unfortunate souls

*Unfortunate Souls Series – Book One*

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one: ruby

Do you know what dying feels like?

I do.

And believe me, it is not something I would recommend.

The act of dying is like falling, except that you have nothing to land upon. You fall further and further into the dark, each fiber of your body growing more weak and feeble as time progresses. It is awful and lonely and cold. It is so cold in fact, that if you were to stand in the middle of the Artic with no clothes on, in subzero temperatures, that would hardly begin to explain how cold dying is.

So you lay there on your death bed, cold as hell-frozen-over, while your body becomes stiff and paralyzed, the effort to lift just one finger —despite whether you are successful or not— takes more energy than it is worth. And you watch loved ones murmur softly, saying how wonderful you were, and what a shame, as though you were already dead. They would cry about the fact that seventeen was too young to die and you had your whole life in front of you. Now wasted.

But because you are in denial, you want to scream and yell and curse at them, telling them that you are not dead yet. But if you were, your ghost would haunt them for eternity for being such insensitive jerks.

Unfortunately, you cannot utter anything but a rattling breath, your mind only exerting these unsated actions silently and your body shutting down sectors one at a time as though you were the captain of a sinking ship. You blood flow ebbs, your heart slows, lungs become heavy, muscles rigor, bones grow cold, and nerves numb.

And the absolute worst thing about dying is that your mind is the last thing to go. You are trapped within your own personal prison, one of that is crumbling around you, and every fiber of your being is screaming with its human instinct of survival. The inner struggle is true torture.

And then when you finally become tired enough to give in, realizing that you are in fact dying, it is all gone. Like falling asleep. Except without the waking-up-in-the-morning-part.

Everything is gone in a fleeting heartbeat, as though you had never existed in the first place. A last exhalation of musty breath. A sea of endless nothing.

Gone. Black. Void.

And the absolute last thing I remember before the blackness of death, was the feeling of a single wet tear, rolling down my cheek, releasing the last bit of my soul with its departure.

But there is another act of dying that I failed to mention. One that many people cannot claim to have witnessed.

Re-birth.

Mine was quite unorthodox in its happening really, and though I wished it had been a traditional re-birth, it was not. It was nothing like waking slowly from a deep slumber. How you would normally fade into the waking world one sense at a time, the sun leaking through your window shades and warming your blanket.

It was more like being thrown into a tub of freaking ice water, the shock of it rocking you to the core. It is new and bizarre and jarring. And very, very painful to say the least. I now know why newborn babies cry after entering the world for the first time…

Any shred of light scalds your eyeballs. Any little sound jams its way into your ear canal, intensified by a hundredfold. Like the shrieking of sirens. Any touch feels like sandpaper on your tender skin. Bolts of lightning connect every nerve, muscle, and bone, as your body tries to acclimate to its new and foreign surroundings.

Even your sense of smell is heightened. Aromas and scents so pungent that they churn your sensitive stomach. Heat and cold are more intense, like the freezing burn of fire and ice. And your mind flashes wildly with colors and sounds and smells that you never knew existed.

At least that was the way of it for me; my body bursting into a whole different world where I would begin my new life.

My life as a vampire.

two: guy

It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. And what a picture she had been. Lying there in the dirt, her body like a work of art in itself, sadly writhing in pain. The glow of her pale skin. The contrast of the cherry-red blood running down her neck from the bite wound. Her mouth stretched open in a silent scream.

She was like a car accident. A beautiful disaster. I knew I shouldn’t stop to watch, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away either. The irony of her tragic allure wasn’t lost on me.

In all the years of vampire hunting, I’d never seen someone turn before. I couldn’t help my morbid curiosity. I was fascinated by the way her honey-colored hair was changing from golden to near-white. The way her brown eyes opened wide with fear and began to take on a purple glow. The way her nails grew sharp as they clawed at the ground.

Despite her stunning beauty, I knew she was in a tremendous amount of pain. Not only from the way she flailed on the ground, but from my years of training. I knew a vampire’s physiology almost better than I knew my own. And though I had studied how painful turning was said to be and the metamorphosis that took place there, seeing it happen was a whole other thing entirely. In all honesty, it was startling.

