says, "Hi, Lucy. I'm... Tara."

I smile and say, "Hi Tara."

And I'm about to say something else, I'm about to ask this room full of geeks question after question when Fiona blurts, "I got it ALL right, Roger; more than you'll ever know!"

"Fiona!" I snap, but she's halfway across the room by now; she must have slinked away while I was in shock and awe at seeing studly Alex in this tiny room full of nerds.

Between her now is Alex and Roger and she's close enough to the teacher's door that she could get to it by the time I could get to her.

"You promised!"

She sees my dilemma, delights in it and visibly savors the moment.

"As a mere mortal," she says dramatically, almost proudly, stepping slightly away from the teacher's boom closet door to deliver her soliloquy, "I would say I'm bound by honor to break the promise of a... zombie."

And there it is; she's done it.

Just like I'd hoped she wouldn't.

Just like I knew she would.

I look at the room and the initial reaction is, as I expected it would be, disbelief.

"Please," scoffs Roger.

“Lucy,” says Tara disapprovingly.

“Enough,” snaps Alex, not quite protectively but just protectively enough to tease a smile from my cold, dead lips.

I think about how we’d flirted outside of shop class the day before, how good it had made me feel, how thrilling it is to see him here just now... and how awkward it’s going to be when he finds out why I’m here.

Not to mention what I really am.

Fiona frowns and while she’s forming her comeback I look suddenly at where I’m standing; the room I’m standing in, the teacher with his back to the class, the rows and rows of video cameras and chords and microphones and web cams and computer monitors and laptops and I make a snap decision.

Before the class can scoff once more, before Fiona can make an explanation, before I can chicken out, before I can consider the implications it will have on Alex and I (yeah, like there even is an Alex and I), I say, “My name is Lucy Frost and I am a zombie. Thanks to Fiona here, the whole school knows it and, even if they don’t believe it, the real zombies won’t care. They’ll be coming here; they’re probably already on their way. Now that you know, now that I’ve confessed, I’m sorry but... I can’t let you go. I need you; I need your help. Somewhere in this room, somewhere in your brains, you and I are going to find a way to make the Council of Elders understand that this was all just a practical joke.”

I expect laughter, and halfway through my little “revelation” I’ve decided to convince the loudest laugher first.

I am not surprised that it’s Roger.

So I walk over to him, force him to put his Danish down one more time and take his warm, bread loaf hand and place it squarely in the middle of my chest, right where a beating heart would be.

I kind of give Alex a side-eye and he’s kind of half-standing, half-sitting, as if he’s not sure whether to be madder at me or at Roger, or if he’s not sure why he should be mad in the first place.

Roger blushes but plays along, like it’s no big deal he’s suddenly touching a real lady girl’s chest, at least until the cold of my skin seeps into that warm, soft hand of his and he realizes I’m not playing and he tries to pull it back.

That’s when things get really intense.

He struggles, and he's a big guy, I mean, 300-, 350-pounds, easy, and here I am this little pale waif in black and I'm not budging.

I hold firm and don't let his hand go and he quiets down, the whole room does, and I know I have him when Tara tries to interrupt and asks, "Roger, what's going on?"

And he snaps, "Quiet, Tara. I think... I think... she's right. I really think this is for real here. Hold on!"

And he leans closer, to listen to my non-existent heartbeat, to see if my chest is thumping, and after a few minutes when he's convinced it's not he leans back, chubby cheeks breaking into a wide grin and says just one thing: "Cool."

And he nods, and he wipes his hand on his jeans, and picks up his Danish. "Very cool."

And it's not what I'm expecting; it's somehow... better... than I expected.

But Fiona doesn't think so; not even close.

She loses it; loses it hard.

Fiona snaps, "Cool, Roger? Cool!?! What's so cool about being a skanky, skeezy, undead, brain-eating ZOMBIE?!?!"

And I look at her, trying to figure out which Fiona I'm seeing; the sweet, nerdy, mousy Fiona or the "showing off for her friends just because she knows something they don't" Fiona.

And I think I know, but I can't tell because she won't look back.

Instead she just keeps boring her eyes into little, waifish Tara.

And Tara, little Tara, slinks away from the corner, her green eyes coming to life and appearing to grow an inch with every step she finally says, in a voice bold and clear, "Dude, what ISN'T cool about being a skanky, skeezy, undead, brain-eating zombie?!?! This is like history, here; scientific history. And you're going to diss it because you can't... understand... it?"

And Fiona is blown away; this is not what she was expecting at all, I can tell.

And I kind of feel sorry for her, in a way (though not really) because she's standing there, hair mousy, face crinkled, pudgy, pink hands on the hips of her baggy, shapeless khakis and I think she's going to give up, to sit down, to shut up and get along, but she surprises me again.

“History?” she snaps. “Science? This, this... thing—” and she’s pointing to me here, face crinklier, hands pudgier than ever, “is the opposite of that. She’s an aberration; a... a... freak of history, of science. Don’t you guys get that?”

“No,” says Roger, eyeing Fiona coolly from his seat. “I don’t get that at all, Fiona. She’s not an aberration; she’s Lucy. She’s just a kid; she’s just some girl in high school. She goes to our school, she’s a student here, look at her, Fiona; she’s normal.”

“I mean, except for the no-heartbeat, doesn’t breath stuff,” Tara adds, but not in a Fiona way, in a kind of “fan” way.

“She eats brains, Tara. I mean, probably. Don’t you, Lucy? I mean, eat brains?”

I shrug.

“When I have to, Fiona,” is all I’ll cop to.

Roger kind of smiles, Tara doesn’t just kind of, she does smile.

“We all have to eat something, Fiona,” she says sensibly.

“Yeah, okay, I get that. I’ve taken basic Biology but... brains? It’s... it’s... unnatural!”

“So is eating fried cow, in some cultures,” Roger points out. “So is pumping chickens full of steroids to make them bigger and growing them like plants in some warehouse where they never see the light of day.”

“Look, Roger, you big fat gross vegetarian hippie, I get all that, okay? I’ve heard it all before, but this is something completely diff—”

“Stop, Fiona!” Tara snaps, barking out with a big voice for such a little girl. “Lucy has something to say, and it sounds like we’re all in danger so, if you don’t mind, kindly shut UP and let her finish!”

I don’t smile, exactly, because I’m not used to being surrounded by so many Normals, all at once, let alone Normals who now know my deepest, darkest secret - and aren’t trying to chase me out of town with pitchforks and torches - but I don’t growl and chase them off, either.

As Fiona frowns, Roger peppers me with questions: “Why would the zombies be on their way here, Lucy? How many zombies? How long have you been a zombie? Can I be a zombie, too? What do brains taste like? Can I still be considered a vegetarian if I—”

Tara interrupts, “Don’t be rude, Rog, she’s not some circus animal but... he did make a good point, Lucy: how long have you been a zombie?”

Desperate to be in on the action Fiona says, “She just told me she’s been a junior at four different high schools, so that’s, what, 16 years? I mean, if you do the math. Can zombies do math, Lucy???”

“Hold up,” jokes Roger. “You’ve had to go to four different high schools? Don’t you ever get to, you know... graduate?”

I step back a little, his hand is still on my chest - and creeping starboard, if you know what I mean - and say, “This is how I looked when I died; this is how I will look until my kneecaps crumble and my jaw bone falls off and my skull disintegrates. The only way for me to ‘pass’ as normal is to, well, go to high school.”

“Forever?” asks Tara. “Good god, that’s horrible.”

Roger steps back, frowns, rubs his hand and says, “I guess I take back that last bit about wanting to be a zombie!”

I look at Alex, sweet Alex, frowning in the corner and say, “I dunno, going to high school forever kind of has its perks.”

I look back at the geeks and only Tara is smiling.

She raises her hand.

I frown and say, “Yes, Tara?” as if I’m some kind of substitute teacher or something.

“Nothing, I just, well, you said you needed our help. I think, well, I think I know how we can help.”

I smile back and purr, “I’m all ears.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The bell ending first period rings and no one moves.

Not even the teacher hunched over at his personal terminal.

(I'm actually beginning to wonder if perhaps the AV Club teacher has replaced himself with some kind of crash test dummy or something and these kids just haven't realized it yet.)

Roger says, "It'll never work."

Tara bristles a bit, snaps, "Why not?"

After all, it was her bright idea; a good one, too, I thought.

"No offense, Tara. It's just... there will be too much noise in the cafeteria at lunchtime," he says, fondling a fuzzy microphone for emphasis.

She considers this, nods, a little blue vein pulsing beneath the pale, almost opaque skin of her temple.

"What about after lunch?" she offers, not in a testy way, but collaboratively.

I get the feeling these guys work well together.

You know, when they're not facing a zombie-vampire Armageddon, that is.

He nods. "It would work better with other kids around, other kids' reactions, you know?"

Fiona, through huffing in the corner, sits up a little and says, "We could do it right after school, while some of the geek-friendly clubs are still on campus. That way we have a little more quality control, you know?"

I'm sitting now, smiling over at her helpful suggestion; she ignores me.

"Right," says Tara, spinning around in her armless desk chair. "I could get the Drama Club to help; they'd be naturals. And they'd really get into it, you know?"

Roger almost hesitantly offers, "I could perhaps persuade the Star Wars Light Saber Duel Reenactment Club to participate."

Alex snorts from the corner, but Roger ignores him.

I do, too.

"Don't forget the Math-a-Letes," Fiona offers with a perfectly straight face.

I sit back and say, “So, let me get this straight: the plan is to get, I dunno, three or so of our finest extracurricular clubs into full face paint, bad suits, bloody teeth and gums, powdered wigs and zombie drag and have them all... attack... Fiona here at the same time? So that the zombies, the school, the whole town gets that she was only joking when she wrote that little story yesterday?”

“Not that she was joking,” points out Roger, “but that we were all punking her. That you were in on it, leading it, but that you weren’t alone and, hey, lookout, here come 150 zombies now. Arrggggh!”

He gets all into it, making noises from his double-wide chair and waving his big, bulky arms as Tara and I snort conspiratorially at his tripled-chin antics.

“That way,” explains Tara, “it doesn’t look like she was in on the joke. It’s like... like... she was clueless about the whole thing. No offense, Fiona, but... it’s more believable that way.”

I nod, the room growing silent.

“And you think these clubs would participate?” I ask hesitantly, almost not believing it could be quite that easy.

Tara laughs. “Hmm, let’s see; we can either go home to another boring afternoon of live blogging our chores or dress up like zombies and harass Fiona, on LIVE TV? Hmm, I think you’ll be fighting kids off once the word gets out.”

I smile but Roger quietly clears his throat and a look passes over his chubby, typically serene face.

“The bigger question,” he asks, just to me, “is do you think the... zombies... will go for it? I mean, will... it... work? Really and truly? Will they go away if we do this?”

I hesitate before answering, “If we do it right, Roger, it should work. I mean, I might get in trouble, me and my zombie friends but... the important part is Fiona’s life will be spared and no humans will get hurt.”

Roger nods, then Tara, then... reluctantly... Fiona.

I wait for Alex but he’s still playing silent soldier in the corner, his green eyes a tad darker now, his broad shoulders hunched under his perfectly stone-washed rugby shirt, the folds of it clinging to his flat, almost concave stomach.

Distractedly I say, “Roger, Tara, Fiona, why don’t you guys start texting your friends in those clubs you mentioned, line up as many as you can for today, right after school. It has to be right after school, not a minute too late. If I’m right, the Sentinels are already on their—”

“Sentinels?” Roger asks.

“Sentinels, right,” I explain. “They’re like... zombie cops. Actually, more like zombie... green berets. They do the Council of Elder’s dirty work, moving us zombies around the country, making sure we have someplace to stay, making sure we get our monthly dose of brains, that kind of thing.”

He nods and I see he has other questions but Tara says, “What about these Elders, what’s their story?”

“They’re like, the real Living Dead. Seriously, you never want to see an Elder if you can help it. They’re hundreds of years old; barely human anymore, barely even the Living Dead. But their brains still work, and for better or worse, they’re the ones who enforce the 8 Unbreakable Zombie Laws.”

“Which are?” asks Roger, sitting up in his chair.

I smile, get a brainstorm and say, “I’ll make you guys a deal. If you can get every member of your clubs to show up, in full costume, at exactly 3:16 today, and not a second later, I will tell you everything you ever wanted to know about zombies - and then some - but were too afraid to ask. Deal?”

Roger doesn’t answer, but merely pulls out his PDA and immediately starts texting, his massive thumbs moving quite eloquently across a keyboard the size of a credit card.

When I look away, I see Fiona and Tara doing the same.

