

GOOD-BYE

*H*ave you damned me? I wondered, staring over my shoulder at the lanky devil in dark formal-wear. The one with honey cream sauce on his collar and blood on his tie, the one who'd so newly remade me into the same kind of monster he was.

It was past 2 A.M. in the dining room of my family's Italian restaurant, and moments earlier, I'd agreed to a fool's bargain. To drink deeply from the throat of the boy lying beneath me, the boy I loved, on the condition

that if I could wrench myself away before taking his life, the seductive fiend known as Bradley Sanguini would concede defeat, leave us in peace, and abandon Austin, Texas, forever.

Brad understood the thirst, the intoxication, far better than I did, and he'd acted like I had no shot at it.

Lost in the salty red mist, the sweet satisfaction, for a few moments, I'd feared he was right. But somehow I'd torn myself from the blood, the bliss. And won.

Now Bradley gaped at me, slack-jawed in amazement, before recovering enough to offer a saucy wink. "Baby," he said in a rumbling voice, "I underestimated you."

His full lip curled, and the vampire chef turned away to slip through the crimson velvet drapes separating the dining room from the foyer. Seconds later, I heard the front door open and gently shut.

Good riddance. In that moment, I didn't give a damn whether the monster kept his word, whether that was the last I'd see of him. It was enough that he was gone for now.

Then Kieren's whispers drew my attention. Kieren Morales, my best friend and true love—it sounded like he was praying. And why shouldn't he have been? He glistened with sweat. His hands and neck had been savaged. It was a miracle that I hadn't killed him.

"Hey," I whispered, "let's get you cleaned up."

“You’ll have to move off me first.” Offering a wry smile, he added, “But only if you really want to.”

Kieren never teased me that way, never dared to flirt—another sign of a surreal night. Or maybe he was just too wrung out to self-censor what he was really thinking.

I blushed, suddenly hyperaware of my position, half straddled across him on the bench of a black leather booth.

Bracing myself with one hand on the table, I pushed off and then helped Kieren sit up. Most of his shirt seams had burst, the material falling from his shoulders in tattered wet ribbons. The top button of his jeans had come undone.

How much blood had he lost? A lot. Too much? I couldn’t take him to the ER, and not only because a medical exam would out him as a human-werewolf hybrid.

Kieren was a prime suspect in a murder investigation, the result of a simple but effective frame job by Bradley that had drawn on human prejudices against shape-shifters.

What’s more, I couldn’t call in Kieren’s Wolf mama, even though she’d trained as a healer. As far as the Moraleses knew, their eldest had already ditched town en route to a Wolf pack that was supposed to protect him. Kieren wanted them to go on thinking just that.

“Brad’s obsessed with you,” he began. “We can’t expect him to just—”

“Give up?” I suppressed a sigh. Even if Brad didn’t leave us alone, he still couldn’t force me to love him. “Maybe not. Okay, probably not. But I have supernatural power of my own now, and, Kieren, you can’t watch over me forever.” Brave words, especially since I wanted nothing more than for him to go on doing just that.

The front door opened, and we froze. The pastry team wouldn’t arrive for hours, and besides, they used the kitchen entrance. I darted to the nearest wait station and snagged a steak knife.

“It’s all right, Quince,” Kieren assured me. “I recognize the scent—”

His pal Clyde stumbled in, flailing to extract himself from the heavy drapes. Clyde was a little guy, a sophomore with salt-and-pepper hair. He was also a weremarsupial, from a long line somehow related to a giant Ice Age marsupial.

Put mildly, he had issues with my newly undead status.

Brandishing a battle-axe nearly half his size, Clyde took in Kieren’s bleeding neck, bleeding hands, and ragged clothing before turning toward me. “Back, you demonic hussy! Step away from the Wolf!”

I blinked at that. It was endearing, Clyde coming to Kieren’s defense. Usually when confronted with danger, the Opossum played dead.

I took a step forward. “Easy now . . .”

Baring tiny, sharp teeth, Clyde swung the blade my way, almost losing his balance. “Back, you unholy—”

“Enough!” Kieren said. “Can it, Clyde. It’s Quince, got it? She’s *still* Quincie.”

Clyde’s glare disputed him, even as it lingered on the bustline of my T-shirt. “Oh, yeah? Was she ‘still Quincie’ when she was sucking your blood like a Slurpee?”

“I *let* her bite me.” With a grimace, Kieren stood, shaky in his black cowboy boots. “We had our reasons. The rest of the damage, I did to myself.” He raised his square jaw. “I thought you’d be halfway to Matamoros by now.”

“I, uh . . .” Clyde broke eye contact. “Your mom’s van is parked out back.”

Kieren took a deep breath. “Fine, you can wait for me there.”