I could almost feel her torment. My stomach clenched in sorrow for her.

Did she have a family? Were they wondering where she had disappeared off to? Was she just some unsuspecting college student on her way home from the library when her maker found her?

“John,” she moaned.

I frowned, wondering who this John was. I knelt down beside her. “Who’s John? Is he your maker?”

“Maker?” she breathed, holding her midsection. “John,” she gasped. “My boyfriend.”

Oh. I hadn’t expected that.

But that brought me to a whole other slew of questions. Where was her maker?

When a vampire decided to create another it was not a benign decision. They took it very seriously and stayed with their creation as though a mother would her child. They taught them and protected them until the new born could learn to be on its own. Why would her maker leave her to turn all alone? And what had even caused the vampire to want to turn her in the first place? Was there something special about her?

I shook myself from my invalid thoughts. I wasn’t there to wonder about some new born vampire and why she was the way she was. I was there on orders. I was there to kill…

Then why hadn’t I yet?

“Not anymore he’s not,” I said in reply to the fact that John was her boyfriend. I slowly reached for my gun and stake. If a silver bullet to the head didn’t do the trick —which in most cases it did— a wooden stake to the heart would. But yet again, I found myself hesitating. What was stopping me?

Was it because this vampire was not yet a vampire? She was still a human, not yet fully turned. I’d never killed a human before. Or was it because she reminded me of a girl I lost long ago?

I shuddered at the rush of emotions the female on the ground brought to me. The situation was too eerily close to the one that had started me on my journey with the FUSE army in the first place.

I glanced up and took in the scene surrounding me. The warehouse we had been staking out, the place where a coven of Unfortunates hid, was now blown to bits. And the parts that still stood were engulfed with flames. My men were retreating into the desert to catch up with the few who’d managed to escape. I was left alone, but I knew it was only temporarily.

I looked back down at my target, the girl who was turning into a vampire right before my eyes. A single tear trickled down her cheek as she looked up at me. Something hit me hard. My chest tightened. And an awareness crossed her face. And something else. Fear?

When our eyes met and I felt a sudden surge of emotion. I pushed it back. I pushed it away, my finger trembling on the trigger. I had never been an emotional person, at least not since Lily was taken from me. And I could not let those emotions overwhelm me at such a time as this. I had taken a vow with my FUSE brothers and I needed to uphold it.

But the look on her face did something to me. It reminded me of something. It transported me back to that night…

No.

I don’t know what made me do it, but I dropped my arm, shoving my gun back into its holster. Damn it. I couldn’t do it. I could not kill an innocent human.

Yes, I saw the paradox of my decision. And yes, that human would be a full-fledged vampire by sunset the next day. But for now, she was just a girl. A poor girl that had been infected. A beautiful girl that I could not keep my eyes off of.

I inhaled deeply and slid the wooden stake into my belt, not realizing that my next decision would change my life forever.

“Shit. I’m gonna regret this.”

three: ruby

I gasped —and yes, just in case you were wondering, vampires do breathe— my lungs burning like hellfire with the shock of sudden oxygen. My eyes flew open in a flash and I was thrust into an explosion of lights and sounds, the blazing heat unbearable. I writhed and moaned, my naked body thrashing this way and that.

Why was I naked? Where was I? Is this was what afterlife was like? Seriously?

I didn’t know where I was or how I even got there, but the pain was excruciating. My body was a cluster of fiery nerves and breaking bones and sore muscles. But through my pain, my senses were heightened, a lightning awareness of everything that surrounded me.

Cool grass beneath my back. The glittering stars above, closer than they’d ever been. And the smell… the smell of everything. I inhaled the freshness of the grass, layered with the musky scent of dirt beneath. I could even smell the earthy clay far beneath the layers of dirt and desert rock.

I gagged.

And blood. I could smell the blood of man and the blood of —what was that? I didn’t know. But it was cold. Cold blood. I tried to crawl away from the chaos I had awoken to...

A war of sorts; large fiery balls exploding left and right, the smell of burning flesh and soot filling the air. My ears were alert. The loud roar of backfire and the concussion of booming detonations wracked through my being, adding to my intense pain. I covered my ears and closed my sensitive eyes against the blinding scene. I balled myself up tight against the ground.