I sigh, get up quietly and walk over to Alex, not worrying about who might see, or hear, what I’m about to say.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chapter 15



“Alex?” I ask, taking the desk chair next to his. “You’ve been pretty quiet since the ‘big reveal,’ any thoughts.”

There is a moment, just then, with the other three kids texting away, fully occupied, where I imagine Alex to be the boy I’ve always dreamed of; a Normal who could accept me, for who I am - for what I am.

I play it all out in a millisecond, every inch of it unfolding; as if I’m seeing the future.

He will hold me, not caring if I’m cold; he will cling to me, not caring who sees.

His warm breath will caress my cold ears and he will tell me everything he’s always wanted to say; everything I’ve always wanted to hear.

He will confess that yesterday, when I stopped by the oil drums outside of shop class and we talked, and asked, and answered, and laughed, was the best day of his life.

He will say something like, if not exactly like, “Lucy, I don’t care if you had three heads and six arms and four butt cheeks, I don’t care if you’re as cold as my refrigerator turned up to 10, I don’t care if French kissing you tastes like tongue wrestling an ice spider, I don’t care if you turn my Dad’s Jacuzzi tub into an ice bath, I don’t care if you still look 17 when I’m 97 and you have to change my diapers - in fact, come to think of it, I’d prefer to have my diapers changed by a nubile young teenager - I don’t care if we break every single zombie law, I want to get with you, be with you and stay with you, no matter what.”

And I’m not sure why I’m so surprised when it doesn’t... quite... happen that way.

When, in fact, just the opposite happens.

“Thoughts?” he finally spits, just above a whisper, sliding over slightly on the wheels stuck to the bottom of his chair.

They make more noise than he does.

His eyes aren’t just cold, suddenly they’re... cruel.

“Which thoughts do you want to hear, Lucy? My thoughts on you being a zombie? My thoughts about how I feel about sitting next to a zombie, every day, in Chorus? My thoughts about almost... almost... asking you to the Fall Formal next week? My thoughts about you lying to me, every day, for the last three years? My thoughts about—”

“Hold up, hold up,” I stop him, ignoring the hurt look in his eyes, the anguished tone in his voice, the way his big pale hands are trembling on the arms of his chair. “YOU were going to ask ME to the Fall Formal next week? But Piper told me you had already asked her?”

“Piper?” he snorts. “Piper Madison? What am I, some kind of masochist? I barely know that chick and, what I do know, frankly, scares me. Even more than YOU being a ZOMBIE scares me. And, trust me Lucy, that scares me A LOT!”

I ignore the jab and press, “So, you mean to tell me, Piper Madison doesn’t pick you up every morning for school?”

“What? Gawd no. I ride my bike to school, if you must know, just like I have every day since freshman year. After the divorce, you know, Dad had to cut back on expenses, to afford the alimony. So... tuna casseroles every Thursday is his way of cutting back; riding a bike to school - even though I know it’s social suicide - is mine. Piper Madison? Where did you ever hear a thing like that?”

I shake my head.

How could I let her get to me like that?

Bother me like that?

How could I ever believe Piper for one frickin’ second?

I look at Alex and he seems hurt, confused and... well, just plain hurt.

I ignore Piper for the moment and say, “Alex, I’m... I’m sorry you had to find out this way but...”

“But what, Lucy? Chorus, three years, five days a week, 45 minutes a day, us talking, flirting, that whole time and not once, not ever, did you even drop a hint that you’re... that you’re... the Living Dead?”

I sigh.

“What did you want me to do, Alex? Scare off the only cool guy I’ve gone to school with in years? Decades, even? What would you have done if I’d walked into Chorus that first day as a freshman, gone straight up to you and said, ‘Him, I’m Lucy and I’m a zombie.’ You would have done what every other guy I’ve ever told has done; run the other way without looking back.”

He shrugs. “I guess so, yeah but... would you blame me?”

“No, but... do you blame me, I mean, now that you know? Look at you; you’ve known me for three years and suddenly you’re ready to disown me just because I’m a... zombie. It doesn’t change anything, Alex; it doesn’t change what’s inside.”

He slides over even further.

“Doesn’t change anything?” he asks, his chair darting across the tiny room and into Roger’s wide hips as he stands and grabs his backpack. “It. Changes. Everything.”

What?

He’s leaving?

Now?

Just when I need him the most?

I stand, too, keeping pace even though he’s faster, taller and leaner than me.

“Where are you going, Alex?”

“Going?” he spits, reaching for the door. “I’m going as far away from you as possible.”

“Hey, Alex,” grunts Roger as he stands up.

I hold up a hand and he sits back down.

“You can’t do that, Alex,” I say firmly, getting in between him and the door.

His eyes bulge a little but he keeps it real for the nerds.

“So, what, I’m a hostage now?” he asks, puffing his non-existent chest out, acting cocky.

“I thought you understood, Alex, we’re at war here. It’s nice and cozy and all plans and text messages for now but, eventually, we’re all going to have to face an elite team of zombie killers after school and I need you, Alex.”

“Me?” he spits, his face recoiling into something stiff and strange, making him look distant and cold and... dare I say... ugly. (At least, temporarily so.) “I wouldn’t help you if it was the last thing I ever did.”

Oh.

Ow.

Ouch.

That.

Frickin'.

Hurts.

I step back because it's hard to believe this sweet, green-eyed, curly-haired kid who I've talked to every single frickin' school day for three straight years could turn so fast, so suddenly, so... completely.

And he's quick, too quick in the space of my dead, broken heart.

He already has the door open by the time I grab for his rugby shirt, which I manage just to snag the part that hangs over his belt loop and it holds, just for a second, then rips, letting him go into the swirl of kids as the bell rings and 2nd period swirls into 3rd.

Roger joins me at the door, breathing heavy just from the six steps it took him to cross the room, and Tara joins him and we step out into the halls, into the swirl, but already the word is out, the mood has changed and the kids who merely looked at me in homeroom with curiosity and just a little whimsy this morning now stare daggers as Alex zigs and zags through the crowd, his lovely dirty blond curls a head higher than most of the kids, quickly lost before we can even follow and grab him.

"Great!" I spit, as I grab Roger and Tara and drag them back into class before anymore probing eyes can find out where I've been hiding all morning.

"It's just Alex," sighs Fiona from her chair, where she hasn't even bothered to get up. "He'll be back."

And with Roger inside, with Tara beside him, with the door closed at our backs I turn to her and say, no longer trying to be brave and hide my fear, "That's what I'm afraid of."

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 16

"1 or 2 sandwiches?" Ethan texts back as I work my Crackberry.

I sigh; we've been at this for 10 minutes and I could care less about lunch.

"Roger," I ask impatiently. "1 or 2 sandwiches?"

He looks almost apologetic as he says, "Would 2 be all right?"

I smile and text back, "Better make it three."

Tara and Fiona are in the corner testing the video equipment, which we've whittled down from five cameras to just two, which Roger and Tara will have to hold manually since Fiona is to be the star of the show and Alex has bailed on us.

In between coordinating the zombie costumes with the Drama Department, Roger bookmarks the live feed sites he plans on uploading the content to as it happens, using a laptop he keeps across his ample lap.

I'm busy watching the screen fill up with response codes and time zones as he coordinates this very technical part of the effort.

When I finally look away from the screen and find him looking at me.

Without flinching he asks, conversationally, "So, how does one become a... zombie?"

I sigh.

"Roger..." I groan playfully, but his chubby, almost serene face is deadly serious. "Seriously, dude, it's not like in the movies, okay. You're not going to want to recreate this with your little friends after this is all..."

"I'm not that guy," he says quietly, but seriously.

This close, his eyes are a washed out, friendly hazel.

His ruddy, pink cheeks are covered with stubble the same color as his light brown hair.

I can tell, beneath the extra 100-pounds or so, there is a masculinity very few people ever see, or would even suspect.

"I'm not that guy you think I am," he insists, quietly but insistently. "I mean, sure, the computers, the games, the movies, the Star Wars club, yeah, sure, it's fine to pass the time but I'm interested in this in a serious way, Lucy. I mean, I'm seriously interested, like Tara said, in a historical, in a scientific way. Listen, I'm the last guy who wants to be a zombie. I enjoy French fries too much, and breathing, and... warmth."

He smiles, to show no disrespect. “I just, I mean, I’ve seen a million zombie movies, every one ever made, in fact, and they never say anything. The zombies in them, I mean.”

“Except ‘brains,’ right?” I joke, making a harsh snorting noise that comes from staying away from humans too long; from being too excited to speak to one now.

At least, about this very personal topic.

“That, yeah,” he smiles.

And opens his mouth to say more, to ask more, but then closes it, and shuts his laptop cover, and sits back; preparing to listen, instead.

And because he’s worked so hard, and the plan seems to be coming together, and because we have time before we can actually implement it, I say, “We talk.”

And then I add, “To one another, anyway.”

“But you talk in class, right? You have to, to get a grade, to pass Mrs. Helmsmeyer’s Social Studies final oral report, right? You talk to humans.”

“We talk at humans,” I correct. “It’s just too dangerous to talk to humans, to get to know them, to interact. I mean, witness what happened with Alex. That was stupid; I let my guard down. I won’t be doing that again anytime soon.”

He shakes his head. “It just seems a waste, is all, going through eternity only talking to your own kind.”

I shrug. “Maybe, but... it’s easier that way.”

“You don’t break the ‘8 Unbreakable Zombie Laws’ that way,” he says, using a spooky movie announcer’s voice.

I smile and say, “You got it. But the laws aren’t in place for us; they’re in place for... you guys.”

He makes a quizzical face, his large eyes growing larger.

I say, “For instance, ‘Law # 6: Thou Shalt Not Date a Mortal.’ That’s so we don’t start dating some sweet guy, get all hot and heavy with him, give him a little love bite on the throat and - bam - instant zombie. So to—”

“Hold up, hold up, hold up,” he insists, sitting up, excited now, pink face now a red face, strong deep voice now an excited geek voice. “So you can turn humans into zombies? Just like vampires?”

“No, not just like vampires but, yes, I could bite you - right now - and, after you pass out for an hour or so, you’d wake up—”

“Just like you!” he says hopefully.

“Not quite, Roger. You’d be what we call a ‘zombie light,’ kind of like a half-zombie, at least until we got some brains into you.”

He frowns and jokes, “So I guess this means we won’t be hooking up after we put on our little show in the gym after school today?”

“That’s gross,” says Fiona from the other corner of the room before I have the chance to answer him myself.

“Hey,” says Roger defensively, “stranger things have happened.”

“No,” Fiona corrects, “it’s gross that she has to eat brains to stay alive.”

“ ‘She’ has a name,” Roger corrects back, his voice an octave lower, his eyes a shade darker.

“What?” I ask of Fiona, who has her arms crossed over her small chest. “You’ve never eaten a chicken liver? Never eaten a hot dog? Both are full of internal organs and, what’s a brain but an internal organ?”

“Yeah, but... I don’t eat liver raw. You eat like... like... an animal.”

“We’re all animals,” says Tara quietly, inching her chair away from Fiona as if to avoid guilt by association.

I stifle a smile and say, “Listen, Fiona, we can debate brains versus liver and animal versus human and human versus zombie all day long but, trust me, when the vampires come for you, and they will, there will be no debate. Talk about animals! Those jerks are stone cold killers and they will eat you up and suck you dry and not think twice about it. Ever.”

Tara shakes her head, small lips trembling in a big way. “I just, I... can’t believe it. I can’t believe there are really vampires; that there are really... zombies.”

“I’m sorry, Tara,” I tell her, trying on an uncomfortable smile as the stress of the day - about what’s still to come - finally settles on my shoulders like a hoodie made out of granite. “I

really am but, vampires and zombies do exist and now that you know about us, well, things have changed. For all of you.”

She opens her mouth to say something, to maybe ask something, and the door opens.

Immediately I tense, flying out of my seat, shoving Roger’s chair clear across the floor so that he and Fiona and Tara will be clustered; all the better to defend your lives, my dears.

Turning I see Ethan at the door, his arms full of food, his face a mask of concern.

Well, concern and something else.

He walks in quickly, shutting the door behind him and tossing the food down almost distastefully on an empty computer workstation.

As Roger quickly divvies it up and starts eating I pull Ethan to the side and say, “Where’s Dana?”

Ethan avoids my eyes and says in a way that manages to sound somewhat judgmental, “We’re not supposed to be seen together, remember?”

I swat away his weak excuse and say, “The cat’s out of the bag, Ethan, in case you hadn’t noticed?”

