The moon was full and bright in the sky, light was beaming onto the worn and cracked asphalt, and yet the night felt so dark and gloomy. My heart was beating on overdrive and my blood was pumping so quickly that I was worried that the creature standing in front of me was able to hear. It lifted its slightly disconnected head and let out such an unearthly and terrifying shriek that I couldn’t help but wince. Little by little, soldier after soldier appeared and stood at solute behind their commander, readying themselves for a battle of all battles- a battle between monsters from horror movies and the human race. Another ear splitting scream was released, and the army charged. “Now?” He said a little uncomfortably. “Not yet,” I replied. Footsteps sounded from behind me. I turned to see the calm and determined face that was my trusty librarian. I couldn’t help but say, “You’re late.” He looked behind me at the approaching enemies. “Yeah, sorry about that.” I nodded my head with a small grin and turned around to make sure that everything was going according to plan. They were getting closer, and he was getting very uneasy because he said, “Now?” I cut him an annoyed look, “No! Not yet!” He looked at me again, “Has the book nerd gotten here yet? I would really like to avoid becoming a midnight snack!” “Yeah.” I replied. “He just arrived about a minute ago.” I looked back to the dashed-white-line battlefield. It was time. “Now!” I shouted to him.

*Please let this work. We’re all doomed if this doesn’t.*

**Chapter 1**

My voice echoed through the corridor, it sounded as if a million of my own clones were mocking me. Only, instead of hearing “Hello, who’s there”-like I was supposed to, I heard, “You idiot, do you really think that you can escape?”

*This can’t be happening. This can***not** *be happening!*  I kept thinking to myself.

Footsteps. I heard footsteps. Haunting the path that I just took.

Running! I had to start running, and I knew that it would give away my exact position, but I had to get away. Faraway. As I ran spider webs got tangled in my hair, mousetraps snapped at my bare feet, and it was slowing me down. Time was running out and I knew it. I stopped, looked around, but could see nothing. It was pitch black in the god-forsaken place. So for all I knew, I was just running in circles.

Moving shackled feet brought my attention back to my follower. A barely audible groan whispered its way down the twisting hallway, it was closer than I suspected. I began to move, this time sprinting. Ignoring all of the pain that shot up through my legs, as I accidently stepped on mousetraps that I couldn’t avoid. I started to recognize some tapestries that I had passed on my way in to this castle. Pure relief surged through my veins, and I lurched forward into motion once again. Not long after that, the grand entry way came into view. I forced myself to move faster. I was just about to open the door that had kept me from freedom, when a deathly ice-cold hand grasped my arm.

“Ouch!” I looked back at the zombie. A devilish smile played on her lips like it was a national holiday for the undead. But I only knew that she was thinking that it was dinner time. Lilly’s red reamed eyes were full of hate and hunger. Zombies are always hungry. And get this, before yesterday I had sworn to Winston that zombies didn’t exist. Well if I ever got to see him again, he would probably make me eat those words for lunch. I drew my attention back to her-it- and caught a wicked smile. *Alright think, think, what did zombies like most? Flesh. No,no, that wouldn’t work for my benefit. What else? Think, you stupid girl, think!*

Company. They like company. Crap.

Within a flash, Lilly opened her mouth, trying to stick her grimy teeth into my skin. Before she could, though, I wrenched my arm free from her harsh grasp and lunged for the sword that was on the wall behind her. I reached it and saw that it was dull, not sharp. *It will have to do.* I never thought that I would ever be put into the position of being forced to kill my best friend. I only had a moment to think about what I was about to do, but I quickly dismissed the sorrow that filled me. Without any hesitation, I swung the sword with as much force as I was able to muster.

*It was either me or her.* I kept telling myself this as I walked numbly to the nearest gas station, which was three miles away, at least. The outside air chilled me to the bone, and it looked like it was about to rain, perfect. I didn’t know how long I had been walking, but I finally gave up and sat down underneath a weeping willow. *Plop. Pitter. Patter. Plop.*  Rain started falling from the heavens. I let the rain poor down on me, soaking me through. It felt nice, but it soon became so uncomfortable that I began shaking. I looked down at my feet and saw dry blood, caked on. I scrubbed them free of the red, but now they were extremely pink, raw. I tried to wash my face as best as I could. God only knew what I looked like at that point in my life. I washed my hands, washed them so many times, trying to wipe away the guilt that consumed me. I soon ran out of things to clean, so that left me time to think. Not good. Thankfully I saw headlights growing brighter and brighter, a car was coming my way. And they were going to stop for me whether they liked it or not. I quickly jumped into the middle of the pot-hole filled road, hoping that the car would brake in time. I noticed a silhouette of a man or possibly a teenage boy, but either way, I *was* getting a ride. The brakes screeched in protest as the driver noticed me. I walked over to the passenger side once the car was completely stopped. The window was already rolled down. “Steph?”