“Freakin’ Fangers!” A man screamed out as I heard feet stampeding across the ground.

I am now very well aware of the meaning that those words held, but at the time I was clueless. Not to mention preoccupied with the torment my body was enduring.

I jumped as a fiery piece of debris crashed to the ground in front of my face. I cried out. It felt as though I were melting from the heat. I inched away from the flaming ball.

“Move. Move. Move!” More voices hollered and others let out blood curdling screams. There was fire. Lots of fire.

Another large chunk of metal came skidding by my body, missing me by mere inches. I covered my head as splinters of metal, wood, and dirt peppered my body like a hard rain. I coughed and sputtered, curling up tight.

Wherever I was, I needed to get away. Or I would die…

For some reason, the thought befuddled me. *I would die?* Something didn’t add up right. I tried to grasp at what it was I was missing, but just couldn’t.

I looked up to see the night sky now covered in blackish-orange billowing smoke. I then felt a presence coming towards me. I tried to move, to run, but I just stumbled and scrabbled along the ground.

A young man kneeled over me, studying me intently. He couldn’t have been more than a couple years older than me. Twenty. Maybe twenty-one?

He looked all rough and tumble, weapons of every sort stuffed into his pack. He was wearing faded green camouflage pants and black boots, his dingy white shirt clung tightly to his smoothly rounded muscles. He looked like a renegade soldier of some sort. His eyes were slate grey and his hair was chocolate brown. He smelled absolutely amazing, like wet leather and wood, and flesh and musk. Strangely enough, he smelt of life.

“Jesus,” he said, his eyes roaming my body and then landing on my neck. “They got to you.”

I reached up and touched my neck, finding what felt like two swollen puncture wounds. My fingers came away sticky just before the agonizing cramps set in again. They shattered through me like a brick through glass. I whimpered lethargically. Why was I in so much pain? What was happening to me?

“John,” I moaned before I knew what I was saying.

He leaned in closer. “Who’s John? Is he your maker?”

I frowned. “Maker?” I doubled over in pain as hot knives stabbed through my body. I breathed heavily after the contraction subsided. “John,” I panted. “My boyfriend.”

Or would he be my ex-boyfriend now? He had broken up with me, hadn’t he? The memory was foggy. Something was missing. Something that had brought me here. And that something tugged at the back of my mind. But I couldn’t recall what it was.

Booming shockwaves echoed through the air behind us. “Not anymore he’s not,” the man said.

“Wait— what?” Another shock of pain jolted through me and I let out a howl of a curse.

The man pulled a gun from his belt and pointed it at my head. What the hell? His face was stern, showing no sign of emotion whatsoever. He was going to kill me. But that didn’t seem right. Where was I?

Again, it was like a thought tried to come to the forefront of my mind but couldn’t quite make it beyond my scorching pain. I wished he’d just do it already. Kill me. At least in death, I wouldn’t be feeling like I was in the fires of hell.

When I finally came to after the blinding pain, I looked up into the man’s eyes. He seemed perplexed, his face twisting with conflicted emotion.

“Shit,” he breathed, sliding his gun back into his holster. “I’m gonna regret this.”

He placed a woolen blanket over my nakedness. It was scratchy but I was thankful. He scooped up my body, hoisted me into his arms —arms stronger than even John’s— and stood in one swift movement. The bulge from his muscles encased me tightly and his head turned from side to side, eyes scanning the surrounding area.

I could now see a group of warehouse buildings engulfed in fire, the flames licking the sides and spewing from the windows and doors. Debris and small fires littered the ground sporadically. I even thought I saw —as insane as it sounds— an arm and a leg lying detached on the ground. But everything was a blur and I couldn’t be too sure.

Soldiers with weapons drawn, and in uniforms similar to the grey-eyed man, were scattering in the opposite direction. The sounds of combat still lingered in the air, although it sounded farther away now. It was as though the explosions were moving of their own accord. But still the sounds of the fire roared deafeningly and the smoke clouded my vision.

“What is going on?” I gripped my stomach as though it would help to subside the agony. “What is happening? Am I dying?”

