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Hunting Souls

Our Treacherous Souls · Vol. 1

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PROLOGUE

Ever since I can remember, I've loved the Addams Family. Not the Pritchett-Dunphys, the Simpsons or – may Lilith have mercy on my undead soul – the Kardashians.

No. My favourite TV family is a strange thrown-together gang of outcast creatures with a marked preference for grotesque and morbid things like graveyards, poisoning and decapitated roses. Just like my own family. With the minor difference that the Addams Family is fictional. And mine is very much real, though not every member necessarily enjoys a functioning heartbeat or a physical existence. All the same, we're here.

We're real, and no mortal soul knows what exactly we really are...

To our neighbours, for instance, we're the strange but nice Smythes. The outsiders in this sealed microcosm they call a town, where everyone knows everyone else and says hello to them on the street. Actually, there is a family like ours everywhere you go. And New Arcadia, a small town in the far north of Washington State, is no exception. We're oddballs here, and that's totally fine with us. We're fully aware that we're a curiosity in this perfect little world. I mean, how could we not be?

My parents run a well-regarded funeral parlour in our basement, and we live in an old house in the Victorian Gothic style, made of dark sandstone, well off the beaten track on the edge of town. Mom and Dad never leave the house without a parasol, and my sister Carolyn likes to dance on the roof. Luckily my brother Anthony went off to college a few months ago – which meant an end to people wondering why we were buying such large amounts of raw beef every week. And the midnight barking of our dog, Frankie (who no one has ever seen) annoys a sleepless old lady occasionally. And I can kind of understand that – he does have an unusually loud voice-box, even for a ghost.

Centuries ago, we'd have been burned at the stake for our sinister appearance alone – to be on the safe side. But today, our neighbours have enough respect for us to just steer clear. No one voluntarily invites us to a bar mitzvah or a dinner party. But then I can't imagine anything worse than a boring dinner with mortals, listening to them make small talk.

In the eighteen years I have existed so far, then, people have treated us like weird but harmless eccentrics and not like what we really are. No one believes in the existence of vampires, werewolves, witches or the undead. To our neighbours, we're like them, just with an unusually dark lifestyle.

But things can change quickly. I sense with every fibre of my undead being that something is coming for us, and it most likely has something to do with us no longer living alone at the end of this street in New Arcadia. A new family has moved into Warrington House across the street from us, which had been abandoned for years. Something tells me this is going to bring a sudden end to the good old days...

KATRINA

Chapter 1

Some things in our house are disturbingly normal. My alarm clock going off in the morning, for instance. I'm already eighteen and under American law I count as an adult in some areas, but I still go to high school. It's my senior year, and I can't wait for this nightmare to end. Nothing is worse than school – and I'm allowed to say that. I'm already dead, and for very many people their own death is their greatest nightmare.

This whole alarm clock business is nonsense when you consider that I don't need any real sleep. No matter how pale I look and how raw my nerves are, it has nothing to do with the average teenager's lack of sleep. Still, Mom insists that I at least rest for a few hours a day, so I can arrive at New Arcadia High feeling as relaxed and fresh as possible. I still don't get what good graduating high school is supposed to do me, but then I also don't try very hard to figure it out. In the end I'd just have to admit that she's right, which might unbalance our great mother-daughter relationship. I feel around for the alarm clock next to me and thump it until it dies quietly with a pitiful noise. Five minutes. I just want another five minutes. Not because I'm tired, but because I have no desire to get up. Without further ado I turn onto my other side and – like every morning – just hope for the best.

A scratchy scraping sound makes me hesitantly open one eye. I peer at the dark ceiling of my room, fully alert now. There is a flash of something silver up there, and my body reacts instinctively before razor-sharp blades start raining down on me. Well-trained from plenty of other mornings like this one, I roll out of bed and land heavily with a loud thud on the creaking floorboards. At the same time, the points of Dad's prized set of kitchen knives slice deep slits into my mattress. That's probably it for the mattress, then.

Around me there rings an echo-like, diabolic giggling which leaves me in no doubt about who is behind this attack.

"You little bitch," I hiss, getting up. Anyone else's backside would be hurting right now, but all I can feel is a dull pressure where I landed. One of the advantages of being undead. In the vast majority of cases, pain is the least of my problems. I knock the dust from my pyjama shorts and look around for any other ambushes my charming sister Carolyn might have set up. She can be very inventive when it comes to getting me out of bed in the morning. I would love to say that the floating knives are just the tip of the iceberg, but we're the Smythes. Thanks to a comprehensive protection spell we can't seriously injure one another inside the house, but otherwise there are very, very few limits to our imagination.