Out of all the people to find me, it had to be him. It had to be Elric. “Jesus! What happened to you? Do you need a ride?” I looked at him; his face was masked in shadow. I was going to say yes, but then thought better of it. “You know, no, I don’t. Sorry for making you stop. Bye Elric.” School was going to be utter hell tomorrow. “Wait! Stephanie! Where are you going to walk?! There isn’t any civilization for hours! The nearest gas station is like 6 miles away!”

“You don’t need to over exaggerate, Elric. The nearest gas station is not *hours* away, it just might take me a while, and that is fine. I am perfectly content with walking.” With that I began limping away, feet still hurting from the mouse traps and the extreme scrubbing. I didn’t make it far before I heard a car door open. I tried to walk faster, but I knew it was pointless trying to out run a football quarterback, even if I could walk normally. Once again a hand gripped me, but this time it was nice and warm, and it was placed around my waist. Before I knew it, he slung me over his shoulder like I was a sack of potatoes. “Hey! Stop! Put me down!” I protested loudly. “Something is up with you Stephanie, and that something is getting you hurt.” He paused to put me gently into the passenger seat of his car. Continuing, he said, “Were you sneaking out here to do drugs?” My eyes nearly popped out of my skull in surprise. “What? Drugs? Of course not!” Glancing at me suspiciously, he slammed the door on my face. I could hear him splashing through the rain as he made his way to the driver’s side of the car. The door opened and he sat down, now soaked through as well. “Then what were you doing out here? Especially alone, it can be dangerous.” He glanced at my bare feet. “And where the hell are your shoes?” I looked over in his direction and his face was now completely visible. His hair was plastered to the sides of his face and his sea green eyes were piercing, staring right at me.

“Stephanie?”

I sighed, bringing my attention back to the ever so pleasing conversation. The conversation that I was beginning to wish would end.

“Why do you even care, Elric?”

“Excuse me?” His tone was laced with hurt, but he knew where I was coming from. “Why,” I asked. “do you even care?” Ignoring my question, he said, “I am not answering any of your questions until you answer mine.” That was when I snapped. “Why should I tell you? Why should I tell you when at school all you do is throw me into trashcans and shove me into lockers? Do you think that I am stupid?! No way am I giving you ammunition so that you can torture me more than you already do!” Instead of stopping to let him defend himself, I kept on with my little rant. “Do you really want to know why I was out here? Fine. I was doing drugs. And I left my shoes at home, so back off,” I lied. I then opened the car door and tried to step out, but fell. Using the side view mirror, I got to my feet, before he could say anything. Before slamming the door, I looked him in the eye. “Now why don’t you go meet your *second* girlfriend before she leaves your special meeting spot.” His mouth was open in shock and embarrassment. I inhaled sharply and exhaled through my nose, trying to calm my temper. Sounding as calmly as I could, I whispered, “That’s right, Elric, I know about that; but there is the difference between you and me. You would use the information to make my life a living hell, if the roles were reversed. I leave you alone.” I leaned closer to him. “Next time think about what I just said, before dumping me into another trashcan. Just think about it. And don’t worry, this isn’t blackmail, I would never let myself stoop to your level.” With that I shut the door and started painfully making my way to the gas station.

Now, I don’t like crying. I hate it in fact. So when I finally arrived at the gas station, you could only imagine my surprise when I suddenly burst into tears. I dug a quarter out of my pocket and went to the payphone; I had accidently left my cell at home. It took me a whole five minutes to dial the correct number. “Hello?” Winston’s extremely British accent calmed me immediately. Not enough, though, to stop the steady flow of tears streaming down my face. “Winston! You will never believe what just happened!” I cried into the phone.

**Chapter 2**

Monday mornings never put me in a good mood, or any other weekday morning for that matter. Weekday mornings meant that I had to go to school. Thankfully, today that did not matter. I was grounded until I died and my feet were too swollen for me to walk. My mother didn’t know that yet, though, but in this case, I could see the writing on the wall. “Stephanie! You’re going to be late for school! Hurry up!” When I didn’t answer, my mom called for me again. It wasn’t long until I heard the loud and obnoxious footsteps of my mother’s high heels on the stairs. “Honey? Are you alright?” Knocking sounded from the other side of my bedroom door. “Yeah mom,” I called. “I’m ok. Come on in.” She opened the door and noticed that I hadn’t made any effort to get out of bed. “Why on earth are you not dressed yet?”

“Ummm…” I tried to wiggle my toes beneath the covers. It hurt so much that it felt like a million little suns came aflame on my feet. “Well?” My mom pushed.

“Mom, I can’t go to school today.”

“Are you sick?”

I looked at my carpeted floor. “Not exactly.” Though I could be.

“Then what?”

I sighed, and quickly pulled my feet from their shelter, underneath the sheets, before I could change my mind.