He took one step and then stopped, looking down at me. “You’re turning.”

“Turning?”

The man twitched uncomfortably and then huffed. “I’ll explain later. For now, I need to get you out of here.”

I frowned. The soldier with the slate-grey eyes was making no sense. Nothing was making any sense. I didn’t even know if I was still in my hometown of Bisbee, Arizona, much less in Arizona at all. Though the specific scent of mesquite trees reassured me that I was at least still in the southwest. I couldn’t remember anything, except flashes of a forgotten memory…

*Crying. Rain. Headlights. Pain.*

*A hospital. Mom. Dad. Darkness.*

“Hold on tight,” my savior said. Without warning my body jolted, bringing me back from my fragmented thoughts. The man ran us into the cover of night, away from the fires and echoing booms. My body bounced with the movement. My arms clumsily wrapped around his neck, my head rolling lethargically.

I felt horrible.

I felt like I was dying… Again.

And then it hit me in the face like a slap from God himself.

I *was* dead.

I remembered now. The accident. I had *died*. My heart had stopped beating and my soul had left my body. Dead.

And this must be my hell.

It was all making sense now. The pain… the blinding pain. And the fires. A wrath from the underworld in which I would spend the rest of eternity.

But I was confused. Didn’t one need to have committed some treacherous crime to enter hell?

In life, I hadn’t been that bad of a person. Aside from a raging addiction to banana pudding and reality Television, I felt that I was quite normal, if not even nicer than most. I babysat for all the neighbors. I never cheated on any tests. I always called my mom to check in if I was going to be late coming home. I was starting college soon. To be a nurse. I wanted to help people. To me that didn’t seem so hell-worthy.

What more could I have done? What else would I need to do to buy my soul a ticket into heaven to spend the rest of my days in the golden beams of lights? What could I have done to deserve this?

I frowned at myself. I should’ve never stolen that tube of lip gloss from the department store when I was fourteen. That was it. That was why I was in hell. I was a horrible, lowly thief and was being punished for it.

I gasped again. Another shock of pain. Another howl of grief, before a dirty bandana was being stuffed into my mouth. I choked and sputtered, my body twisting and turning in the strong man’s arms.

“Shush,” he said, shoving the cloth farther into my mouth, making sure I couldn’t spit it out. “You need to keep quiet or you’ll get us both killed.”

What did he mean? I was already dead. I knew I had died. Though the memories were hazy and fragmented, I knew for sure I was dead.

And if I was dead it would only be logical that the man with me was dead as well. I looked up through squinted eyes. He didn’t look dead. On the contrary, he had a fresh scent of life about him, his skin glowing with vigor. His flesh was warm and his steel-grey eyes liquid and alert. His sharply cut jaw had a lawn of dark stubble growing in patches from lack of upkeep. In all of this madness, I had somehow managed to appreciate his good looks, though it was one of the last things on my mind.

What was on my mind though, were questions. So many questions. But my body was betraying my curiosity by writhing and flailing in excruciating damnation, keeping my attention elsewhere. It was all I could do to keep my arms wrapped around his neck and my knees tucked up into my stomach.

The world became silent. The only sounds were my savior breathing heavily. His footfalls cracked swiftly over rocks and dry branches. The scenery flew by us in swatches of dark greens and browns and blues. The moonlight so bright that it highlighted every line and detail of every plant and animal.

I could’ve sworn I’d even seen a large scorpion with his pointed tail curved upwards in a ready-to-strike position. But that was impossible. No human could see a scorpion in the dead of night, that many feet from the ground. And going as fast as we were. I knew, because I hunted scorpions with my dad. *Used* to hunt scorpions, I should say. And even then we needed a special black light that would ignite the venom inside the creature causing them to glow. I shook my head from the random thought, realizing that I must just be going crazy. Yep. That was it. I was going insane.

“Let’s take a rest for a moment.” The man huffed and sat me down on top of a flat rock. It was rough and jagged, and scraped against the sensitive skin of my rear. I tucked the blanket in under me and wrapped my arms around my knees. I noticed the moon had moved positions in the sky. We must’ve been running for hours, although time flew by unaccounted for.