It is pitch black, but I can see perfectly well. I see the dark paint on my bedroom walls and notice every tiny uneven place in the brickwork, through which a draught blows into every nook and cranny. Heavy black velvet curtains keep out the daylight, and a single bare lightbulb hangs from my ceiling, though I don't often turn it on. My bed, with the knives sticking out of it like it's a wooden block, is in the middle of the room, surrounded by a rustic wardrobe, a chest of drawers

with a carnivorous plant on it, and a desk covered in papers and my laptop. Beside that, against the wall, is a musty old sofa covered in thick velvet. It came with the house when my family bought it – before I was even born. A greying carpet with its pile trodden flat completes the cosy ambience. Seriously: you often find pictures of rooms like this in the newspapers under headlines like “Teenager sacrifices guinea pig in satanic ritual”. I’d never sacrifice a guinea pig, though – I’d rather do one of my classmates. I love animals far too much for that, unlike humans. I quickly find what I’m looking for: my Betty. I shift Betty from one hand to the other, feeling her pleasant weight, and pull my lips into a thin smile. I’m really attached to this trinket.

Mom and Dad gave me the axe for my eleventh birthday, having given me all the different types of sharp knife they could find over the previous few years. Even as a small child I was more fascinated by this kind of toy than the typical dolls or plastic bricks. I mean – that stuff can’t do anything. Anything at all. Maybe the bear will giggle when you press his tummy, but that’s it. A carefully curated set of every kind of knife, on the other hand... that teaches your daughter so much more for her future life – if only how not to accidentally injure herself with them.

Betty is a pitch-black beauty and her cutting edge is so sharp I could use it to shave a werewolf bald without cutting him. Next time my brother Anthony comes home for our sister Lyn’s birthday, he’ll confirm it. That’s my favourite so far of the Halloween pranks I’ve played on him, and there’s still a photo of it somewhere. A hairless werewolf is totally hilarious, even if the joke was a bit one-sided.

I open the door of my room cautiously. As on almost every other morning, I’m greeted by an excited whimpering. “Hey, Frankie,” I reply to thin air. Frankenstein is our wrinkly, slobbering bulldog, though he isn’t really our pet. You can’t own a ghost, and as true specimens of his kind do, he came into our family when we bought the house. Lyn and I were allowed to name him, and after we found old photos of him and the previous owners in the attic, we worked out that he must have died at some point more than twenty-five years ago.

Before I shuffled off this mortal coil, Frankie had no discernible form for me. He was quite simply invisible. It was only Mum and Dad who told us where the nighttime whining was coming from. Ghosts can’t be seen by the living. You sense their presence in the form of unpleasant goosebumps, or you hear their pitiful moans, because they’re incredibly weepy or terribly angry in a really tedious way. But see them? No. You have to be dead yourself for that. Frankie is always howling his head off and gets quite bitey if you rub him up the wrong way. But I’ve had him eating out of my hand since I’ve been able to see more of him. Lyn and Anthony still regularly run right through him, and so I’m Frankie’s favourite among the children. I’m considerate towards him and sometimes I tell him what a good boy he is, so he’ll feel better and be quieter. Now, I step past him into the hall outside my room. Our house is like a labyrinth, composed of various extensions from different epochs. The heart of our home is the orangery, a steel and glass construction two floors high, which is where our living room slash greenhouse is. Thanks to my Aunt Apollonia’s consummate witching skills, the sun is filtered through the glass in such a way that so one turns into a heap of ash when they walk in there. At the same time, Mum’s huge jungle plants, which take up most of the room, have more than enough light to grow happily and thrive.

At the weekend I don’t usually know exactly where my beloved family will be, but on a Thursday morning it isn’t too hard to find them. Although we all have particular preferences when it comes to breakfast, it’s important to Mom and Dad that we act like mortals as far as possible. They insist that we get enough sleep, graduate high school and eat together in the morning and the evening. And so even for us it’s normal to hear Mom’s melodic humming from the kitchen as I walk down the upstairs corridor towards the stairs.

I rest the handle of the axe easily on my shoulder. When you’re like us, it doesn’t do any good to creep up on someone. Pretty much everyone in this house except Lyn can smell or hear me

coming a mile off – in the worst case, both. That makes it damn difficult to keep anything a secret from them. Mom often laughs about it and calls it the sixth parental sense – I call it the worst tragedy for a teenager, to be the daughter of two vampires.

Before I get downstairs, there's a ring at the door. Not the usual mechanical buzz you get in normal houses. Our doorbell sounds a lot like a cat whose tail you've just stood on too hard – like in a comic horror movie. Dad loves these references.

From the top of the stairs I see Mom going to the door. The chestnut brown hair that reaches her shoulder blades ends in soft waves and looks like it's been set in concrete there. She's wearing a black dress with long pointed sleeves, and it curves out from her hips into a voluminous knee-length skirt. Her pumps are the same colour and the right style. She looks a bit like a housewife from a 1950s advert, who is about to set off for a funeral. Mourning colours suit her supernaturally well. Mom opens the door, and on the other side is a guy who I've never seen before in this town.

"Morning," he greets my mother in a deep, friendly voice. I walk slowly down the stairs, and his eyes dart briefly past her and up to me. If he's confused by the sight of my axe, he doesn't show it. Anyway, it's completely normal to be walking around the house with one of these, right? "I hope I'm not disturbing you. My name's Tate Walker and my family moved in across the street a few days ago." Mom shakes her head. "No, it's fine. It's nice to meet you. What can I do for you?"

I can't see it, but I'd bet Betty on Mom having put on her most heartfelt smile.