Oh, I underestimated my mom’s power to punish. After I told her what happened and how I had disturbed Winston in the middle of the night, well she still made me go to school. Now I didn’t tell her about Elric or Lilly, I made up some crap story, but still. She made go to school. In a wheelchair! How humiliating is that? I mean, one of my good friends is in a wheelchair, so I have nothing against handicapped people; but I mean I was going to get so much crap from Elric and his clowns. I didn’t even know that we had a wheelchair!

I simply declined my mom’s order to go to school in a wheelchair. I simply refused to go down without a fight.

So I went to school. I mean, what was a girl to do? I rolled my way down the extremely red hallway, trying not to collide with anyone or anything. “Yo! Reaper! Nice wheels! Claim anyone’s life over the weekend by running into them?” Yelled Chad, the back-up quarter back. “Talk to the chair!” I yelled back, without any humor laced in my voice. It has been an on-going joke about me killing people on my free time because- well because my last name just happens to be Reaper. Hey, its not like I had any say in the matter. Of course, Winston thinks that it is freaking hilarious and “quite ironic”, as he puts it. I hate to admit that the irony is truly there due to the fact that I am some sort of a beacon to the paranormal. I am not kidding. They come *looking* for me. It is a nuisance and it can be pretty scary and disturbing at times.

I headed toward my next class just as the late bell rang; I didn’t care that I was late. “Current Times” wasn’t my favorite class anyway. All we did in that class was sit around for an hour watching the news and then quizzing over what we had just watched. Nothing else, and that was exactly what they were doing when I rolled in through the door. I sat there for what seemed like forever. It was totally boring- until the anchorman stated in his bad news voice, “Breaking News! Johnson High School student Lilly Carson was found decapitated at the town’s tourist attraction, ‘The Cursed Castle’.” Before Mr. Royer, the class’s teacher, could stop me, I bolted out of the room. I felt like I was a street-racing car because I couldn’t get the wheels to move fast enough. It didn’t help that I also had to focus on keeping my breakfast where it belonged.

I guess it is time to tell you who Lilly is- was.

I don’t know where to begin. Lilly was many things, and one thing among that long list was that she was my best and most beloved friend. One thing that I have noticed was that I was just the least bit jealous of her, and I think that is why we became best friends. Hey, I know that sounds really shallow, but hear me out. Her looks had all of the boys hover around her. She was the flower. They were the bees. Now don’t get me wrong, she was never the kind of girl to get pregnant while still in high school. In fact she avoided that kind of intercourse like it was the plague. The boys kept coming, though. That was what made me so jealous. How come she got all of the boys to follow her, and I couldn’t get one! Not even the nerds followed me. Believe it or not, I was below them on the food chain. Which is pretty sad because when the chess club isn’t even talking to you, you know that you have issues. Anyway, so I naturally gravitated toward her. I mean how often do you come across someone who is popular *and* extremely nice? So, I introduced myself and we lived happily ever after, until- well you know. Now I don’t understand, though, why she chose me over all of the others. That is the one thing that I could never figure out. It stupefied me. I should have been nothing but insignificant to her. Back to the main point, people gravitate toward other people who have different qualities than they do; like two halves to a whole, if you will. That is what Lilly and I were. That was why I was going to do whatever I could do with this damned “gift” to get Lilly back.

Back in one of my earlier cases, there was a creature that could move time forward or turn time back, altering anything that it pleased along the way. I just happened to figure out where its buddy happened to be hiding before I sent it to its watery grave. I haven’t done anything to get rid of the one that was in hiding because it hadn’t done anything wrong. So why kill it? I was not the kind of person who would kill just to kill. I only killed monsters when they gave me a reason to. For me, it was time to bust out my paranormal butt-kicking gear. Once my feet healed, that is. The zombie that turned Lilly was still out roaming the world as a free parasite. It was time to change that, but first I had to talk to Winston, then find the creature in hiding, and kill the zombie that murdered my best friend. Hopefully saving her life along the way. Even though she was technically already dead. Everything was going to change.

**Chapter 3**

“Now, Stephanie, I don’t see how you are going to get anything done with your feet looking like loaves of bread!” Exclaimed Winston after I told him what I wanted to do. After speeding away from Mr. Royer’s classroom, I had decided to ditch the rest of the school day, knowing that people would be staring at me. So I had called a cab from my cell phone and rode to Winston’s grand apartment. I say grand because even though this building looked pretty pathetic on the outside, inside it was a beautiful library. I am not kidding; Winston lived in his own little personal heaven. “I’d rather live with books than anyone else in the world”, he told me once. The walls were stocked with hundreds upon hundreds of books, with a desk stationed in the middle of the room along with two chairs in front of it and an up-to-date computer wresting on the desk’s surface. His bed was just shoved into a corner where it wouldn’t bother him while he was doing research. “Stephanie! Are you even listening to me?” I looked back Winston.