I use my hand to take in the whole room, as Roger and Tara and, of course Fiona, look back at him with absolutely no surprise in their eyes whatsoever.

“What, you told them?” he asks, stepping back from me, toward the door.

I watch his eyes change, watch them darken, and I know he’s turning the page on me, even as we speak.

That, like Dana, he’s distancing himself from me.

So when the time comes, when the Sentinels interrogate him - and they will - he can say, “It was all her, sir; it was all Lucy’s idea!”

It doesn’t sound like Ethan, at least, not the Ethan I know and could (secretly) love, but right about now it sure looks like the new Ethan; the self-protective Ethan.

So to salvage the situation, to bring it into perspective for him, to try to show him I’m not selling him - or Dana or any of us - out I say, “Ethan, they’re helping us. We’ve got it all



planned out, a way to make it so the whole school, the whole town, thinks this was one big joke and make it so the Sentinels—”

“What plan, Lucy? You can’t just plan something without telling Dana and I about it. You can’t just tell civilians about us, trusting them to keep our secret. We’re a team, Lucy, and we work like a team. Your allegiance is to us, always, forever, not... them.”

The way he says “them” it’s like humans are cockroaches; bugs to be squashed under foot.

I’m not the only one who senses it.

Looking around the AV Club I can literally see the faces of these kids change; from high expectations of meeting another new zombie (one like me) to dread, to fear (like they’ve suddenly tuned into a zombie movie on late night TV they can’t turn off).

They’re not alone.

I take a step back, involuntarily, as if a quick blast from a hot furnace has leapt out too far and threatened to singe me.

“I k-k-know, Ethan,” I stammer, unused to this kind of stubbornness, “and... I’m sorry, really but it was an emergency. But if you just listen, if you can just trust me until after school, we’ll have this all fixed. It’s my fault Fiona touched me, it’s my fault she figured it out, that she put two and two together, I just want to make it right.”

Ethan’s eyes are empty; empty of anything we may have ever felt about each other, for each other, with each other.

The friend he’s been, the constant companion, the savior, the buddy, I see all that receding with the grimace that curls across the bottom of his admittedly scary face.

“It’s too late for diplomacy, Lucy; it’s too late for your little human geeks to ‘save the day’ with whatever hare-brained scheme you four have cooked up while you’ve been hiding out here all day—”

\* \* \* \* \*

Chapter 17

“Hiding out?” I snap, inching toward him to make this a more private affair. “Hiding out? Ethan, I’m in here trying to save your butt, and Dana’s butt and, yes, my butt, too! But I can’t do it alone, these ‘humans’ are helping us, Ethan. They know the risks; they’re ready to help. I’m not hiding from anything, Ethan; neither are they. We’re doing something, something BIG here, in this room, that’s going to help save us all, even Fiona!”

He ignores me, ignores my pleas, ignores my rationale and continues as if I haven’t said anything at all, “Forget Fiona, forget these... these... clowns. I need you out here, with us. Piper and Bianca and the rest of the vampires aren’t going to wait until after school to make a move on us. You know that, Lucy.”

His chest moves forward and back with the exertion of his tough talk, and he looks again at the three humans scattered around the room.

“And as far as trusting your new ‘friends,’ Lucy, don’t; you can’t. One of them’s already turned on you, and don’t think Piper and Bianca weren’t waiting for him with open arms, either.”

“Who?” I ask, not even thinking, not even guessing, not even realizing who it could be, who it must be, who it almost certainly has to be.

“Alex,” whispers Tara from her corner of the room, and she says it so quietly, so reverently, it’s like she can’t believe it, either.

She looks at Ethan, despite her obvious fear, and dread, and confusion, and sadness she looks at Ethan and says, “Alex sold us out, didn’t he?”

Ethan cocks his head, like looking at a lab specimen under glass and says, “Yeah, he did. So whatever little plans you have, whatever little scheme you’re running, forget about it. Lucy, we need you out here, with US, now; right now.”

I look at the seriousness in his eyes and know he’s right; know his plan is right... for US.

Yes, we could fight off the vampires at Barracuda Bay right now; yes if we banded together - Ethan, Dana and I - we could fight our way out of this and escape to live another day; another decade; another century.

But it’s not just about us anymore; there’s a room full of kids in here whose days are numbered if I leave them alone for one tiny second.

Ethan knows this; he’s not stupid.

And he's not usually selfish, either; but for whatever reason, he's more interested in saving his own butt right now than these shivering, quivering kids.

And it's not like I'm any big hero, either; trust me.

I'd love nothing more than to cut bait and run right now, just like Ethan.

But now that I know these kids, now that I've sat with them, talked to them, I just can't do that anymore.

Even if it means turning my back on Ethan, and Dana; even if it means the wrath of the Sentinels and, yes, even the Council of Elders.

"No, Ethan, I can't... I can't do that. Not now; not... anymore."

"It's not a request, Lucy."

He holds up his cell phone, his old school flip phone and says, "The Sentinels have been in touch. They're on their way. They say," he looks now to the humans, the Normals, with one last trace of humanity of his own and adds, more quietly, as if they might not hear in this little tiny room with his deep, commanding voice, "the Sentinels say if you hand over the humans, all of them, everyone who knows, they'll let us go. They'll relocate us, forgive us, no matter how many laws we've broken. No matter how many laws you've broken, Lucy. That's a good deal; that's a fair deal."

"No, Ethan, it's not fair. Not to me, not to you, not to us, and certainly not for them."

He shakes his head, inching closer to me.

I stand my ground, hands busy in my pocket, where I've been scratching the black protective coating off of one of Roger's spare video cables ever since Ethan walked in.

(Luckily, he's too busy being Mr. Self-Righteous to notice.)

"Look around you," he says. "You're not like them; you're like us. When are you going to get that through your head, Lucy? You're dead; you're not living. You can't date human boys, you can't have human girlfriends. It's me, it's Dana and it's you. There's no room for Alex in your life, Lucy."

I start, my eyes big, but he doesn't even pause long enough to let me defend myself.

"Yeah," he sneers, "don't look so shocked, okay? I knew, Dana knew; we all knew. Piper, Bianca, every immortal in this school knew you were getting ready to break about a dozen undead laws and start macking on Alex as a full-time hobby. We get that. But that's over

now, Lucy; in more ways than one. But we're not. Don't you see? You and me and Dana, we can still stay together, the Sentinels promised. The Three Musketeers, just like the last three years. Think about what you're doing, Lucy. Think about what you're throwing away by aligning yourself with these, these—"

"They'll never let you live," says Roger authoritatively from his desk chair.

His voice has surprisingly grown firm, almost... masculine; almost... commanding.

Ethan makes a dismissive "tssking" sound with his tongue and the roof of his mouth, like you would when someone's just taken your parking space at the mall.

"What do you know, Hungry, Hungry Hippo?" he growls.

"It's simple arithmetic," Roger explains patiently, as if he's talking to one of his fellow Star Wars geeks and not a walking dead person who could pop his head open with two fingers. "We know too much, sure, I get that; we're goners. But so are you. You've screwed up, broken a bunch of laws, they'll never let you live. They're just telling you that to get you to do what they want."

Ethan looks him up and down with a mocking glance and says, "You a big expert on the Sentinels now, lard butt?"

"Hey!" I shout, tempted to unleash my pocket protector a tad too early.

Roger just chuckles. "I've been called worse, Lucy, trust me. And, Ethan, no, I don't know the first thing about Sentinels and I'm just learning about zombies but I do know that this is Scary Movie 101. You're toast, too. The Sentinels will get here, waste us, or kidnap us, or eat us, whatever it is they do, and they'll turn to you and say, 'Good job, Ethan; we're so grateful. Now we just need to debrief you back at headquarters before we give you your new reassignment. Please get in the back of this big, scary car and don't mind those big, lethal zombie ninjas hiding on the floorboards.' Only, there is no reassignment, Ethan; there is no trip back to headquarters for you. Or Dana, and certainly not for Lucy here. They'll find the nearest graveyard and bury you six feet deep - again - and no one or nothing will ever hear from you again—"

I'm so impressed with Roger's soliloquy, with his logic, that I'm not prepared when Ethan has had enough and launches himself at Roger with lightning speed.

At least, lightning speed for a zombie.

Roger still manages to get up from his chair - at least, halfway - but Ethan slams him back down in it, hard, to the point where one of the chair legs snaps and the chair itself lists to the right.

Roger gasps as Ethan chokes off his air supply with those big, pale hands, but the big guy isn't going out without a fight.

Ethan is stronger, stronger by far than any human, big or small, but Roger has momentum on his side, tipping the chair to the right and slamming Ethan into the ground with all 350-plus pounds of his soft, warm, flabby human weight landing on him belly first.

Ethan growls a pure zombie growl and I know what's coming next.

As Ethan opens his mouth, bares his teeth and lashes out at Roger's throat I strip the last of the protective coating off the copper wire in my pocket, raise it up in my hand and am about to jam it into Ethan's neck when Fiona says, "Ethan, look out!"

He whips around, arms flailing, but it's too late; I jam the copper into his shoulder blade and out he goes, as if I'd just given him three vials full of horse tranquilizer all at the same time.

I release my grip on the inch or two of protective rubber coating that's stopped me from getting shocked myself and the wire drops to the ground.

Roger grunts, rolls Ethan off of him and stands up abruptly.

"Fiona!" I snap. "Why'd you do that? We're supposed to be on the same team!"

She shrugs.

"I guess I still just don't like you very much. No, I shouldn't say that. I do like you, Lucy; I always have. I just don't... trust... you."

"Trust her?" Roger squeaks, rubbing his bruised Adam's apple. "You trust the guy who's choking me out on the floor versus the girl who's trying to save your life?"

"For the four zillionth time, Roger, she's not a girl!" Fiona says, completely missing the point; again.

I sigh, exasperated, and rustle up the humans as we head for the door.

"How long will he stay out like that?" asks Tara, reaching for the wire on the floor without comment.

She grips it from the rubber end and slips it into her pocket.

I smile, thinking maybe, just maybe, there's hope for us yet.

“Not long enough,” I spit, grabbing Roger’s laptop and Ethan’s cell phone. “Roger, Tara, grab whatever you need for our little after school project. Wherever Ethan is, Dana’s not far behind, and I can’t spend time fighting off my own kind and an Afterlife Armageddon. We’ve got to go; now!”

“But Ethan said,” protests Fiona as I reach for another spare cord and yank her arms behind her back, tying them as tightly as I can with it. “Ouch!”

“Ethan said,” I snort, mimicking her like an immature fifth grader on the playground; and loving every minute of it. “Ethan said. Roger’s right, Fiona; we’re all dead unless we stick to the plan and turn this around somehow. Once the cameras are on, once there are a hundred civilians involved, all dressed like zombies, the Sentinels won’t have a choice. They’ll have to turn around and head home. They’re not going to waste hundreds of kids, live, on national TV, trust me.”

I’m impatient with them now, watching Roger flail lazily for his camera equipment, shoving it listlessly into a padded black backpack.

“Got it all?” I shout, and still - with all the commotion - the faceless teacher doesn’t move.

Roger nods, zips up and turns around, his face ghostly pale, a speck of blood on his collar.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 18

“Roger?” asks Tara, concerned.

“Roger,” I shout her down, even more concerned; not just for him, but for all of us. “Get over here right now. We’ve got to go.”

“Go where?” asks Fiona, struggling against her bonds.

I smack the top of her head, gently - okay, gently for a zombie - until she stops and I say, “It’s not safe here for us now. Ethan knows where I’ve been hiding, I told him when I texted Roger’s stupid lunch order. No doubt Dana knows as well and—”

“Don’t forget your boyfriend Alex,” Roger says, his voice soft and croaking, the backpack looking heavy on his slumped shoulders.

“Shoot, Alex! I forgot. That means Piper and Bianca know, too. Let’s go, you guys, follow me.”

Fiona looks cagey and, just before I open the door asks, “Where are we going, I mean, in case we get broken up?”

I smack her on the forehead again and say, “We’re NOT going to get broken up, Fiona. Sorry.”

I open the door a crack, knowing I don’t have long before Roger’s down for the count.

I check my watch; 10 minutes before the next bell rings.

I look back inside, just to check Roger’s temperature and see his foil wrappings from lunch all over the floor.

Suddenly I know the place - the only place - it’ll be safe to go this time of day.

“Come on,” I say, tugging on one of Roger’s backpack straps to get him out of the tiny room. “Let’s go.”

The group falls in, Roger at my side, Fiona out in front, my hands securely on the chord binding hers.

I look at Tara, struggling with a camera bag of her own and say, “Tara, if Roger falls, you’ve got to carry his pack, okay?”