Clyde set the axe on a nearby table. “You’ve got three minutes,” he said. “Then I’m calling your mom to drag your hairy ass out of here. I mean it, Morales.”

A moment later, Kieren and I were alone again. Returning the steak knife to the wait station, I fought to wrap my mind around what was happening. Did Clyde say three minutes? Only three minutes?

After a lifetime of friendship, tonight Kieren and I had finally admitted our deeper feelings for each other. And now we had to say good-bye.

He touched his fingertips to his sticky neck. “Towels?”

“Right,” I agreed. The trip to the kitchen and back took only seconds.

I cleaned off the blood with one towel and then ripped the other to wrap his hands. Fortunately, the wounds had already begun to heal—a benefit of his Wolf DNA. “Do you want something for the pain?”

Kieren didn’t answer. His arm circled my waist, and we moved to reclaim the small dance floor of my family restaurant. I relaxed into his embrace, his body warm and damp against mine. I knew what Kieren was thinking. If we had only three—two?—minutes, we wanted to make the most of them.

Then he shook his head and took an uncertain step backward, and I tightened my hold. He could hardly stand. “We don’t have to do this,” I told him. “You should—”

“Hush,” he said, running a fingertip from my temple to my chin. “Can I lean on you?” A huge question coming from Kieren, who’d always thought of himself as the strong one.

I welcomed his weight, and we danced in that swaying way where all that matters is the touching. I didn’t beg him to stay. I didn’t tell him how I remembered holding his hand on our first day of kindergarten and not holding it during our tour of NASA on his ninth birthday. I didn’t tell him how at thirteen I’d chickened out under

the mistletoe or how lately I'd let the girls at high school assume we were more than friends. I didn't admit that my lips still buzzed from tasting him, and so did every slick, secret part of my body. Most of all, I didn't apologize for having let Bradley manipulate me. Or say how sorry I was about not being alive anymore.

And I didn't admit to Kieren how alone I'd be without him or that I could never again watch a sunset without thinking of the moonrise, too. I had to be brave. I *had* to. I didn't want him to remember me as a weepy, clingy mess.

Each second neared our last.

We danced.

"Kieren . . ."

"Shhh . . ."

We danced.

"I'll be okay." Was that me lying? Or him?

We danced.

"Close your eyes," he whispered, brushing his lips against mine. "Know that I'm missing you already and that you'll always be in my prayers."

PREDATOR OR PREY?

When I opened my eyes, I stood alone in the middle of the dance floor.

The restaurant was all I had left.

Only three nights earlier, on Friday the 13th, Fat Lorenzo's—my family's Italian bistro—had been relaunched with a vampire theme and renamed Sanguini's. The preternatural angle was supposed to have been make-believe, all in fun.

The new joint had proven itself a sensation. Five stars from *Tejano Food Life*. A rave from *The Statesman*. A nod

from *USA Today*. We'd made not only every Austin TV news program but also the twenty-four-hour cable news networks.

It wasn't just our food that the reviewers raved about. It was the faux-castle décor, the staff's creature-of-the-night regalia, the gothic fantasy made real.

Wickedly delicious and deliciously wicked.

"Hell's Kitchen Serves Up Culinary Heaven," according to the *Capital City News*.

Then two nights ago, Bradley and my uncle Davidson—who'd managed the place and who had been my legal guardian—had revealed themselves to me as *real* vampires. Homicidal vampires who'd been trying to frame Kieren for their crimes. They'd been working with my high school's vice principal, likewise undead, to distance me from my human life so I'd be more open to taking my supposedly destined place among them.

I'd been caught by surprise, and not just because I'd known them (especially my uncle) so well. According to popular belief, vampires were extraordinarily rare, possibly extinct. Beyond that, I hadn't been at my best, even before my transformation.

For weeks, Brad had flattered me with his attentions, delivered with glass after glass of red wine, dosed—I'd found out later—with his own unholy blood. The combination of alcohol and dark magic had intoxicated me, made me emotionally unstable, more susceptible to

his suggestions, and generally an idiot. Not to mention what it had done to my humanity and fashion sense.

Taking the axe that Kieren and Clyde had left behind, I shuffled out of the lonely dining room and down the lonelier back hall. Ducking into a restroom marked PREDATOR, I leaned the long handle of the weapon against the counter and then splashed my face.

No mirror hung above the sink—another thematic touch, playing on the popular misconception that the undead can't cast a reflection.

Hardly anyone knew much about vampirism—except that it was demonic in origin. By the mid-1700s, though, leaders of most major religions and various heads of state had acknowledged its existence, and according to a show I'd seen on the History Channel, the undead may have played a key role in the French Revolution, the sinking of the *Titanic*, and the JFK assassination.

Still, that didn't give me a lot to go on. What the hell had I become?