“What?”

He just shook his head, pulled a couple of really old looking books from one of the shelves, and then made his way to his desk to sit down. Winston was in his early-to-mid twenties. He had really brown eyes, blonde crusty hair, and was pretty buff for a lonely librarian. He was extremely huggable. He represented my father figure. “Never mind”, he sighed. “I suppose that you will have to learn through your actions.”

“What the heck is that supposed to mean?” I demanded.

“I am saying, Stephanie, that the best way to learn is through doing. And this hardly the time to do that, but you are giving me no other choice.”

Sighing, I turned the wheelchair around and headed toward the door.

“Where do you think you are going?”

Damn, he had made it to the door before me. “I am going,” I said. “Home.” He looked at me like I was crazy.

“Why on earth would you want to go there?”

He had a very good point but I wouldn’t bring myself to admit that he was right. I really didn’t want to go home right now. My mom was extremely nosy; in fact she made a living by being nosy. That is what happens when you become a private investigator. As I dwelled on this, I refused to meet his gaze.

My thoughts soon shifted into what I considered the forbidden territory of my mind. I began replaying the night that I was forced to kill Lilly. The never ending hallways, the mousetraps, the spider webs, the shuffling of chained feet, and the blood- oh god there was so much blood- my best friend’s blood. Recalling that last moment before hearing her body hit the hard and cold travertine, I could have sworn she murmured the words, “Save me! Please save me!” Then I swung the sword. I couldn’t help but dwell on the fact that I still swung the sword even after I thought that those words were released from her mouth. I still swung the sword.

“Steph?”

I killed my best friend, and she asked me to save her, not to decapitate her.

“Stephanie?”

I was such a horrible person- such a terrible friend.

“Stephanie Reaper!”

I was instantly torn from my torturous reverie.

“What!”

Winston’s voice turned maddeningly gentle, “Why don’t you spend the night here? Just so you have a chance to compose yourself for when you see your mother.” I then realized that my traitorous tear ducts had acted up again. Quickly wiping away the liquid from my face, I said, “What is the point? I will have to eventually face her and all of the other school assholes eventually.” His face hardened, “Are those boys still bothering you?” Woops. “Nope. Not at all. Nuh-uh. They are perfectly fine.” I quickly said. The moment that the words left my mouth, I knew that they sounded extremely false. Even to my own ears. His face looked like it would permanently stay a grimace- a carving in stone. “Really,” I said. “Things are going fine at school. You don’t need to worry about me. I know how to handle myself.” His intelligent and knowing eyes looked disbelieving. “Just know that I have your back. Okay Stephanie?” I nodded.

Expressions, faces, eyes, mouths twisted into scowls as people walked past me; letting me know how much they blamed me for her death. Disapproving appraisals from teachers. I got them all. They had no idea how right they were. I kept my head high, though, and walked on only with a slight limp. The school day passed by in a haze. It was kind of depressing living in that kind of environment. That was why I would rely on Winston to cheer me up when I ever I got back to his place, if I ever got back to his place. My mom had officially kicked me out of the house. We had a huge fight a couple of nights ago. I refused to tell her what really happened that night. I simply stuck with the story that I had already given her. But she didn’t buy it. Her “instincts” were too keen. “Fine then!” She screamed at me. “I just thought that I raised you better than to lie to your own mother! When you are ready to treat me with respect again, then you can have a place to stay. But until then, you have no home under this roof.” I remembered being so shocked that I just stood there staring at my mom. “But I am telling you the truth mommy!” I plead. “Please this is the time that I really need my mother and not the private investigator!” She turned her back on me, “I am sorry but my daughter is a beautiful, intelligent, and honest young lady. Not a lying, deceitful, disrespectful little brat. Now get out of my house!” I left the house that night with an overflowing duffel and little money to keep me well fed. I knew that I couldn’t rely on Winston in this instance. It was too much for me to ask. I slept on the street that night and every night since then, using the local lake to bathe (of course when no one else was around). I avoided all contact with Winston, I didn’t know why though. I just did. I guess that I was too embarrassed to really talk to anyone. The last thing that I wanted was to have anyone know that I was truly a homeless person at that point in my life. That was why I was extremely pissed and incredibly confused when I found out that I had been followed to my special ally. Pissed because it was Elric who had followed me- and confused because I couldn’t figure out why he had. “What the hell are you doing here?” I screamed at him. The sun started to disappear behind a series of buildings; nighttime was less than ten minutes away. “I think that I should be the one asking you that question,” he said. I gazed at the dumpster next to him, anything that wasn’t his face. “I am here doing my homework.”