She looks back bravely at me, all five feet and 80 pounds of her, and says, “You got it!”

Fiona snorts and I yank her hands back and up.

She screams and I yank the scarf belt from around her waist and gag her.

The halls are deserted, but not for long.

We pass open doorways, and closed doors with windows in the middle, and each one is a recipe for disaster.

As we approach the commons I see Dean Winters patrolling his grounds; we’ve just missed him, but we’re still too close for comfort.

Fiona could still make a break for it and catch him before I can stop her, or Tara could surprise me and scream out his name.

Neither happens, but Dean Winters takes so long checking open lockers and picking up folded notes from the commons floor that Roger is in danger of passing out before we make it to our final destination.

I think he's almost gone when he notices a piece of gum on the wall.

As if it's a matter of national security, he takes out one of his keys and starts slowly, very slowly, very painstakingly, scrubbing it off.

I grimace and see Roger's eyes fluttering by my side; I can practically hear Tara's heartbeat as she breathes heavily on my shoulder.

"Come on, come on," I whisper-urge Dean Winters until, at last, he has gotten all the gum and tosses it in the nearest trash can.

He looks up, looks around and then quickly rounds the corner to D-wing and leaves the commons area wide open.

We cross it quickly, me shoving Fiona ahead and dragging Roger along all the way to the cafeteria.

"But lunch is over," Tara whispers behind me.

I say, "Exactly," shoving open the double doors.

Only; they don't open.

At least, not the easy way.

I look past the greasy windows in the double cafeteria doors to see if, this late in the afternoon anybody is still polishing tables or washing dishes but the entire room, tables, chairs, window, trash cans and all, is empty.

I look left, no Dean Winters.

I look right, no Dean Winters.

I yank on the door handle, hard, then harder, until it snaps and opens with a lunge.

At that very moment Roger gasps, burps... and passes out cold.



I look at the halls, look at the clock above the commons and know the bell is going to ring in about 30 seconds, releasing a flood of 1,000 kids into the commons and all over my plan.

Tara undoes his backpack, I grab Roger's feet and with seconds to spare drag him into the cafeteria.

I try to shut the door behind us but, with the way I've bent the handle broken it won't stay flush.

I curse, shove Roger all the way in - and then some - with my toes and yank Fiona's gag out of her mouth.

It is moist; no, it's wet!

I don't care; I can't care.

She starts screaming.

I don't care; I can't care.

I wrap the scarf around the outer handle, thread it through the bar, yank it back inside and tug the doors shut, tying a tight knot on our side of the door through the metal handles on our side.

It won't last long, but it will keep the doors flush enough so no one walking by will see them bent at an angle and try to investigate.

Only when I'm done, the bell has rung and I'm watching kids flood into the commons from the closed cafeteria doors do I notice Fiona has stopped screaming - and why; she is out cold, Tara rubbing her tiny little fist.

I quickly put two and two together, say to Tara, "Nice, but now you have to drag her" and together we take our two humans - well, one and a half humans - all the way across the shiny cafeteria floor, into the line where you hand your tray over when it's done and back, back into the kitchen.

The counters are gleaming, the ovens dark now for the day, the walk-in coolers old and cold.

I open the nearest one, shove some lettuce boxes and bags of onions from that day's shipment out of the way with my sneakers and toss Roger inside.

Tara gasps until I point to the walk-in cooler next to mine and say, "Her turn" pointing to Fiona.

Tara quickly follows suit, slamming the door shut and clapping her hands dramatically to wipe them off.

“Now what?” she asks.

I smile, perhaps the first time in three or four hours and say, “Now, Tara, we find ourselves some brains!”

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 19

“These?” she asks, holding up - with two hands - an industrial sized can of beef stew.

I shake my head.

“Look for something like potted meat, or meat spread. Look for words like ‘tripe,’ which is the cow’s stomach lining, or ‘offal,’ which is all the internal intestines, in the list of ingredients.”

We have to get Roger some brains, stat, or he’s going to be useless to us.

I know from personal, firsthand experience that, in a pinch - i.e. when the Sentinels are late shipping our latest brain delivery - that any kind of canned, potted, processed “junk meat” would work.

Not for long enough, like weeks, but there’s enough brains in there to get us by for a couple of days; and right now, all Roger needs is a couple of hours.

If we’re lucky.

That’s because, in a sordid little secret humans would get grossed out over but zombies frequently rejoice over, few modern processing plants waste an ounce of a slaughtered animal, meaning your average canned meats, even hot dogs, have plenty of liver, kidneys, spleen and, yes, even brain mixed in.

Not enough to substitute for the real stuff, the fresh stuff, but enough to get a brand new zombie through the first few day or two without wandering around like a complete and utter tool.

“Aha,” says Tara, rising up from a stack of huge cans in the pantry with one marked “potted meat paste product” held triumphantly in both hands.

“Perfect!” I shout, sticking two fingers into the top and peeling back the lid while Tara watches, wide-eyed.

“Groovy,” she says, at least until I use those same two fingers to scoop out a handful and shove it down my gullet, making smacking noises with my greasy, glistening tongue.

Instantly I feel the slight sizzle and charge of brain product found in the soft, pinkish meat spread product thing I’d just consumed.

It’s like when you go to plug in the Christmas tree lights in the dark on December 25th and your finger gets too close to the socket and you feel that not unpleasant surge pass just by your fingertip; yeah, like that, only... now imagine that surge passing through your whole body, stem to stern.

Nice, huh?

Welcome to my Afterlife.

“This’ll do,” I say. “Now, any luck finding that funnel?”

She hands over a white plastic funnel that looks recently cleaned, if you consider “recent” anytime in the last decade.

I shrug - no germs are going to hurt him now - and open up the first walk-in cooler.

As expected, Roger is just coming to.

Lying on the graceless refrigerator floor, one shoe squashing a head of lettuce and his hand resting in a half-frozen pile of last week’s chocolate pudding - please let that be last week’s chocolate pudding - his ironic T-shirt has rather un-ironically slipped up the crest of his belly, exposing an admirable gut that, over the next three weeks will literally fall away as his body converts the fat to hard, gritty, sinewy muscle.

(You’re welcome, Roger!)

He sits up as we approach, squinting into the light that bathes our backs and must make us look downright angelic to him.

That is, until I bend down, push his head back onto the floor, insert the semi-clean funnel into his mouth and, as directed, Tara spoons most of the giant, industrial-size can of potted meat paste product down his gullet.

He resists at first, like most “Fresh Meat,” i.e. brand new zombies, but once his body gets that first faint fizzle of food borne electricity he sits up and chows down.

He knocks the funnel away and soon Tara is spoon-feeding him as Roger licks greedily at the empty spoon.

I shove his hands away and say, “Enough, big boy; we don’t want you on overload!”

Then I take the rest of the industrial size can and scoop out what’s left for a little midweek pick-me-up.

Like Roger, I suck greedily at the spoon then, when the can is practically empty, abandon it for two probing fingers which latch onto each and every morsel of meat byproduct to be found inside.

When I’m done I wipe my fingers on Roger’s socks.

He sits up, burps and slurs, “Quit it.”

“Ah,” I smile. “You can already speak; I knew there was a reason your head was so big!”

He cocks his head and looks around and says, “Why aren’t I cold?”

I smile and say, “Trust me, Roger, you ARE cold; but I stuck you in here to help you get better adjusted. Do you think you’re ready to join us outside the cooler? Because pretty soon I think we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Roger follows me out of the cooler on wobbly legs, Tara following him with a critical eye.

I can't tell if she's scared of him, amused by him or simply curious as to see how Zombie Roger will compare to Nerd God Roger.

"What happened while I was out?" he asks greedily, as hungry for information as he was for brain byproduct back in the cooler.

"Not much," I admit. "We got you from there to here, that's about it."

Tara slides up onto a kitchen counter, her feet high above the clean tile floor and says, "Well, she's leaving out just a tad; like the way she used this—" and here she whips out the copper wire plus protective rubber handle and adds "and turned that dude Ethan's lights out."

Roger cocks his head and reaches instinctively for the pretty copper wire; just as instinctively, Tara yanks it back.

Both look at me, like frightened schoolchildren when the man from the zoo brings the pretty, but deadly, poisonous snake for a class visit.

I shake my head and say, "Careful with that, Tara. And Roger, don't even think of touching it."

"But why?" Tara asks as Roger examines it more closely with his new zombie eyes. "What does it do?"

"You know how vampires hate having stakes shoved through their hearts? Well, that's because the stake interrupts their life flow. Blood is what keeps vampires alive; energy is what keeps zombies alive. We eat brains because brains are full of electricity; that's all the brain is, really, just a big battery for your body. We don't need blood because our hearts don't work; we don't need air because our lungs don't work. We just need brains for the electric charge. And what does copper do, class?" I ask, leaning back against the same counter where Tara is sitting, her legs dangling.

"Conducts electricity?" offers Tara.

"Conducts electricity," says Roger, a tad more sure of himself.

"Right, so when you touch a zombie with copper, it short-circuits their whole electrical system. It can be any kind of copper; shiny copper wire, like the innards of that power cord, or copper tubing; heck, I've seen zombies forget and try to pay for a tube of maroon lipstick with a penny and zonk out right there at the makeup counter."

Tara smiles, holding the copper wire aloft like a magic wand and saying, "So if I were to touch either of you two with this right now, boom, you'd fall to the ground like Ethan did back in the AV Club?"

"Yeah," I say nervously, inching away from her, "so be careful."

Instead she smiles devilishly and says, "I like this; I'm going to keep this."

And that's exactly what she does.

Better yet, it gives me an idea.

"Roger, let's try something really quick. See that white fridge over there?" He looks, slowly - I'm going to have to remember he's not quite all there yet, at least for awhile - before nodding. "Can you walk over and turn it around for me?"

He looks back at me with wide eyes already going from a sweet shade of hazel to a dull but intense black.

"By myself?"

I nod and watch as he dutifully plods over to the dim white fridge by the shiny silver sink and grabs it by the side.

Hesitantly at first and then, as if it's on wheels, he kind of whips it around until the back is facing us.

He kind of stands next to it, smiling.

"Wow," he remarks. "That was really, really easy!"

Then, getting cocky, he turns it around again; and again.

"Roger," I say. "Roger!"

He's got the fridge halfway up off the floor when he finally registers and drops it, hard, on the tile floor.

"Sorry," he says.

I walk over and inspect the tubing running in tight coils all the way around the back of the thing.

He sees me looking and I stupidly say “Roger” while he’s looking at them and, eager to please, he reaches out to yank them loose and has barely touched them before he drops to the floor like a double-sack of extra large potatoes.

“Tara?” I ask, but she’s already at my side, stepping over Roger with a slight smile on her face and wedging two dull sneakers against the bottom of the fridge as she yanks, and yanks, and yanks until the copper coiling finally wrenches free in her hands.

I have her lay them down on the ground, away from where Roger is snoozing, and find a meat cleaver.

By the time Roger is sitting back up, rubbing his head and asking, “Hey, how’d that fridge get all the way out there?” I have hacked the coil loops up into five long strips, about the length of a sawed off shotgun each.

In a tool box under the sink I find a half-empty spool of thick, black duct tape and have Tara wind a two-foot strip along the bottom of each copper spike.

When she’s done, we each have two pretty lethal - at least temporarily - weapons.

I bend the duct tape portion of mine into short “u” shapes; they kind of look like the curved part of an umbrella, you know, where your hand goes.

Tara and Roger watch carefully and then he helps her, then himself, do the same.

“Hitch one to your belt loops,” I say, showing them, “and hide another in here somewhere... just in case. Roger, be careful to—” but by the time I try to warn him about holding it from the duct tape side, he has already grabbed the tip and, boom, down he goes - again!

Tara looks at him with equal parts amusement and alarm and asks, “How long is he going to be this... stupid?”

I snort, “Enjoy it while it lasts, Tara. There’s nothing worse than a know-it-all zombie.”

She smiles over her shoulder while hiding her extra copper dagger in the freezer.

I smile and, while her back is turned, smash a slatted wooden butcher’s block into bits.

“Whoa,” she says, turning around with one hand over her heart. “Warn somebody next time, will ya?”

I shrug and start whittling down thigh-bone length boards into sharp, lethal steaks.

She joins me, sitting close by my side and asks, “I thought you said only copper could hurt a zombie?”

“This isn’t for the zombies, Tara,” I say soberly, watching Roger’s sneaker twitch back to life from across the room. “This is for the vampires.”

“Oh,” she whispers, dread filling her gentle, tiny face. “I almost forgot about them.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 21

Speak of the devil.