Tate's face relaxes, and the corners of his mouth lift into a smile that radiates so much charm he gains my full attention.

"My mom has been meaning to drop round and say hi. But I'm afraid work is stopping her and my dad from doing that right now, so I'm here instead."

People seldom turn up outside our door, and so I inspect him thoroughly from my elevated position on the stairs. Wavy brown hair, thick eyebrows over blue-green eyes, the colour recognisable even from a distance. His jaw looks chiselled and his nose is neither too large nor too small for his face. Tate doesn't seem any older than most of the people at my school, and he's wearing a plain dark grey t-shirt that his muscular upper body fills out perfectly. He probably does some kind of sport. I bet it's football. Or swimming? He has the shoulders for it. And because it's October already and a little chilly out, he has put on an open check shirt over the top. The sleeves are rolled up to display his strong forearms. Sturdy black jeans with it, and boots that look mud and water-proof. Not one of the classic heartthrobs you see in New Arcadia, but definitely not bad. Even I find it difficult not to stare at him for too long.

Unfortunately, he's incredibly mortal. Even from the stairs I can smell, beneath a pleasant aftershave, another, typically human scent: sweat. Sweat and... there's something else there, but what? I can't say exactly, but it seems damn familiar.

Without thinking about the fact that all I'm wearing is my oversized black t-shirt and sleeping shorts, I go down one, two, and eventually three more steps so as not to miss the conversation.

"That's so nice of you." Mom sounds genuinely touched. She's always like this – for various reasons she loves mortals and isn't at all bothered by talking to them about boring everyday stuff. "I'm Beatrice Smythe."

A step creaks treacherously under my bare feet, making Mom turn halfway round to look at me. She knew I was there already, of course, but centuries of living with humans have taught her to mimic their behaviour. If the stairs creak loudly behind you, you turn around in surprise.

Even after all the time we've been mother and daughter, I'm always struck by how unusually beautiful she is. Some might think her face a little too oval and her nose a touch too straight and long, but I don't know anyone who displays such elegance and dignity without looking down on others. She treats everyone with respect and kindness, which gives her a beauty all her own.

“Dear heart,” she greets me with a perfect smile. She turns back to Tate, who looks me up and down without trying to hide it. That’s only fair, after I did the same to him. “My eldest daughter, Katrina,” Mom says by way of introduction, as I step off the final stair. He nods at me. It’s only now that I really notice how tall he is. I have to tilt my head back to look him in the eye. “That’s a lovely name.” His eyes travel to my t-shirt, but not in the grubby way that would instantly make me want to kick him in the nuts. “You’re a fan of My Chemical Romance?” I look down at myself. The logo of my favourite band is emblazoned right across my chest. “No, I like to wear shirts with bands I can’t stand on them. That’s my whole thing.” His lips twitch as he points to the axe. “And what’s that for?” I lean against the wall beside the door and raise my shoulders. “I want to teach my sister a lesson for hounding me out of bed with a set of kitchen knives.”

Before Tate has a chance to get scared – which I very much doubt, because like all boys I’m sure he thinks he can handle a flyweight like me no problem – Mom intervenes with a laugh clear as a bell. “Katrina’s only joking. She has to chop some wood before school.”

She places a hand on my shoulder and presses a kiss onto the top of my head. She’s taller than me too, especially in those shoes. But mostly because I’m barely five feet four. Some of our floor-standing clocks are taller than me.

“That’s what I thought,” says Tate. Seriously? “What year are you in?”

“Senior,” I tell him.

“Me too. We finally get to graduate soon.”

That’s the last thing I need. A neighbour who is apparently the same age as me and for lack of alternatives will go to the same school. I pray silently that it doesn’t occur to Mom to suggest some kind of ride-share.

“Katrina talks of nothing else.” Mom gives me a little grin that I return without any real feeling. I’m only doing this whole school thing for her, and because she is the way she is, she regularly shows me her gratitude for it.

“I get that.” Tate clears his throat. “Before I forget – my mom would like to invite you over for dinner tonight. My parents will be home late this afternoon. So if you’d like, we’d be really glad if you could all come over.”

Mom doesn’t seem especially surprised. “You know what, Tate?” she says. “How about if you come to us? We have Mathilda, who’s an excellent cook and can honestly prepare anything your heart desires.”

Oh yes. Lyn and Aunt Apollonia might be the official witches in this family, but what Mathilda conjures up every day to suit our wildly different tastes and needs borders on true magic. Raising the dead is a cheap party trick by comparison.

“Oh, I’m sure Mom wouldn’t want you to go to any trouble for our sake,” Tate responds politely. The way he says it makes me think he doesn’t find the invitation awkward. Preparing a dinner would probably be left to him or one of New Arcadia’s delivery services.

“Not at all, we’d love to. You must have more than enough to do with the move. Just come over with your family at eight. I’m sure it will be a lovely evening.”

Tate – totally unexpectedly – agrees and takes his leave, saying we’ll see each other later at school.

[...]

“What is it?” I ask.

“Something is not right about that boy.”

A little laugh slips past my lips. “Good that you’ve invited him and his family to dinner, then.”