“In an abandoned ally?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

This time I did look at him. “Because I can. Now will you please go? I would like to be left alone.” Of course he stood his ground. Silly me for thinking that he would actually do as I asked him to. “How about we have a little study session?” He suggested. “I will provide the heating system,” he offered. “No thanks,” I declined. But just then a huge gust of wind soared into the ally leaving me shivering. Still trying to keep up my tough gal persona, I said, “I’m good. Can you please go now?” Giving me a disbelieving look, he said, “I doubt that- and no I will not leave.” Instead of replying to him, I just stood up and made my way out of the ally. I abruptly halted in my tracks. “Where do you think you are going?” He asked.

“Elric, get in your car now.”

“No.”

“I am not asking, get in your car now.”

“Why?”

“Damn-it Elric! Trust me!” He did as I asked- sort of.

“Fine, but you have to get into the car with me.”

“Alright, I will be right there. Just get into the car now!”

The zombie that had killed Lilly was right across the street, and it was staring right at me. I could have sworn that I saw something fall out its mouth, but I did not want to find out what. The car horn startled me, and I turned around to face Elric, waving my hand to let him know that I understood. When I faced the direction of the zombie again, it wasn’t across the street anymore- it was less than a few steps away from me. I caught my breath, my eyes grew wide, and I tried to step back. The last thing that I needed was to fight the undead with an audience. It had different ideas, though. It started to attack me. I dodged and avoided each and every swipe it took at me, until Elric left the safety of his car to help me. “No! Get back into the car!”

“Like hell I am, Steph!”

I didn’t say anything in response because I was too busy pushing him out of the way because the zombie had lunged at him; and I wasn’t about to lose another person to the same creature. It definitely missed Elric, but it sliced open my stomach with its abnormally sharp and pointy nails. I fell to the ground with a cry. I stayed conscious long enough to see the zombie sprint away from a 200 pound quarterback.

**Chapter 4**

Something wet and soft was touching my forehead; it felt nice but weird at the same time. I wanted to swat it away, but couldn’t find my hands. The wet thing went away again and came back with a fresh and new force of cold water soaked into it. Someone was dabbing a wet cloth on me. I opened my eyes, hoping that I wouldn’t find myself in a hospital. Surprisingly enough, I wasn’t. I was lying down on a red couch in some sort of family room. It sure wasn’t in my house or there would be papers strewn all over the place. Mom’s research. The walls were painted yellow. There were two armchairs in the middle of the room, each facing a decent sized television. The couch that I was lying down on was toward the left of the TV, right up against a wall. That’s when I remembered that cloths don’t magically touch my forehead. I looked next to me and saw that there was an elderly woman, but not too old, someone my mom’s age looking down at me. I was so shocked and surprised to see her there that I tried to jump up; but when I did so an extreme and sharp pain ripped through my stomach and I cried out. “Shhh. Lay back down, you’ll be alright. You just need a lot of wrest.”

“Where am I?”

“You are at my house.” I saw Elric in the doorway.

“Why am I here?”

“You are here to wrest and heal.” I saw a glint in his eye. I was here for another reason. That was when it dawned on me. How did he explain my injury to this woman- who I presumed was his mom? I gave a shaky laugh. I did not like being in a situation where I had absolutely no control over my environment. It put me at an enraging disadvantage.

“Why aren’t I at a hospital?”

“Well sweetie, I am a nurse. And I fixed you up pretty well. It wasn’t easy, though. That cut was extremely deep. What on earth did you do?” His mother asked.

Crap. So Elric played the dumb-not-knowing-what-happened card. Two can play at that game.

“I can’t remember. Did I hit my head when I fell?” His mother nodded and said, “Oh dear, that is not a good sign. Can you tell me what you ate for breakfast this morning? Can you remember that?”

“Sure”, I said. “I ate Cheerios- I think.” The creases in Elric’s mother’s face disappeared with relief.

“Well that is good that you remember that, Dearie.”

“Thank you for helping me Mrs.-uh-“

“Call me Ann, dear.”

I smiled, “Thanks for your help Ms. Ann.” She smiled. And that was when Elric said to me, “Can I talk to you? Alone?” Ann started to get up in order to give us some privacy, but I grabbed her wrist and begged, “Please don’t leave me! I really do not feel good!” It was true. I did not want to talk to Elric alone so much that I felt sick to my stomach. I never had to discuss my paranormal ability with anyone except with Winston, and I didn’t like the idea of starting now. Looking down at me she asked, “What is wrong Sweetie?”

“My stomach is turning so much that I feel dizzy. And I’m not even sitting up!”

“Maybe you are hungry. Elric- dear? Would you please go into the kitchen and fix some soup for our guest?” He left the room with a frustrated frown on his face. I sighed with relief.

“Dear, if you didn’t want to talk to him, all you had to do was say so.” With that she left the room.