“Alex,” she says, stake in hand, but before she can dash up to meet him I yank her back - hard - on her collar and she literally sits back down; hard.

“Ouch!” she says, a sincerely wounded look in her dewy brown eyes, but I shush her with a sincere case of zombie eyes and either she trusts me enough to go with it or is simply scared enough to pretend.

Either way I stand and, with the back of one foot, shove her back, back, back across the slick, white tile floor of the kitchen until she and Roger are clumped together, rubbing their heads, like a pair of human bowling pins after one dazzling pickup spare.

I have a stake in one belt loop, my copper dagger in the other as I swing through the kitchen doors and out into the cafeteria proper.

It’s like a bad high school Drama class version of the Gunfight at the OK Corral, starring zombies.

Well, starring one zombie and whatever Alex currently is (and I have my sneaking suspicions I already know the answer to that one).

For his part, Alex is swaggering across the clean linoleum floor, his hands looping lazily around each end of the black and white scarf I’d used to keep the door locked.



(Well, so much for that.)

“Hey Lucy,” he says seductively, or at least his version of what he thinks must be seductively, playfully stretching my name out to way too many syllables for my taste.

Now?

Now he chooses to come on to me?

After what Piper has (obviously) done to him?

Already I can see the slugs working through his veins, the twin sets of fangs teasing his soft red lips apart and the yellowness blazing out of his once incredibly sincere green eyes.

His curls seem less curly now, more masculine, his once lanky frame now purposeful and sleek, like in addition to opening up his veins and sucking his blood Piper has returned the favor with a double injection of Grade-A testosterone.

“Keep away, Alex,” I say and he looks... surprised.

I don't know if it's simply because Piper didn't tell him I'd be able to see beneath his skin once he turned completely (although that seems pretty unlikely), or because he thought I'd still have a baby crush on him once he joined the ranks of the Living Dead.

He keeps walking, ignoring me, just like a vampire would.

“Now hold on,” he says, streaming forward instead of keeping back, his hands up, palms out, their flat white skin like a hand-sized canvas on which all I see are a hundred tiny little slugs squirming around. “I thought you'd be happy I came crawling back.”

“Slithering is more like it,” I hiss - hiss, I tell you - as I slip the freshly-sharpened wooden stake from my belt loop and hold it menacingly at my side.

“What?” he asks incredulously, eyeing the sharp stake with a wet tongue across his dry lips. “Is that... for... moi?”

And then he puts his hands on his chest in the universal, not to mention totally icky, “for moi” gesture and even if he hadn't just been made into a vampire I would have lost all kinds of respect for him right there.

(Although I have to admit, I still might have gone to the Fall Formal with him. Might; just... maybe. I don't know; get back to me on that one.)

“You and whoever else you brought as backup,” I spit, halfway across the unbelievably large cafeteria by now, fully expecting Piper and Bianca and, heck, maybe even Ethan and Dana to show up any minute and pound, tear, bite and grind me into a living dead pulp.

He looks around the empty cafeteria and says, “I didn’t bring anybody, Lucy. Why would I? I’m the good guy, remember? I’m here to help!”

His voice is the same, but I can’t help hearing the slight... liquid... sound each word makes as it slithers past his rapidly growing fangs.

It’s not quite wet; that’s not quite the word.

It’s not like a lisp, so much, as a... slither.

I’m not sure if I can hear it because that’s how it actually sounds, or just seeing the words ooze past his fang-puffy lips makes me think they’d sound that way but, either way, gross.

Just... gross.

“You had your chance, Alex,” I say with real resignation in my voice because, let’s face it, two periods ago this guy was the bomb. “And you blew it.”

Finally he stops, just shy of the middle of the room.

All around us are the tables and chairs we’ve sat in for three long years.

Rows and rows of them; dozens of tables, hundreds of chairs.

I’ve never been an innocent, not with my history, but I look at those rows and rows of tables, imagine them filled with hundreds of living, breathing kids and think back to how much simpler life was before the powers that be at Barracuda Bay decided to upgrade the C-wing girls bathroom paper towel dispensers.

Alex isn’t thinking along those terms.

I can see behind his glowing yellow eyes that he’s up to something; that he’s playing me, one way or the other.

As if on cue his still incredibly handsome face shifts from a beautiful mask of supreme confidence to just another mask - though equally beautiful - of extreme apology.

“I know I blew it, Lucy,” he says, not looking at me; not daring to look me in the eye. “I’m... sorry.”

And now the word “sorry” actually sounds painful coming from his lips, like it’s killing him to say it.

“No you’re not,” I say, taking a step forward so that I’m in striking range. “You’re not sorry at all.”

This close I can almost hear the blood slugs traveling beneath his skin; it’s like standing next to a human beehive.

I am tense and flexed because, while it doesn’t happen every day, to fight a vampire is to fight rage up close and even for someone who can’t technically die it’s never quite fun (and far from safe).

I look at what remains of the humanity in him, the purposeful tear in his faded blue jeans, the peace sign some (other) girl drew on his battered sneakers, his stubby fingernails, the faded rugby shirt and it makes me sad that he’s gone.

That the Alex I knew, that his parents knew, that his friends and buddies and nephews and grandparents and neighbors knew is gone; gone forever.

But that’s just it: this is meat talking to me right here, this is just fangs with a body, really; nothing more, nothing less.

The Alex I knew, the sweet, curly-haired kid who would whisper in my ear in Chorus and drive me all kinds of crazy, who would text silly messages all period long, who would forget I was there and stare dreamily out the window, thinking of something - or someone - else is little more than a memory now.

Alex Foster was gone the minute he stormed out of the AV Club.

Was it my fault he left so angrily?

Was it my fault his only recourse was to join the other side, to be seduced by Piper and her beauty, her wiles, her... fangs?

After all, I was the one he was disgusted with.

I was the one he thought had lied to him.

If he had stayed in that room, if I could have had, I dunno, five short minutes to explain my side of the story, maybe the old Alex would still be here.

But the new Alex isn't having it, and I can't let the sweet, innocent, playful boy he used to be lure me into being tricked by the thuggish, predatory and very, very dangerous vampire that he is right now.

As if to show me just how dangerous he thinks he is, Alex shrugs bluntly, looks up, smiles and kind of snaps open his mouth, kind of like a human Pez dispenser, to push his shiny new fangs forward.

It doesn't look entirely natural.

Don't get me wrong; if I was mortal I'd be staining the cafeteria tiles yellow right about now but I know he's only as much a vampire as Roger is a zombie and, frankly, the move just looks... lame.

"Boring," I say, careful to stifle a fake yawn with my very real stake. "That all you got?"

He shrugs, looks uncertain and, for one moment - for just one stinkin' moment - I actually believe he's come all by himself.

"Yup," he says, then gives it away by glancing, ever-so-briefly, up; up toward the ceiling tiles.

And that's when I know; when I know that, as goofy as Alex's attempts to seduce, trick or frankly crack me the heck up have been, he's succeeded in stalling for time, he's lured me into a place I should have never gone in the first place and I know I have to snap back; snap back and RUN!

I back up frantically, sneakers squeaking on the clean cafeteria floor, just as the shower of off-white tiling and (probably) asbestos rains down as Piper and Bianca burst from the ceiling.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 22

They fall on whisper-soft feet, landing gracefully two steps in front of Alex; one just to his left, one just to his right.

In other words, right where I would have been standing if he hadn't given it away with those yellow-blue eyes of his.

"How'd you find me?" I ask, creeping back toward the kitchen.

Piper waves a black-veined hand in front of her flaring nostrils and says, "I'd know that putrefying flesh smell anywhere!"

Roger.

I hadn't wanted to hurt his feelings but, the real reason I'd tossed him in the cooler was to slow the process of decomposition which, unfortunately, is a new zombie's calling card for the first 24- to 72-hours of his or her existence.

(Hey, we don't call 'em "Fresh Meat" for nothing.)

But now that he is up and around, well, there's no denying Roger has a bad case of zombie-stink-itis.

I'm a few feet ahead of them, just in front of the door that separates the cafeteria proper from the actual kitchen.

Piper and Bianca are watching me carefully, but haven't moved an inch.

Meanwhile Alex is more than happy to stay in the background, taking their lead.

I blink and dive through the door, slamming it shut with my back to it and screaming, "Roger! Fridge! Here! NOW!"

Roger has ripped open the empty can of meat processed byproduct whatever and is literally licking the insides clean when he hears my orders, drops it on the spot and literally grabs the freezer side of the fridge and tosses it in my direction.

It lands with a tile-crunching thud against the door, jamming it shut just as I hear the scraping of Piper and Bianca's claws on the other side.

"Tara," I say as Roger shuffles over. "Run to the walk-in cooler where I've got Fiona and hide there."

She frowns and lifts her stake from her belt.

“But I have a stake?” she says, and if there weren’t vampires threatening to break through the flimsy wooden door at any moment I would have laughed to hear her pitiful voice with that pitiful stake.

“I know, honey, but those are some hungry fierce bloodsuckers out there, honey, and I’m going to need you later, remember? So take your backpack, get in that walk-in and don’t come out until I come to get you, okay?”

She nods, grabs the backpack and an apron to wrap around herself to stay warm and disappears inside the walk-in.

I vaguely hear Fiona complaining but Tara silences her with a quick and forceful, “Shut up, Fiona!”

I smile on instinct but it never quite reaches my eyes.

I turn to Roger and say, “How do you feel?”

“Like I’ve got the world’s worst hangover,” he admits.

I smile.

“Good,” I say, my voice shaking from where the vampires are trying to get in just the other side of the door. “That means your dead body’s purging the toxins from your live body.”

He pats his ample belly and says, “That could take awhile.”

I hook a thumb over my shoulder and say, “Not if these two have anything to say about it.”

His face turns grim and he says, “What should I do?”

I look at his face, already losing some of its puffiness as the Z-disease begins to turn soft, puffy fat into hard, tough, sinewy muscle.

I see the joystick on his shirt, potted meat stains obliterating half of it and say, “Think of every Gameboy zombie you’ve ever killed and—”

“Xbox,” he says, and he’s so serious.

“What?” I say.

“Gameboy is, like, for nerds. I use the X—”

I smack him square in the forehead and say, “In about two minutes those vampires are going to find a way in here. I don’t want to still be arguing about game consoles by then, okay? The point is, pretend Piper and Bianca and, yes, even Alex are nothing more than—”

“Alex?” he asks, his voice falling, his eyes widening. “They already... turned... Alex?”

I shake my head, fighting off my impatience, and try to put myself in his size-12, double-wide sneakers.

This morning he was just another lard butt gamer with a cup holder full of Mountain Dew on the way to school for another day of lounging around the AV Club room and talking Star Wars versus Star Trek with Alex, Fiona and Tara and now he’s a zombie and Alex is a vampire.

I get that, really I do, but he’s going to be just plain dead before he gets a chance to be the Living Dead if we sit here talking about life, the universe and everything all day.

“I know, Roger, I’m sorry, but stay with me here... the vampires?”

“Okay, okay,” he says, finally slipping a stake from his belt loop and holding it just like you should.

“In the heart?” he asks.

I nod.

“But listen, Roger, that’s just the kill shot. It’s going to be harder than you think to sink that puny little stake in Piper’s rib cage. Remember, she’s been a vampire a lot longer than you’ve been a zombie, so... but the one thing you have on your side is your size. Zombies aren’t delicate. We’re not limber or graceful but a guy like you can freight train it all over those bony broads, right? So smash, grab, pull, yank, tear, chew, whatever; they can’t hurt you.”

“Really?”

“Zombies don’t feel pain, Roger; that’s just one of our few tiny little perks. Already your pain receptors are fried, so don’t be afraid of claws or fangs or fists or dirty Mean Girl looks, okay? And whatever you do, don’t think twice about hitting a girl!”

He smiles conspiratorially, just before Piper finally breaks through the door and literally yanks him through.

Looking at the Roger size hole he’s left behind, I see the stake clattering to the floor just outside the door.

Great; so this is going well...

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 23

I leap through the hole and find Piper and Bianca tearing Roger a new one, literally clawing at his elbows and arms as he flails his arm in a vain effort to get away.

I rush to his aide but just before I do he makes a huge growling lunge and stands, knocking both girls from his side.

They scramble on the floor tiles, their nails sharp like claws and clattering across the floor like lobsters, fighting for purchase.

“Bianca!” I shout to Roger as she finally stands.

I turn my attention to Piper and watch as she rises from the floor as if on strings, her elbows bent and pointing toward the ceiling, her knees bent and pointing in my direction.