My eyes then landed on the mysterious soldier as he found his own rock close by and slumped against it. He pulled out a canteen and unscrewed the lid. He brought it to his lips and let the liquid travel down his throat and drizzle down his chin. Afterwards, he handed me the canteen.

“Soon you won’t be needing this stuff anymore,” he remarked as I chugged heavily from the water. It tasted weird, almost metallic, and I felt as though drinking it were pointless. I grimaced and handed it back to him.

“No good, huh?” He let out a small chuckle and it made me smile, although for the life of me —or un-life, rather— I didn’t know why I was smiling. Here I was, thrown into some sort of different realm of reality —or at least I thought so at the time. And I was naked to boot. Not my idea of something to smile about.

“Where are you taking me?” Of all the hundreds of questions in my mind, that one seemed the most relevant. I felt silly asking because it made the situation almost seem normal. Like I was asking my boyfriend what restaurant he was taking me to on our date. But this man was definitely not my boyfriend and this situation was anything but normal. It was unreal.

The soldier shifted his position on his rock and checked his watch. “Someplace safe.”

“You ever heard of a car before?” Again, words came from my mouth before thinking. It was my failed attempt at making light of the grim situation. It was quite ironic really. If I was dead how would I even be in a situation? Or was I in some weird purgatory dream?

He looked at me impassively, and I could literally feel his grey eyes boring through me.

I wasn’t quite sure about my savior yet. Was he a figment of my imagination? Was he a machine with absolutely no emotions? He seemed to be all business, cold, distant. Though, if he was in fact alive, I couldn’t blame him. We had just been through a battle from the depths of hell after all.

His gaze shifted away from me and into the night. I could practically see the wheels turning in his head. “We have to stay off the roadways and out of sight. For now, at least. I’ve done something really bad.”

His words made me flinch slightly.

Bad? What could he have done that was so bad? I looked him up and down, his gorgeous profile highlighted by the moonlight. Yes, he had had a gun to my head. But he’d thought better of it. He was the one to pull me out of the battle and save me from the raining debris and fire. He had saved my life, hadn’t he? What about that was so bad?

“What have you done?” I asked.

“I rescued you.”

“Okay...” I looked down at my fingers, which were tangled together and thought about what he had said. Why was rescuing me a bad thing? It had just come to my attention that I hadn’t been in searing pain in a while. I was still in pain —don’t get me wrong— but I could at least sit upright now.

His voice brought my eyes up to his. “Orders were to kill every vampire on sight.”

My heart was racing, my limbs numb and my mind whirling at his words. I laughed out loud. “And you think *I’m* a…vampire?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. But by tomorrow night you will be.”

four: guy

Though the girl was petite and not very heavy, my arms were starting to tire. I’d ran us through the desert for the better part of two hours, getting us as far away from the ambush as possible. If they found me with her… if I was caught… I didn’t even want to think about the repercussions. I glanced to her body that hung over my shoulder like a bag of wet laundry and frowned.

God, what was I doing? What in the actual hell was I doing? Had I completely lost my mind? What on earth could’ve motivated me to make such a rash decision? One that could possibly mean the end for my career? And probably my life?

I guess I hadn’t thought it through. I guess I had just let my emotions take over. But that wasn’t like me. I didn’t have emotions. Hell, I’d even heard people say that I didn’t have a heart. All machine. All combat. All killing. I’d had emotions at one point in time, years ago. But that was before I realized how badly that could turn out for someone. Feeling. What had now caused my sudden stroke of compassion? Did I have a brain hemorrhage or something?

I stopped, but only momentarily, to consider my options. The sky was completely dark now, the orange glow from the explosions long gone. Stars twinkled merrily in the sky as if I hadn’t just made the biggest mistake of my life. I could take her back and leave her in the bushes for someone else to find. I could leave her there and reconvene with my men back at headquarters. I shook my head.

No, she’d talk. She’d tell them what I had done. I couldn’t chance that. The only other option was to kill her, and I’d already proved myself unable to do that. God. What was wrong with me? What was seriously wrong with me?