She was smarter than I gave her credit for. Or was it that I wasn’t as subtle as I thought I was? After pondering on this for a while I finally gave up because my stomach interrupted my train of thought. Elric had gone into the kitchen like twenty minutes ago and there was no food. The jerk had cheapened out on me. Ignoring my stomach, I tried to sit up in order to get a good look at the clock above the television. It was a little passed ten at night. No wonder I was so hungry, I had missed dinner by a couple of hours. Deciding to give standing a shot, I swung my feet over the edge of the couch. *All right! So far so good. Keep going. You can do it.* Putting all of my effort into it, I was able to stand; only for a second though. After a few moments of trying to calm my wobbly legs, I collapsed. “Easy there!” Elric said as he caught me before hitting the floor. *Damn! So much for a semi-stealthy escape!*

“I am fine. Please let go of me.” I wrenched free from his arms.

“Wow for someone who is helping you, you sure have a weird way of showing appreciation.”

“Elric, I wouldn’t even be here if you had stayed in the freaking car!”

“Oh so this is my fault now! All I have been doing lately was trying to help you! But each time you push me away! Why can’t you let anyone get close to you anymore?”

“Bec-”

“You weren’t this secretive with Lilly!”

I fell silent. Now noticing that I was in my bra, I slipped my shirt back on, covering my bandage. I stumbled to the door.

“Stephanie.”

I opened the door and started to walk out, not wanting him to see how much those words had hurt me.

“Stephanie, where are you going?”

Shutting the door behind me, I ignored him, never answering him. I whipped out my phone immediately, thankful that it was still where I had left it. “Yes I would like a cab to come pick me up at…” Giving my location, I waited for the taxi to show up.

*My bra! I was only in my bra! And in front of Elric too. GROOOOAAAANNN!!!!! Why couldn’t have Miss Ann kept my shirt on? I mean she could have just lifted it to stitch me up- unless it was Elric’s idea… THAT PERV!!!! Well I hope he got a good look because that was all he was going to see. EVER.*

The taxi’s horn interrupted my mental ranting. I opened the door and told the driver Winston’s address. It was time to face his wrath.

“Where on earth have you been?” Winston’s face was nearly purple with rage.

*Okay Stephanie, I know that this is the first time that Winston has yelled at you, but you deserve it. I think I deserve it. GRRRRR!!! Why does life have to be so complicated?*

“It’s complicated,” was all I could make my mouth mutter.

“Well you better un-complicate it.”

Suddenly my mom was right beside him, looking disapprovingly at me*. Holy crap! Where did she come from? Oh shit.* “You have really put a damper on things, Stephanie. Especially since your way too ‘complicated’ life has basically ordered ours to a screeching halt,” Mom chimed in. *I am sorry. Did she just say “ours”?* Winston put his slender- but muscular- arm around Mom. He then said, “Your mother and I eloped while you were off fighting for your life.” I nearly crumpled to the ground when I realized that Winston would never say or do anything like that.

I woke up with a painful jerk. I was sweating like no other, and I had somehow made it back onto Elric’s couch. *SON OF A BITCH!!! What the heck happened? You know what? Scratch that. I don’t even want to know.* Just then I realized that someone was staring at me. It was very awkward to feel a pair of eyes boring into the side of my face. I groaned with annoyance. Screw this weak version of me! I looked over to the meet the creeperish gaze. I was right, Elric. This time I let the curse words run freely from my mouth. This day couldn’t get any worse.

“Hon is your side hurting you?” Crap! I had no idea that she was right behind me! “Uh. Just a little bit, but not that much. Thank you for your help,” I replied lamely. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Elric shaking his head with a smartass smile on his face.

“Oh. Alrighty dear. I will let you rest.” Ann turned and made her way up the steep steps that led to the second floor of the house. When I knew that she couldn’t see me anymore, I immediately flipped Elric the bird. Apparently this little gesture was outright hilarious because he just burst into uncontrollable laughter. I sighed with stubbornness. Don’t get me wrong, I knew that he was helping me out more than I thought anyone would (well except Lilly, but she was not there).

*Oh forget it. He will never understand what really happened that night. There is no point in trying to explain to him why I push everyone away. I guess I will be handling this on my own.*

This time I sighed in grief and deep sorrow. Not wanting him to see the tears welling up in my eyes, I rolled over, and pretended to try and sleep. He made no move to comfort me, which told me that I was doing a really good job at hiding my emotions or he was just being a total asshole. Thinking this, I let the tears run silently down my cheeks. Time passed by. I heard Elric get up and head to some unknown part of the house, and I slowly but surely drifted off to sleep.