Vampires can’t fly, exactly, but they sure are graceful and seem to defy the laws of nature from time-to-time; this is one of those times.

She darts at me, building momentum along the way; but momentum is good.

I dodge just as she nears, pivoting on my left and slamming my right foot down as I grab her by the backpack purse and sling her across the room.

She lands in a heap of cafeteria chairs and I’m almost there by the time she clatters to her feet, just close enough to launch myself at her.

Her shoulder is softer than I’d imagine, but it sure feels hard when we both hit the ground.

I hear a grunt and then two piping hot lungs full of stank vampire breath bathe me in their putrid putridness full of putridity.

The smell is so disgusting I slam my fists into her chest just to stop it.

She grunts once more and shoves back, toppling me to the floor where she pins me, her fangs glistening with spit, hot, sizzling spit that drops off each fang and spills onto my clothes.



It's dank and fiery, like her breath, and I shake against the floor beneath her.

She laughs, her mouth open, her fangs wide, but she's careful not to bite me because we both know a zombie who's been bitten by a vampire is twice as powerful as a mere zombie or vampire alone, and the last thing she wants is that kind of competition.

Still, she uses her sharp nails to stab me, jab me, and although I can't feel pain I don't want to spend eternity with gaping holes in my skin so I get traction with my sneaker bottoms, lift her up, up until I buck like a bronco and topple her right onto her head.

I sneak a look at Roger as I'm getting up and see him cornered by Bianca and Alex, but he's somehow broken a cafeteria table in half and is using the sharp, jagged edges to hold them off like a giant shield.

(Nice one!)

I turn back to Piper and she is gone, if only for the briefest of moments.

I hear the whooshing against her skin and look up, just in time to find the bottom of her foot planted against my forehead.

I go sailing across the room, lose my stake and am still scrambling for it when she breaks a cafeteria chair over my skull.

She's left holding the plastic part of the chair and I reach for the metal legs, finding myself with one in each hand as I lift up to one knee, driving the first under her chin where it pierces flesh and she gushes blood, hot and sticky all over my arm.

With the other I aim for the other side of her throat but there is so much blood I slip just as I'm making another plunge; it ends up piercing her side instead.

She hisses hard enough to just about break my ear drums and slithers away while I race for my stake.

But she is cagey enough to climb, climb the walls, bleeding everywhere, the walls looking like crime scenes, the tables at her feet not much better.

While she's catching her breath I race to Roger, swatting at first Alex then Bianca with my converted chair leg nun chucks; they squeal and hiss and allow me to pass.

I give him one chair leg and he tosses the table, literally, halfway across the room.

I watch it sail and think, "I'm glad he's on our side."

He doesn't watch it sail; he quickly rushes from our safe protective circle to join the fray, which now includes Piper.

Together the vampires close ranks, with Alex in the middle looking equal parts menacing and amused; it's like he can't quite grasp this is life and death now.

I smack him on the side of the face with a chair leg and that wakes him up; he hisses and hits back but Bianca shoves him aside.

Roger plows into her with his considerable weight and brings her to the floor, where I quickly trade out metal for wood and plunge the stake dead center into her chest.

The flash of sulfur fumes and ash and light knock both Roger and I onto our feet as Piper and Alex cower to the sides.

I've seen that happen before with vampires; it's like they can't stand the literal heat coming from their fallen comrade's body.

I use the time, the ash, the soot, the smoke and flames to drag Roger through the broken door to the kitchen and onto the other side, where I yank open the walk-in cooler door and yank Tara and Fiona out, one by one.

Fiona says, "What's that smell?"

I look at Roger and say, "Sorry, sleepyhead, I just wasted a vampire; get used to it!"

I crowd them behind me, behind me and Roger, as we stand facing the gaping hole in the kitchen door.

On the other side Piper is collecting Bianca's ashes into Alex's backpack, shoving scorched bone and a couple fangs deep down.

Roger says, "What are they doing?"

I say, "Hiding the evidence. We still have a couple periods before the big showdown and if some poor janitor walks into the cafeteria and finds a burned body, well, that's it; game over!"

Piper ignores me to literally wipe the floor tiles clean with her hands while Alex spreads Bianca dust far and wide.

They even straighten some chairs and Piper sends Alex to wash her blood off the walls.

As she dabs at her throat with a hand wipe from her purse I notice the wound has already healed.

“They can really do that?” asks Roger, mouth agape from next to me in the doorway hole.

I nod my head and say, as if to myself, “I really, really hate vampires.”

He snorts and Piper hears him, smiling as she flips up her collar to cover a blood stain she can’t get off.

As Alex finishes with the wall and saunters over, backpack full of vampire ashes clinging to him like a wet sack of potatoes, Piper eyes our little ragtag team of zombies and humans and says, to me, “Not bad, Lucy. I’ll miss Bianca, of course, but the good news is I’ve got Alex here to take her place.”

She slaps Alex on the back, hard, in a not-so-friendly way and Fiona, who’s been MIA in the freezer this whole time asks, “Alex?”

He looks at her brazenly for a second and then, sensing her utter disappointment, looks next at the ground.

Just then the bell for 6th period rings and it’s like a wake-up call; we’re still in school.

We have just trashed the cafeteria kitchen, the entire cafeteria and, no matter how much blood they’ve wiped off the walls they couldn’t get rid of the body-sized singe burns on the floor.

I shake my head and say, “Run along to class now, Piper. You’ve got a rep to protect, after all.”

“Unlike you zombies, of course, who I dare say nobody’s missed all day.”

She takes great pride in that fact.

I frown and say, “Well, that’s probably because Dana and Ethan are still representing in class...” not bothering to think before I speak.

After all, I don’t know where Dana is, what Ethan’s been doing; and suddenly Piper knows this, too.

Her face beams, her fangs practically glisten as she says, “Oh, didn’t you hear? Your little zombie friends have been MIA all day, too. I guess you three aren’t getting along anymore, what with you having all new... friends.”

She gives the motley crew behind me a withering glance and says, “I do hope you zombies can make up before school lets out for the day. You’re going to need all the help you can get when the Marauders get here.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 24

“Marauders?” asks Fiona, who’s so out of the loop I’ve almost forgotten she’s the reason we’re in this mess in the first place.

We’re in the sunlight now, early afternoon shifting to late as we creep along the back wall behind the cafeteria and sneak, single file, toward the back gym door.

There are no more PE classes for the day, so we’ll have the whole girls’ locker room to ourselves until the big finale.

I stop just shy of the gym door, look out upon the empty soccer field just beyond and sense no one in the offing.

I’m in no hurry to be stuck in the locker room with Roger and his fresh-zombie stench for the next two periods, so I linger outside for a moment and explain, “Listen, Fiona, not to name names but thanks to a certain someone - namely, you - the cat is out of the bag for the Living Dead here at Barracuda Bay. Your little column this morning set in motion a cataclysmic chain of events that is just now starting to pile up on me.”

“Like what?” asks Fiona, clearly clueless.

“Like what?” I ask. “Like what? Like, try, my best friends in the world - my ONLY friends in the world—”

“Until now,” corrects Tara.

“Until now,” I manage a smile, “my only two friends in the world - until now - are no longer speaking to me, the guy I used to have a major crush on for, like, three years and who I now wish I had made a move on THREE YEARS AGO is now a vampire, Roger here is now a zombie and—”

Fiona barks out a laugh from her crinkly, snarky face. “Wait, what? Backup: Roger is a zombie? Get out of town. Although, wait... that would explain that smell that’s been following us all the way from the cafeteria. At first I just thought one of the garbage disposals had backed up, but then why would I still be smelling it 20 paces from the cafeteria, right?”

Far from being embarrassed, Roger has chosen to embrace his newfound Living Dead status - and Fiona as well.

“Love it, Fiona!” cries Roger, sucking her into his big pale arms and smearing her face all over his chest. “Love the rotting corpse smell of your old friend, Roger!”

“Uggghh,” she spits, finally pushing herself free of his large, ample moobs. “Roger, you stink worse than that time you quit bathing to protest the Lord of the Rings movie not getting an Oscar.”

I manage a smile, picturing Roger in a Hobbit T-shirt and simmering in his own geek funk for close to a week.

“Well, the good news is that he only has another few days to smell and then, well, he’ll be just like me.”

“Big improvement,” murmurs Fiona, just murmuringly enough for me to overhear.

“Fiona!” snaps Tara, seeming to rise two inches in height. “You take that back. Lucy has saved our butts more times than I can count this morning, and if it wasn’t for you she could have gone back to her old life and none of this would have happened in the first place.”

“Okay, okay,” says Fiona, then, to me, “You were explaining about Marauders?”

I look at the sun drifting through the blue Florida sky, at the palm fronds on the fringe of the soccer fields waving in the early autumn breeze, then look at Fiona’s frumpy mouth and say, “I can’t believe they aren’t here yet, but the Marauders are kind of like... vampire cops. Those creeps don’t have laws, per se, but they do have a kind of rule that says you can’t let humans know you’re a vampire unless you plan on sucking their blood, that kind of thing. Anyway, thanks to your little stunt this morning, the Marauders know something is up at our school, so they have to send a representative or two - or four, or six, or 600, we won’t know until they get here - to check it out, make sure everything’s kosher.”

Fiona shakes her head. “So, let me get this straight: you’re a zombie, Roger’s a zombie, Alex is a... vampire... so are Piper and Bianca and—”

“Not anymore,” says Roger, and I can’t tell if he’s smiling or blinking back a tear. “While you were in deep freeze, Ms. Vampire Slayer Lucy here turned Bianca into something that belongs in an ashtray.”

Fiona says, “Phew, okay, well, counting you and Roger and Ethan and Dana, then, that makes four zombies to two vampires, so... what are you babysitting us for? You should be kicking their butts and letting us go home early.”

Tara looks at Roger and Roger looks at me and I look at them and it’s like... seriously?

Seriously?

You can be an honor student, a Math-a-lete, walk on your hind legs, use opposable thumbs and still be this stupid?

“Fiona, what part of Zombie Versus Vampire Apocalypse do you not understand? The Sentinels are coming, the Marauders are coming and we can’t keep stopping to explain that to you. I’m trying to save your butt; the least you can do is keep up!”

And with that I’m done with Fiona.

I lurch forward, yank open the back door to the gym and in a flash I realize I’m already too late - the gym is crowded with zombies.

All sizes, all shapes, all—

“They’re here,” says Roger, lurching forward and suddenly it dawns on me that these aren’t real zombies, they aren’t Sentinels or, for that matter, Elders but Drama class zombies.

Roger streams forward to embrace his thespian buds but I yank him back, look him up and down and say, “Listen, Roger, remember; you’re not alive, okay? You’re one of us now; you can’t tell these kids you’re a real zombie.”

“What?” he looks crestfallen. “But... what’s the use of being a zombie if you can’t brag about it?”

I shrug. “Welcome to my world, pal. The point is, once this is over - if we’re so lucky - you get a ticket to a new life, to a new school, to new friends. You can’t do that if the whole world thinks you’re a zombie.”

He thinks about it for a minute, then kind of shrugs and says, “Okay, Lucy. I trust you. If you say lips shut then, that’s it; my lips are sealed.”

And he shambles off, straightening just before he greets a big group of dressed-up zombies.

I turn to Tara, who is already yanking out a camcorder and plugging in chords and checking out battery packs.

“You really think this will work?” I ask.

Tara says, “It’s got to, right?”

Fiona kind of lurks in the corner, picking through a pile of zombie clothes and says, “What am I supposed to do?”

I look at Roger back-slapping dressed up zombies, watch Tara checking for sound and light with her camcorder and spot the girls’ locker room door across the room.

“You follow me,” I snap.

For once, she does.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 25

Once Fiona and I are alone in the locker room, I walk to the nearest row of lockers and say, “Come here, Fiona.”

She sighs, but does as she’s told.

The minute she does, I literally grab her arm and toss her onto the top of the lockers.

“Hey!” she says. “What gives? This wasn’t part of the plan.”

I slide one of the wooden locker room benches over, use it as a stepping stool and join her on the top of the lockers.

“Maybe not your plan,” I say, “but it’s the best part of my plan.”

“What part is that?” I ask.

“It’s called the element of surprise.”

Before she can ask anymore stupid questions I punch through two of the (probably) asbestos ceiling tiles to expose a network of flimsy metal grids keeping the rest of the tiles together.

“What are you looking for?” she asks.

I smile as I find it: “Roof access.”

The sprinkler system leads to a big red box, with a flimsy little padlock.

I break it, and instantly the square pops up and light falls down.

“How’d you know that was there?” Fiona asks as I drag her up through the square and out onto the roof.