The girl suddenly cried out in pain, bringing me back to my ridiculous reality. I’d have to go on. I’d have to find a place to take her and leave her. And I knew just the man. But would he have us? The old vampire and I had an odd relationship. We had an agreement. We were to never speak again. He hated me and I him. That was what enemies were for right? But under the circumstances… just maybe…

It wasn’t the best idea, but it was my only idea. I’d have to make it work.

But for now, day was approaching. And the girl would need shelter away from the sun. She would need darkness.

I tried to recall the map of Bisbee I’d studied for days on end once being assigned on this reconnaissance. I saw the rough outlines of the small town and the major roads. I saw the warehouse we’d been staking out. I saw the wash that we now traveled along in my mind’s eye. There was something up ahead. Something that could offer us shelter. But I couldn’t remember what. I just hoped that we could find it before anyone else found us…

“I think I can walk now.” The girl huffed, irritated. She was folded over my shoulder, her butt in the air and her face pressed against my back. The blanket was barley covering her body.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?” I dropped her like a bag of cement. She *oomphed* upon hitting the ground and rubbed her backside. She shot me a nasty glare. I smirked, somehow amused by her annoyance.

“Here,” I said, pulling a couple of rags from my pack. “Tie these onto your feet, or you’ll get stickers.”

She pulled the blanket closer to her chest, hiding her form beneath. Her angry gaze softened, if only slightly, and our eyes met. I saw something there in the depths of her purple irises. Was it gratitude for stealing her away from the battle? I couldn’t be sure, but I felt it through to the bottom of my toes. I shifted uncomfortably.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the little squares of white cloth in her small hands. She tied them to the soles of her feet.

I took a deep breath and averted my eyes. I was still addled from our precarious situation. The one I had put us in. But I stood up straight and squared my shoulders. Like it or not, this had been my decision after all. And I needed to fix it. I took a quick gulp of water and shoved my canteen in my pack.

“We need to find you some clothes and shelter. Quickly.”

I stood and eyed our surroundings. We were literally in the middle of nowhere. The desert sky, a wide canopy of darkness and stars. That was the way I liked it. I somehow felt at peace out in the wilderness alone. But I was not alone really, was I? I had the girl with me. And though it went against everything I had trained for, everything I believed in, it was now my job to take care of her.

“It’s so loud!” The girl suddenly screamed, her hands covering her ears. Her flawless face was scrunched up tight. She looked as though she was at a rock concert against a loud speaker, trying to block out the vibrating noise. But except for the vague melody of crickets and an occasional rustling breeze, the desert was silent.

I knew what was happening, though it was hard to imagine what it would be like. I’d never actually thought about it before. I’d never seen someone turning into a vampire. But it was said to be a torturous feat. Everything in the person’s body was on overdrive, their sense of hearing being one of them. The slightest sound was intensified by a hundred and there was little to do to relieve it. But I knew that it would pass once her body became acclimated to the venom coursing through her.

“It’s part of turning,” I shrugged, not wanting her to know how much this was truly affecting me. “You’ll get used to it.”

She looked up at me, irritated. I could tell my casual manner was bothering her. I smirked.

“Do you have a cell phone?” she scoffed. “Can I call my mom? My boyfriend?” She was still muffling her ears.

“No.” I slung my pack over my shoulders and walked on. She ran to catch up, limping and hunching over with pain. I didn’t have time for this. I needed to get us somewhere safe.

“No, you don’t have a cell phone? Or no, I can’t call my family?”

I grunted. When I’d seen her lying there at the warehouse, she’d done something to me, struck a chord inside of me. I’d almost felt bad for her. But now she was just talking too much.

“I want to go home. I want to see my family.”

Here we go again. I sighed. “You are a vampire now —or will be shortly,” I explained, trying to harness a shred of patience. “It’s against the rules to contact anyone. They must still believe you to be missing or dead.” There. Now we needed to move. I rushed ahead, coming to a long row of bushes blocking our path. Which way to go?

“So that’s it?” she huffed. “Out of nowhere I become a vampire. And now I have no family? No friends? What about school? I was supposed to be starting college soon.”

I snorted in response. I wasn’t her grief counselor. I didn’t feel like I should owe her anything, much less an explanation. I’d saved her from permanent death. Wasn’t that enough? I pulled out my machete and started whacking at an overgrown patch of dry bramble.