**Chapter 5**

*I was running down familiar corridors with fear written all over my face. I had no idea what I was running from. Who was chasing me? Why were they chasing me? Bursts of pain shot up from my feet and all the way up my legs. I looked down only to see that I had stepped on a couple of mousetraps. Everything seemed all too familiar. Hitting way too close to home. Where had I experienced this before? I looked around, trying to determine where I was, but everything was pitch black. I couldn’t see a darn thing. From behind me I heard chains rattling and a low but sorrowful moan. Red flags soared up in my mind. Something told me that the reason why I was running was because of that moan. Instead of trying to figure out what was going on, I decided to keep moving forward with a quickened pace. A dot of light was forming up ahead of me, joy started to fill my system. “Yes! I can finally leave this wretched place!” I heard myself say. Elegant tapestries came into view, along with the huge wooden front door. I reached the huge hunk of wood, and was about to open it, but something otherworldly formed a painful grasp on my wrist. I turned to face my doom, but all I saw was Lilly. Her skin was completely dead and rotten, her eyes were so bloodshot that it took up most of everything (the irises were barely noticeable), and she couldn’t keep from salivating at the closeness of fresh flesh. There was something else though- an unexpressed emotion- something that was buried down deep within her; something struggling to resurface. Her mouth opened. “Why did you let this happen to me?” She asked with an excruciating sadness in her voice. Then, within a flash, she bit me.*

My body was shaking when I woke up. It took me a while, but I realized that I wasn’t shaking on my own. Someone else was shaking me. “Would…You…Stop…Shaking…Me!” I shouted at Elric.

“Sorry. But I had to wake you up.”

“Why?”

“You were screaming in your sleep.” Was that concern that I heard? “And plus, if I didn’t shut you up you would have woken up the neighbors.” He added.

Nope still a jerk-off.

I resisted the urge to stick my tongue out at him. Stupid high school quarterback. I noticed that he still had a firm grip on my shoulders. He realized where my eyes had landed and quickly released me from his grasp. “Well-er- thanks for waking me?” I attempted to be nice. “Um, no problem, I guess.” He said. Was he starting to blush?

“So, um, what were you dreaming about anyway?”

I sighed. This was going to be harder than I anticipated. I could feel myself retracing the path back into my mind, the place where no one could harm me. Shrinking down underneath the protective blanket of what was left of my sanity. “No! Don’t do that!” He shouted. What had I done? There was a sudden burst of light and his face appeared right above mine.

“Stop hiding from me.”

Apparently I had actually hid underneath the covers of the real world and not just in my mind. Oops.

*All right. No more hiding, Stephanie. Tell him. You have got to tell him. Well- should you tell him? Can you trust him? Should I trust him? No, you have to trust him. I think.*

“Well,” I began. “I had this nightmare. It was about this girl. She was running from something. I couldn’t tell where she was, and I don’t think that she knew where she was either.” I couldn’t help but shiver. When I didn’t continue he encouraged me to go on. “After injuring herself, it took her a while, but she finally managed to make it to the grand entryway. Joy filled both of us because the sooner that she got out of that place I could get out too. But everything changed when the thing that was chasing her caught up, and it was the girl’s worst nightmare. The monster was her best friend. To top that off, that best friend of hers killed her.” At that point tears were streaming down my face.

“I guess that the real reason why I was screaming was because it brings into perspective what life can throw at you. These things can actually happen, Elric. Just keep that in mind the next time you decide to do something stupid.”

Even though he didn’t appreciate that last remark of mine, I could tell that I had plucked a cord. An eruption of awkward silence surrounded us. If there was one thing that I hated the most, it was awkward silence. “Erhem. Um, yes, well, there I told you.” I managed to force out. Even with my little effort, the awkward silence continued. This was getting to be unbearable. I made an effort to move around him and stand up. I hated this feeling of being trapped in a cage. Thankfully I didn’t collapse or anything like that again. Feeling like a damsel truly pissed me off.“Whoa there!” He shouted, nearly falling himself. “I am fine Elric! I am not your freaking damsel in distress!” I snapped at him. I immediately felt bad afterwards because I knew that emotions were high.

“I’m sorry.”

He looked at me with a weird expression on his face and then said, “Don’t worry about it.” Something had just occurred to me, “Elric, what day is today?”

“Today is Sunday. You have been out of school for three days.” “Three days?” I nearly shouted. My mind was reeling. What if the zombie struck again while I was high with injury hallucinations? “Elric, has anyone gone missing these past couple of days?” Yet again he gave me another odd look.

“I don’t know.”

“Can you please check?” I said through gritted teeth. He left the room and was gone for about ten minutes. I never thought that I could ever be as impatient as I was then. I was a pot about to overflow because I was full of boiling water. “Okay, Stephanie, would you like to sit down?” He asked as he came into the room.