“We have a whole semester on public school roof access at Afterlife Academy.”

“Afterlife whatzit?” she asks as I drag her reluctantly to the edge of the roof.

“Afterlife Academy,” I say quietly, hunching down - and bringing her with me - as we near the roof’s tar-covered border. “It’s where new zombies go to learn how to be human again. Now hush up; we can’t let them know we’re here.”

“Who?” she asks, and in reply I point across the street.

There, standing in a long line, all wearing black, are the Marauders; the vampires’ vampires, the baddest, meanest, hurtingest blood suckers on the planet.

Each wears a black suit, which they say is slimming.

Each has a perfectly bald head, even the chicks.

Each is armed with enough copper to stock a copper factory; copper bracelets, which are good for throwing, pockets full of copper pennies, also good for throwing or, in a pinch, shoving down a zombie’s throat and, my favorite, copper tipped stakes.

Fiona risks a peek over the rim of the roof and says, “Who are they?”

“The Marauders,” I say. “I knew they’d already be here.”



I count as far as I can see to the left, as far as I can see to the right and by the time she asks, “How many of them do you think there are?” I already have an answer.

“20, maybe 30,” I say, “which really sucks because it only takes about two of them to waste a dozen zombies.”

I creep back from the roof’s edge, dragging Fiona along with me, until we’re back down through the red square in the roof and resting safely on the top of the lockers again.

“You weren’t kidding,” she sighs as I gently let her down onto the splintery wooden bench.

“About what?” I ask as I join her.

“Those guys look pretty scary.”

“Yeah,” I snort, dragging her over to the showers. “And this is one time when looks aren’t deceiving.”

“So what are we going to do?” she asks.

I look at the red fire alarm box on the wall, reach out, tap the glass with my pinky, watch it shatter to the floor and yank down the tiny white handle.

In the second before the sirens wail and the alarms bleat, I answer her: “The only thing we can do, Fiona; run!”

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 26

The alarms are blaring now, the entire school in panic mode.

I kick down the locker room door, burst into the gym and find the fake zombies in pandemonium.

Everywhere I look there are kids in gray face paint, leaking blood from capsules out of their mouths, streaming for the doors.

I find Roger and Tara filming every minute of it, and grab them.

I yank them by the collars out the back door and into the sunlight, away from where everybody else is running.

“What’s going on?” Roger barks, camera still running.

I knock it to the ground and he shrieks, literally shrieks.

“It’s called the element of surprise, Roger,” Fiona says knowingly, giving me a cheeky grin.

Tara slaps her smaller camcorder shut before I can yank it away and slips it into her backpack as they follow me to the student parking lot.

Kids are streaming out, regular kids, zombie kids, mixing, blending, all of them shrieking.

To Fiona I shout, “Where’s your car?”

She pauses, thinking about lying to me, and I start to growl, soft at first, then harder, like a dog who can’t decide whether to chase the mailman or not, and she points to a prissy lime green convertible.

“Keys,” I shout and, before I can finish, she hands them over.

Tara shoots me a satisfied look, but I’m not in the mood.

This has about 2.5 minutes to work, and we’ve already wasted .5 of them.

I find Fiona’s car and literally shove them in the backseat, firing up the surprisingly loud engine and gunning her car across the soccer field, the track and the Driver’s Ed loop.

As sirens start to wail down the street I fly up and over the curb and head in the other direction, away from the school, away from Piper and Alex, away from Ethan and Dana... away from the Marauders.

In my rearview mirror I see fake zombies flooding the street, heading straight for the vampires in black across from the school; just as we’re trained to do in case of a fire alarm.

On their heels are our teachers, frustrated and terse and not the kind of folks to take kindly at seeing a line of bald-headed freaks in stiff black suits (no matter how slimming they might be).

The Marauders crouch back into the brushy scrub pines that border Barracuda Bay, for which the town - and the high school - are named.

The fake zombies mingle, and scatter, and talk; just like real zombies.

Or are they fake?

By the time the Marauders find out, it will be too late.

Or, at least, that's the plan.

I speed down Flounder Avenue, cut a left on Tarpon Lane and don't let up until the Church of the Holy Redeemer is in sight.

I screech to a halt in the back parking lot, kicking open Fiona's driver's side door with the engine still running.

I hand Roger everything in my wallet; \$37 and change.

"See that blue barrel by the back door of the church," I tell him.

He looks, nods.

"Buy it. Inside; Father Finnegan will be in there, doing crosswords. Tell him it's for me, and he won't ask any questions."

He shrugs, gets out and shuffles toward the back door of the church.

Meanwhile I back the car into an empty space and herd the two quivering girls out of the car and give them my room key.

I point to the room, easily visible through the chain link fence that borders the church's parking lot and the Home's.

"Open the door, barricade yourself in the closet and don't come out until I literally kick the door in and yank you out myself, okay?"

Tara nods but Fiona lingers in her seat.

"Fiona?" I ask as Roger bursts through the back door of the church and starts rolling the blue barrel in my direction. "We don't have a lot of time now. No doubt Ethan and Dana have figured out what I've done and are on their way, and I'm sure Piper is hot on their trail so... what gives?"

“What’s going to happen to you?” she asks, and the question is so uncharacteristic even Tara gives pause on her way to the fence.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me,” I smile as Roger appears. “I’ve got my bodyguard, remember?”

He flexes a muscle as if to prove it, and I watch the two girls scamper through the hole in the fence, then across the Home’s parking lot, up the two sets of stairs and into good old Room # 208, where I hope they’ll be safe.

“Think they’ll be all right?” Roger asks, hoisting the barrel up over his head with ease as he follows me through the fence.

“No,” I say bluntly, “but they’re in luck; I always keep everything I need to protect myself against a good, old-fashioned vampire invasion in my closet, just in case.”

He grunts, then asks the question I’ve been worrying about ever since I pulled that fire alarm.

“That’s great if the vampires get to them first, but what if the zombies beat them to it?”

“Then they’re screwed,” I grunt, helping him squeeze the blue barrel through the person-size opening in the rusty chain link fence around the pool.

The pool is empty this time of day, partly because it’s late fall but mostly because everyone who lives at the Home is still in school.

Roger and I roll the barrel to the edge and I kick off the top, watching it fall into the pool and float lazily toward the filter.

Holy water - pure and unfiltered and straight from the Vatican - glugs into the pool, mixing with the pool water seamlessly.

There is a box of pool toys near a picnic bench, mostly deflated beach balls and those rings you toss in the deep end and see who can collect the most.

I root around and grab four squirt guns and toss them into the deep end.

“Can I ask what we’re doing?” he asks as the last of the barrel water blends into the pool and the squirt guns float by.

I pick up the empty barrel and toss it back over the fence; it rolls to a stop behind the pool house where the pump grinds endlessly night and day.

I shove him into the pool, then answer before joining him: "Going for a dip."

He panics at first, flailing his arms and kicking his legs, until the new hardness in his body - and the lack of air in his lungs - sends him straight to the bottom.

I grab the squirt guns on my way down, opening the little plugs in the back until they are full of water and join us at the bottom of the pool.

I touch his hand, gently, and look into his eyes.

"Relax," I say through a cloud of bubbles. "You don't need to breathe; relax."

I have to shout, and repeat myself a few times, but eventually he gets the picture, opens his mouth, lets the water in and... smiles.

"Cool," he says, releasing a stream of bubbles.

I hand him a squirt gun, miming he should follow me as I shove first one, then two, then all three in my jean pockets.

He does so, but not without asking, "What are these for?"

I smile and shout-gurgle, "You'll know when the time comes."

Then I drag him, gently, to the deepest part of the deep end, until our backs are against the wall and we're facing the shallow end, which is closest to the road and, I assume, where the vampires will look first.

Or last - or not at all - if we're lucky.

But I've never been that lucky.

"What's the plan?" he asks via a few dozen bubbles.

"Now we wait," I gurgle, spreading my arms so the pool water fills every crevice of my body, every pore of my skin, every thread of my clothes.

Roger spots me, smiles, and does the same.

And the waiting begins...

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 27

It doesn't take long.

Not nearly as long as I'd thought.

We're down there 10, maybe 15, minutes when I spot movement in the parking lot.

Black vans, three of them, screech to a halt just outside the pool fence, which is closest to the front office.

Luckily no one is ever in there, so I haven't lured some innocent human to their death.

Instead Roger and I watch, hands clasped in the deep end, as Marauders pour from each of the vans one, two, three at a time, their black suits slick and lethal as they fan out.

They separate, and merge, and cluster, and flee, and we can't see much but we can see their legs disappearing up the stairs, and combing every inch of the parking lot.

They knock on doors, kick a few down, break open car windows, yank off doors and slash tires with their deadly, claw-like fingernails as their frustration mounts.

Roger's hand clenches tight as I'm looking to the left, and when I turn to him his face is staring at the shallow end, where up on the pool deck we can see first one set of legs, then two, then three, facing us.

Well, that didn't take long.

The first few Marauders are joined by the others; even underwater we can hear them talking to each other, their slick black shoes scraping on the dry, bleached concrete of the pool deck.

One by one they line the deck, standing with military bearing next to each other until, eventually, the entire pool is surrounded.

I clench Roger's hand for support, secretly wishing Ethan and Dana were here to help me, wondering where they are, and hoping Roger is up to the task.

Shoot, hoping I am!

We can see their faces now, the surface of the water calm, their mouths scowling, frowning, growling now, their fangs erect and piercing, their pale heads stubbly and shaven, their eyes deadly and orange.

I sit perfectly still, willing Roger to do the same, although his feet fidget and I'm afraid he's going to bolt.

He inches forward, just slightly, and I yank him back harshly; he gets the message, and moves no more.

I blink my eyes, glad the pool guy hasn't been here in weeks so that the chlorine level is next to nil.

We can stay here all day, all night, all week if we have to, but of course the Marauders won't wait that long.

My only hope is that they don't try to get us one-on-one; the plan will never work that way.

Roger looks left, looks right, and I feel his tension; something is happening.

There is a scrambling at the shallow end, a movement of legs, which were all clad in black a moment ago but now I see bare legs, long legs, pretty legs, hot legs - Piper's legs!

Shoot, they're going to use her as bait.

Little do they know, I wouldn't budge to save Piper if she were the last vampire on earth.

Especially if she were the last vampire on earth.

But it's not just Piper's legs I see; suddenly there are jeans standing next to her, and clean white shoes, and a snug rugby shirt.

"Alex!" shouts Roger, releasing a cloud of bubbles.

No, no, this wasn't the plan at all.

Suddenly the surface of the pool implodes, as Piper gets shoved into the holy water mix.

Immediately the water begins roiling, the vampire's skin shredding and peeling as if from the worst sunburn known to man; the kind you can only get while laying out on the sun itself!

We hear screams as bubbles burst and Piper's face turns toward us, her skin boiling, her face peeling, her fangs falling out as the holy water mixed with the pool water literally boils her alive.

"Now!" I shout as the pool water fills with blood and ash and fangs and bone, Piper's high heels sinking to the bottom of the pool, one still containing the sizzling bones of her foot.

I yank my squirt gun out of my pocket and trudge through dirty pool water to the shallow end, emerging from the depths and spitting water from the gun, aiming at everyone but Alex, who still clings to the pool deck, one leg over the water as the Marauder holding him ducks to avoid getting fired on.

I splatter two, then three, then five before Roger joins me, firing off six or seven shots as the Marauders squeal and squeak, their faces, shoulders and hands burning as they try to protect themselves from the deadly holy water mixed into the little neon colored squirt guns.

Then I'm out of water, dumping the gun to the ground and reaching for the next as an Marauder tries to tackle me.

The minute his skin touches my wet clothes his hands start to sizzle, and before he can pull away I cling him to me in a bear hug, until he is a sizzling, smoking mess.

His screams fill my ears as Roger latches onto the closest Marauder and literally swallows her in his big, flabby arms.

The screams are piercing but now the Marauders are backing away; all but one.

"Silence," says a commanding voice as I release the mortally wounded Marauder to the ground, where I quickly kick him into the pool to finish the job.

The boiling begins again, then continues as Roger follows suit, joyfully tossing his attacker into the soup that was once our humble little swimming pool.

There are at least a dozen Marauders left around the pool, all angry, but equally scared; all except one.

He just happens to be the one holding Alex; holding Alex over the pool.

"Stop!" Roger and I say in unison, reaching out and approaching the lead Marauder.

"Take another step," he says, his voice crystal clear, "and I'll gladly add one more ingredient to that soup."



“Okay, okay,” I say, stopping in my tracks. “We’re fine, we’re here, we’re done, just... let him go!”