I tore the sign that read PREDATOR off my restroom door and the PREY sign off its companion. The unisex approach might've been cutting-edge, but it was also a lawsuit waiting to happen, and I was calling the shots now.

I left the cross hanging where it was, on what had been the Prey door.

* * *

I needed to work. I was Mama's daughter that way. The restaurant had always been more like home than my actual house was. I needed to cleanse it, reclaim it, if I ever hoped to feel safe and whole again. If that was even possible.

I dug through the storage closet—filled with artifacts from Fat Lorenzo's—until I found the *M* and *W*. Then I grabbed the toolbox and nailed the letters back on their respective restroom doors.

Afterward, I returned to the closet for white cardboard and black markers. In the break room, I made two signs that read CLOSED FOR FAMILY EMERGENCY, one for the front door and one for the back.

I probably didn't need to haul the battle-axe around, but it made me feel better, having a weapon close.

On the employee bulletin board, someone had posted a newspaper clipping.

OBITUARIES

AUSTIN—Travis Reid, age 16, was called home by our Heavenly Father on September 13.

Reid was a sophomore at Waterloo High School, where he belonged to the Environmental Club and the Spanish Club.

He was preceded in death by his grandmother Christina Acosta. Survivors include his parents, Isabel and David Reid; his sister, Sierra;

his grandparents Barbara and Clarence “Dutch” Reid; his grandfather Karl Richards; and numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Visitation will be at 7 P.M. today at Lane Family Funeral Home Chapel. The service will be at 10 A.M. Tuesday at Bouldin Creek United Methodist Church. Burial will follow immediately at Magnolia Shade Cemetery.

The family has requested that memorial donations be sent in Reid’s name to the Austin Zoo and Rescue Sanctuary.

I hadn’t known Travis well, but he’d been shy, kind, and awkward, a pal of Kieren and Clyde’s, who’d briefly worked at Sanguini’s as a dishwasher. Beyond that, Travis may have been the only werearmadillo I’d ever met. His people were distant cousins to the Ice Age glyptodont, which had rivaled the VW Beetle in size.

He’d been murdered by Ruby, the same werecat who’d staked my vampire uncle earlier tonight before running off, hopefully forever. Not everybody with a tail or a heartbeat was a good person. It wasn’t as simple as that.

In the manager’s office, the digital clock read 3:38 A.M. I stashed the axe in the safe, changed the combo, and

grabbed my leather-bound planner book, nicknamed Frank. A gift from Kieren.

Kieren. I flipped to a tasking page, determined to concentrate.

Sanguini's would have to remain closed until I found a chef to replace Bradley. Talk about lousy timing! The place was booked solid for I-didn't-know-how-long, and the customers would have hissy fits. But I had a much more serious problem than that.

Bradley had infused our signature dessert—the chilled baby squirrels, simmered in orange brandy, bathed in honey cream sauce—with his own blood. He'd hoped that those most predisposed toward viciousness, most likely to relish a vampiric existence, would order the horrific-sounding dish, ingest his blood, and thereby eventually join him—us—among the demonic.

According to Ruby, his intention had been to create an undead army to help him take over the underworld of Texas, whatever that meant. God only knew how he'd hoped to control the newly risen, but anyway, I didn't find out about the plan until it was too late.

Before he left, Bradley had told me to consider the soon-to-rise neophytes a “parting gift,” but I didn't for a minute believe that, after all of his scheming, he had any intention of actually abandoning them. Or, for that matter, me.

Regardless, Brad had been serving up death at *my* restaurant. What had been Mama's and, before her, Gramma and Grampa Crimi's restaurant. That made his victims my responsibility.

Frank in hand, I sprinted to the reservations book on the hostess stand in the foyer. Sanguini's wasn't big. We could serve fifty at a time, and we'd done only one seating for Friday's party and two on both Saturday and Monday nights.

So, we'd served some 250 guests—plus those in the bar area. I figured upward of 325 total, give or take. I couldn't know for sure how many had tasted the tainted dish, though, especially since people often split dessert orders.

I remembered chatting with guests from as far away as El Paso, Oklahoma City, and New Orleans. Not to mention the foreign exchange students from Ethiopia, the family on vacation from London, and the Middle Eastern studies professor on her way to Iraq. And then there were the innocents they would eventually kill or contaminate in turn.

I didn't have to be a math whiz to realize that, in no time, the world could be faced with a full-scale preternatural crisis. But it wasn't just about numbers.

Members of my staff—including my hostess, Yanira; my expeditor, Sergio; and my waitress pal, Mercedes—were among the infected, and they were practically family.

I turned to the calendar in my planner book. It took about a month after ingesting demonic blood for the transformation to occur. The first wave of Bradley's victims would rise undead sometime after October 11, more with each passing sunset.

Happy Halloween to me.