“What’s going to happen to me?” She asked when I didn’t respond.

The girl was relentless. I let out a loud breath. “Say goodbye to everything you knew before. This is your new life.”

We made our way through the brush and into a clearing at the bottom of a hill. She stopped and looked up at me, her face turning solemn and serious. I couldn’t help but feel the effects of her pleading gaze. Her eyes dropped to the wooden stake that hung on my belt and then back up. She flinched. “You really think I’m a vampire, don’t you?” Our eyes stayed locked for one long moment, before I latched onto her arm and pulled her along with me.

“I don’t think. I know.”

five: ruby

I couldn’t believe what the soldier had just said to me. He had said that I was turning into a vampire. Me? A vampire? If I hadn’t been in so much pain, I’d have laughed out loud. The thought was bizarre. Absolutely crazy.

Vampires were things of fantasy. They were Halloween costumes and storybook characters. They were count Dracula. They were cartoons.

They weren’t real. Were they?

I took in the form of my savior and at first glance he seemed to be just a normal soldier. But he had more weapons strapped to him than the artillery room at the White House. And the thing that struck me even more was the strange weapon that hung at his side. What kind of soldier carried a wooden stake as protection? My heart pounded quickly as my mind began to realize that he just might be telling the truth. I stepped over a fallen tree branch and almost fell.

My mind was spinning, trying desperately to grasp onto any shred of reality. I clung to the images that kept flashing through my brain, trying to replay the recent events. But other than having a heated argument with my boyfriend and crashing in my car, I couldn’t remember much other than dying in the cold hospital bed. Then waking to searing pain beneath a torrent of fire and explosions. Something was missing and I couldn’t fill in the pieces.

“Come on,” Guy grumbled, as if annoyed by my presence. But he glanced over at me and stopped.

Though his face was stern, his grey eyes held something softer. Could it be sympathy? A sadness of some sort? Compassion for my stroke of bad luck?

Strangely enough I hadn’t asked my handsome savior’s name, nor had he offered it either. He hadn’t even asked me anything about myself, but had just thrown me over his back and carried me like a sack of potatoes. The moon had disappeared and I knew it would be light soon, the line of the mountain range growing a hazy pink in the impending dawn.

We trudged through a wash and up a steep incline, the rocks beneath my feet piercing through the cloth and into my skin.

I could feel tears welling in my eyes, but I would not let this man see me cry. I would find a way out of this. But he had said I couldn’t contact my family? Forever or just for now? And even if I could find my way back to them would they even want me? Now with what I’d become? But that was only if this man was telling the truth. And how did I know that I could trust him? My brain was on overload, sparking and fuming like a fried circuit board. What the hell was going on?

“I just… I don’t understand what happened,” I said loudly. I could barely hear myself think over the loud noises clogging my head. Bugs skittering and chirping. Our feet crunching. The wind whistling. I clamped my hands to my ears. “How did I become a… a vampire? I was dying. I died.”

He stopped suddenly. “You died? You weren’t taken?”

I shook my head. “I was in a car accident. I died.”

He looked as though something bothered him, his face contorting strangely in thought. But it disappeared quickly. He shrugged. “Well then, you probably did die. But only for mere seconds. And then some vampire —God only knows why— decided you should become one of them.”

Why? I wondered. Why in the world would a vampire see fit that I become a part of their —what would it be? —Race? Kind? And not only was the fact that I was changing into a blood-sucking monster, a mind-blowing concept, but the whole fact that they truly did exist at all in the first place was petrifying.

“Are you one?” I asked my handsome savior whose name I still did not know.

He laughed loudly. “No.”

I felt embarrassed by his response and almost insulted. If I was in fact going to be a vampire and there was nothing I could do about it, the least he could do was show a little respect. I might just decide that it would be his blood I’d like to try. For the first time, I reached up and felt my teeth. No fangs. Just smooth white pearls, lined up real nice in two neat rows, thanks to the braces that I’d worn a couple years ago.

“Well if you’re not a vampire,” I said, “then why are you helping me?”

He looked over, a whisper of sincerity crossing his face. “I couldn’t bring myself to kill you.”