“Not quite yet,” he says, his voice velvety and smooth, almost magnetic.

If I were still a human, his magnetism - that secret vampire power that makes humans do their bidding - might still work on me.

Now it’s just annoying.

“First,” he adds, dangling Alex dangerously close to the pool, “tell us where your friends are.”

“She doesn’t have any friends,” yammers Roger, causing me to smile. “I made sure of that!”

The vampire looks at him in disgust, then starts walking closer to me, still holding Alex at arm’s length, just over the pool, with what looks like very little effort.

“Hush, creature,” the vampire snaps at Roger.

Then, to me he says, somewhat predictably, “My name is Winter.”

Stupid vampires and their stupid bad soap opera names; Winter, Piper, Bianca, it’s like they pick all their names from bad 80s movies.

“You will speak to me directly, or not at all.”

“I prefer not at all,” I say through gritted teeth, noting the panicked look on Alex’s face as he tries to keep his emotions in check.

We make brief eye contact, but the guilt is too much and I quickly look away. “But, since you have me in a jam, what is it that you want?”

He smiles, 10-feet away now, stopping just short of the water that has drained from my shoes and onto the deck.

“We enjoyed your little fun and games back at the school, Lucy,” he says self-importantly, as if I’m supposed to be impressed that he knows my name when, after all, it was blasted all over the internet all day. “But we don’t have much time now and I need to corral the rest of your zombie friends to take back to my leaders and—”

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 28

“Your leaders?” I bark, trying not to sound like I’m bluffing. “Your leaders? The Council of Elders gets first dib on us, not you guys. Unless they see fit to turn us over to you, which they haven’t done in 2,000 years, so I doubt they’ll start now.”

He cocks his head, pretends to drop Alex, I jump - bluff called - and he yanks him back in, dropping him to the wet concrete but keeping a foot on his neck, where he can either crush Alex’s most important vertebrae - or shove him in the water - at a moment’s notice.

“You seem to think you’re in a position to bargain,” says Winter, his foot dangerously close to snapping Alex’s neck, “But I beg to—”

Winter’s next few words are interrupted by the sound of infernos blazing on either side of him; first one, then another, of his fellow Marauders have just gone up in flames.

I turn, flinching, only to see Fiona and Tara quickly re-loading the stake-firing crossbows I stashed in the closet.

They take aim as they rest the crossbows on the second story walkway, like archers in one of those Japanese movies where their arrows blot out the sky.

I reach for Alex in the confusion, but Winter is too fast and yanks him back, back, away from the pool but closer to one of those sleek black Marauder vans.

He’s still backing away, the rest of his Marauders scrambling to avoid becoming roasting marshmallows, when Ethan and Dana emerge from behind the pool house, crossbows in hand as well.

I smirk, grabbing Alex and yanking him back where Roger and I can be zombie bookends to his whimpering, quaking vampire self.

Ethan and Dana make quick work of Winter, Ethan keeping a loaded stake aimed at his heart while Dana yanks his arms behind his back and snaps them shut with a reinforced plastic tie.

With their leader down, the rest of the Marauders quickly and quietly crumble; one by one they are hog tied and tossed into one of the black vans.

Sure, it would have been roomier, and more comfortable, for them to be spread out in all three but... why bother?

That leaves four zombies and one vampire, who is suddenly outnumbered.

“Are you guys a sight for sore eyes?” blabs Roger, but I’m not so sure.

Ethan is avoiding eye contact and Dana is looking over my shoulder.

I hear boots coming, scraping the ground of the pool deck and suddenly realize why.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Chapter 29

“Sentinels,” I explain, as Roger and I turn to face a dozen uniformed zombies.

“What?” He barks. “Now? But this is supposed to be the happy ending, right?”

Ethan whips him around to face the Sentinels and snaps a plastic tie around his wrists.

“Sorry, pal,” he says, shoving him toward the nearest Sentinel. “This is just the beginning.”

I don’t wait for Ethan to manhandle me; I simply hold out my hands - in front of me - and let him do the honors himself.

Then I turn to face the Sentinels, who don’t wear black but blue; blue cargo pants with plenty of pockets on the side, blue shirts with even more pockets and those straps on the shoulders, blue berets.

They don’t shave their heads, either, but that doesn’t make them any prettier to behold.

“Lucy?” asks Roger as the Sentinels march us out of the suddenly crowded pool area. “What’s happening? Aren’t these supposed to be the good guys?”

The Sentinels don’t speak; at least, not to us.

Instead they look to Ethan, who points to our suite of rooms on the second floor of the Home.

They march us up the stairs, one by one, until Roger and I are sitting on the two chairs in my room.

Alex sits on my single bed, fuming, his future uncertain; his eyes darting everywhere but at me.

The Sentinels spread out, covering every inch of space in my tiny room.

Ethan and Dana fill the door, smirking.

“What gives?” I ask, wondering if Fiona and Tara have had time to sneak back into the closet after saving our butts with their little second floor archery display.

Ethan starts to speak but Dana beats him to the punch, “After your little stunt today, we were left holding the bag, forced to explain to Dean Winters why 300 Drama Club geeks spontaneously decided to dress up as zombies on the same day YOU got outed as one, thanks.”

“No one asked YOU to be our spokesperson,” I snap, the Sentinels watching carefully.

“No one asked YOU to out us all,” she snaps back, inching into the room and leaving Ethan alone in the doorway.

We stare each other down for a second before Roger - of all people - brings us to reason, “Whatever, what now? Who are these goons and where are they taking us?”

“Us?” asks Ethan, inching forward threateningly. “There is no US, you half-zombie. You and Lucy here are going with the Sentinels, and Dana and I are starting over, somewhere far, far —”

“That’s not entirely correct,” says a Sentinel near my closet. “Actually, Ethan, we’ve been ordered to bring you back as well.”

“Me?” Ethan barks, as if he’s a Sentinel himself. “What for?”

The Sentinel clears his throat and says, awkwardly, “Just a standard debriefing, Ethan, and then once we get your story, you’ll be relocated to...”

The Sentinel keeps talking, but all I see is Ethan glance nervously at Roger, and Roger give Ethan a knowing look.

I shake my head, spitting, “You see, Ethan, you see? Weren’t YOU the one who said we all needed to stick together? Weren’t you the one who said we were a team? Now you see what happens when we turn on each other!”

The Sentinels are straightening to take possession of us and march us downstairs where, I can only assume, a van or truck or some super secret spy vehicle is waiting to drive us to our doom.

Ethan is strong, but not strong enough to overpower all these trained killers, although I see his jaw flexing and his eyes doing the math to see how many of them he can take down before they overpower him.

Dana is mute, her eyes wide, not believing their plan has backfired.

I am calm, resigned to my fate, when the doorway fills with two familiar faces, each munching candy bars.

“Hey,” Tara asks, looking saucy with chocolate on her lips, “how come nobody invited us to the zombie party?”

Ethan whips around, stumbling back into Roger, Roger smiles to see his AV Club Friends, Dana is in the process of turning, I’m wondering what’s up and the Sentinels are growling, the scent of human flesh and sizzling, electric fresh brains driving them toward the door.

“Run!” I shout, not realizing why they’re just standing there, reaching into their pockets with a dozen professionally trained zombie killers blitzing them.

“Get out of here!”

I see the pennies in their hands before they launch into the air, handfuls and handfuls of fresh, beautiful, gleaming copper pennies, flying here and there, landing willy-nilly and heading straight toward me and...

\* \* \* \* \*

## Epilogue

I come to in the back of a van; a sleek black van full of sleeping zombies.

I groan, my head pounding from a copper penny overload headache.

I go to squeeze my temples and realize my hands are free; someone has snapped my plastic bonds.

My eyes are blurry, the electricity coursing through my body finally rewiring itself but taking its time.

I look closest to me first, where I can see the best.

Roger is slumped up against the wheel well, rubbing his eyes, while Ethan lies lifelessly and Dana is sprawled on her back, eyes open and unblinking as she, too, tries to get her bearings.

I stand up on wobbly legs, not helped much by the sandy, bumpy road we're traveling on.

Traveling on, I might add, at a high rate of speed.

I stumble over bodies until I'm clutching the back of the driver's seat, where a familiar face turns and smiles.

"Rise and shine, sleepy head," Tara giggles, obviously enjoying putting the pedal to the metal as a tiny country back road spreads out before us, wide and sandy and full of potholes.

"What just happened?" I ask, still rubbing my eyes as Fiona, riding shotgun, comes into focus as she follows a trail on a road map spread out across her lap.

"Just happened?" asks Fiona without looking up. "Girl, you've been out for hours. We're already in Georgia."

"Georgia?" I blurt, sitting down on the wheel well to make my head feel better. "Headed where?"

"Who knows?" asks Tara gleefully. "We're on a road trip, girl; we go where the road leads us."

"And the Sentinels?" I ask.

Fiona folds the map back up, slides it in the glove box and turns around to face me. "Probably waking up right about now in that hotel room, 300 miles away."

I sigh, the thought of being a state ahead of the Sentinels finally putting me at ease.

"And the Marauders?"

Fiona shrugs. “Probably still wriggling around in that nice black van of theirs,” she sighs. “At least, that’s what they were doing when we left the Home. After letting the air out of their tires, natch.”

“Wow, I’m impressed. When did you two turn into 007 all of a sudden?”

“When Tara got the idea to run to the corner store while you had the Sentinels occupied in your hotel room, buy a couple of Snickers and get the change - from a twenty, no less - all in pennies!”

“That was pretty impressive,” I say. “Here I was supposed to be coming to your rescue and, well, you came to mine.”

The sudden realization is not so subtly humbling.

We ride in silence as the van shuttles down the Georgia back road.

“So we’re heading north, then?” I ask, concerned that might be too predictable a path but none too eager to tell my saviors that.

“For a little while,” Tara teases, “then we thought we’d zig west for awhile, head over to Tennessee. “My folks have a cabin there, they never use it, and you four could hide out there while you figure out what to do next?”

“Four?” I ask. “You guys aren’t coming?”

“For the weekend,” Fiona explains. “We’ve already texted our folks, told them we’re out scouting colleges, that should buy us until Sunday night, Monday at the latest. Pretty good, huh?”

I settle back, slinking against the wheel well as Ethan finally comes to.

Dana is immediately up and in the girls’ faces, barking orders about cutbacks and side roads and switching out license plates and when Roger joins her, trying to stick up for the girls but not gaining much traction with the much bossier Dana, I slide back to Ethan.

“Have a nice nap?” I ask coolly.

He smiles meekly, not quite looking me in the eyes.

“It’s always better when I wake up to your face,” he croaks.

“Gross,” I snap. “Where’d you memorize that line from 1,001 Pickup Lines Guaranteed NOT to Work?”

He snorts. “I’m just glad you’re speaking to me again.”

I sigh, leaning back against a spare tire. “Like you said, Ethan, we’re a team, for better or worse.”

“Even after I tried to hand you over to the Sentinels?”

“Well, that might take some sweet-talking to get over.”

“Did I hear something about a cabin in the woods?” he smirks knowingly.

I shrug and he says, “Sounds like the perfect place to make up to somebody.”

“We’ll see,” I shrug, but inside I’m suddenly looking forward to getting back to nature.

After that, who knows?

We’ll have to ditch the van, of course.

Who knows what kind of tracking beacon those creeps are using to follow us as we speak, but with two states between us we can dump this baby as far north as possible just before hitching west and throw them off our scent all the more.

I sit back, Ethan comfortably close, the front of the van full of bickering know-it-alls who, despite the volume of their voices, are all uniformly smiling.

I sigh and think... it’s a good day to be a zombie.

But maybe not so good to be a... vampire.

Slumped against the door, glaring at us, is Alex.

“What about him?” I ask, remembering the frightened little boy face he’d made while dangling over that pool full of holy water.

Ethan shrugs while Alex glares. “Him we’ll have to see about.”

I sigh, but inch away from Ethan nonetheless.

It’s not that I care about Alex getting jealous so much, as the hard look in Alex’s eyes.

It’s a risk, bringing him along; he can turn bad, or he can turn good.



Only time will tell.

Of course, since all of us - okay, most of us - are undead, time is something we have a lot of.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### About the Author

Rusty Fischer is the author of over a dozen zombie novels, including *Zombies Don't Cry*, *Zombies Don't Forgive*, *The Girl Who Could talk to Zombies* and *Panty Raid at Zombie High*! Visit him at [www.zombiesdontblog.blogspot.com](http://www.zombiesdontblog.blogspot.com) to learn more and read tons of FREE zombie stories and poems just like this one!