I creased my brows, confused. “But according to you, I’m a vampire. And apparently you kill vampires. So what gives?”

The man said nothing, but kept trudging through the rocky terrain. His shoulders were tense and I could sense a shift in his mood.

“Why?” I asked again. “Why are you helping me?”

“I couldn’t go through that again,” he mumbled.

“Go through what?” I asked.

He let out a long loud breath and scrubbed a hand back through his dark hair.

“The reason I didn’t kill you was because you’re still human.”

“Then why did you run off with me like that? Why didn’t you just leave me there?”

He huffed. “Because *they* would’ve killed you.”

My heart sank at his troubling words.

“Who’s *they*?”

“FUSE soldiers.” The man’s answers were short and clipped. I could tell he didn’t want to talk. But I didn’t care. I needed answers.

“And these soldiers kill vampires?”

“*We* kill Vampires.”

“Do you work for the government?”

“Do you ever shut up?” He shot me a look, at me then and stopped when he saw what I clearly felt; a raging bolt of pain washing through me.

I collapsed to the ground and tucked up into a ball, wailing and shrieking. Every nerve ending, every muscle and bone in my body felt as though it were ripping, breaking, and blazing with fire. The man got to his knees and placed my head on his lap to keep it off the rocky ground. “Damn it.” He awkwardly rubbed my back, a small attempt at comfort. After what seemed an eternity, the pain finally ebbed —if only a little, leaving me gasping for air. This time I let the tears flow.

“This is only temporary,” he said, still rubbing my back as if he’d never done the like before. Although the man was a complete stranger, his presence was comforting and his fingers felt like a soothing balm on my aching skin. My skin pebbled with shivers. Something I might have mistaken for pleasure traveled through me. But I was unable to hold back my emotions.

“I don’t know what to think,” I sobbed into my hands. “How could this happen? I lost my family once already when I died. And now you’re telling me I’m losing them again? And I’m turning into this creature that should only exist in storybooks?” I couldn’t stop the streams of tears running down my face. “This is crazy,” I sniffled. “It’s insane.” I didn’t know how many times I’d said it, but I was sure it wouldn’t be the last. I looked up into his storm cloud eyes and blinked. “Who are you? I don’t even know your name.”

The man huffed and gazed down at me. I was shaking profusely and my face was wet with tears. He pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to me.

“Guy,” he announced.

“Guy?” I asked. “Guy what?”

“Guy Stone. I am a Captain in the FUSE army.” I looked up at him, but before I could ask any more questions he explained further. I could see that he was planning his words carefully. “FUSE stands for the Faction of Unfortunate Souls Elimination. We are a secret sect of the government whose main goal is to exterminate Unfortunate Souls.”

I wiped off my face and then blew my nose loudly into the hankie. “Unfortunate Souls?”

He paused, rubbing his hands over his face. I got the feeling that he was revealing more information to me than he should be. “Vampires, Witches, Werewolves —or as we call them— the Unfortunate Souls.” I watched his face, a mix of emotions washing over him. His face was hard with determination, but soft with the element of youth. There were no wrinkles or lines, only patches of unshaven stubble over his smooth skin. I reached up and touched the stubble on his cheek.

“You’re young to be a Captain.” I remarked.

He shrugged. “I’ve been training a long time.”

The moonlight had gone completely now and the sky was turning a dim pink.

“Are you okay now?” he asked. I nodded, pulling the blanket closer to my chest. At such a time as this, my modesty was almost funny. But thankfully, Guy didn’t mock me. He helped me up off the ground. “The sun is coming. We need to move quickly.”

I didn’t know exactly why we needed to move so quickly or why it mattered that the sun was coming out. But I could read the distressed look on his face and knew that it must be urgent. And for some reason, though I wasn’t sure why, I trusted Guy Stone.

Without another word, he took my hand and we began trotting through the desert. Not a few minutes later, we edged up a hill and stopped at the top. Over the other side, sat an old, crumbling Spanish Catholic Mission, the three white arches at the top holding three large copper bells. It loomed tall with its three-story façade, and it shone a bright white against the dusky, neutral desert.

“We’ve run out of time,” he said. “I hope you like going to church.”