“Why?” My stomach was turning and I had to grip the arm of a chair for support. “Four people have gone missing within these past couple of days.” He said with a sigh. I had to sit down. The floor was as good as anything else. “Who?” I managed to squeak out. He knelt down next to me and handed me a printed out article of all of the victims. The article described all of the symptoms and evidence of a zombie transformation. The symptoms before the zombie got to them were severe paranoia, isolation, not leaving their house, etc. As for the evidence- well- all that was left behind were a couple drops of blood at the scene of the crime. Those poor people, and what about their families? They had to deal with that as well- only to them their loved ones were only missing, not dead. Boy, they were in for a dreadful shock. The names of the victims flashed across the page:

Sasha Kurt, age 16, Darkwood High School

Joshua Wild, age 18, Darkwood High School

Amelia Heartfelt, age 17, Darkwood High School

Rebecca Jones, age 14, Darkwood High School

All of the people attended my high school, and all these young people were turned into zombies- no thanks to me. I looked at the page again and then gasped, “Elric! Isn’t your best friend named Joshua?” He nodded sadly. I felt a pang of sympathy for him. “Why didn’t you tell me that he was missing when I asked?” He shrugged, all of the sudden he just didn’t feel like talking. I didn’t blame him. More and more casualties were starting to be added to the list of my burden. I knew I had to kill- well put these kids to wrest- one them being Elric’s best friend. Something told me that this zombie was trying to make an army.

I had an impending apocalypse on my hands. Oh joy.

**Chapter 6**

“What are you thinking?” Asked Elric. “Huh?” Was my intelligent reply. He asked the question again and the only thing that I could say was, “Oh, just thinking about how I am going to save lives- you know- with my awesome superpowers.” He smiled. The sad thing was that he thought that I was joking. My “gift” may not fall under the superpower category, but I thought that it was pretty close. I had to develop a plan. I had to stop this zombie from taking any more lives, and the first step was to get out of Elric’s house. Standing up, I found that I still had a small case of wobbly legs, but nothing that I couldn’t handle. Once I was able to gain some balance, I turned to him and said, “Elric, it is time for me to go.”

“What? Why?”

“I have been on your couch for days, I think that I have worn out my welcome here.” I cleared my throat and then continued, “Um, thanks for all of your help, and please tell your mom that I appreciate her stitching me up.” With that I headed toward the door. It was time for me to handle this on my own. It was time for me to be a big girl. Right as I was about to leave, Elric’s voice stopped me. “Oh! Hey Stephanie! Can you please not tell anyone at school about you staying here? Um- I really don’t want to deal with any of their crap.” I knew that I should have expected something like this, but it still hurt to hear him say it. Turning to face him I replied, “I will be sure to make sure that your reign at school stays divine my lord.” Adding on even more sarcasm I said, “Your pupils will never hear a peep about the misfortune that you had to endure. I am sorry that my staying here has been such a burden.” With that, I left the house, slamming the door behind me.

The nighttime air was eerily chilled. I was walking alone- and I was in a sleeveless top without a jacket. To top it all off, my cell phone was in my jacket pocket. Back at Elric’s house.

*Well forget it. I am not going back there. Nope. No-sir-y. Wait- do my arms actually have goose bumps? That hasn’t happened to me since, like, three months ago. Well that is just great. I probably look like a homeless person now.*

Hours passed by, I still was nowhere near any friendly faces or their homes, and the worst part was that I had school the next day. It was getting late and I was dreading the moment that the sun would disappear into the shadows of the night. I kept on my path, though, trying to find sanctuary. About thirty minutes later I crawled into the neighborhood where Winston lived. I couldn’t walk anymore; I was so hungry and parched. Who knew that *He Who Shall Not Be Named’s* house was that far away from where I normally dwelled. I managed to pull myself up onto his doorstep and I rang the doorbell. No answer.

*Oh you have got to be kidding me. Out of all the times I go to see Winston, he chooses this time not to answer his freaking door.*

I decided to just sit there and wait. I mean he had to come home sometime. Little did I know that he would be gone for hours.

“Stephanie?”

I opened my eyes and looked up. Winston was staring at me with disbelief written all over his face. I smiled weakly, “Hey Winston. How have you been?”

“Who cares how *I have* been, where the hell have you been?” He nearly shouted at me. I winced at his yelling at me. My mind immediately snapped back to the dream that I had had about him yelling at me and then telling me that he married my mom.

“*Hello? Stephanie? Answer me!”* My reverie ended quickly. I looked up at him and sighed, “Now that is a very long and painful story.”

“What do you mean?” All I did in response was lift up my shirt, take off the bandage and show him my stitches. His quick intake of breath was all I needed for him to do. He knew exactly what had happened. Now the only thing that he needed to know was the how, where, and when. He told me to get into his apartment. I was so stiff it was amazing. I could barely move. Then he decided to surprise me by picking me up, bringing me into the apartment and setting me gently onto his bed where he told me to sleep and that we would talk in the morning. I of course said maybe, but that was before he gave the most evil looking expression and said, “We will.” Wow he was really mad at me. This bugged me for a while, but I finally blacked out and rushed into a dreamless sleep.

The sun was shining brightly when I woke up the next morn- day. It was shining so brightly, in fact, that I decided to turn over onto my stomach, put the pillow on top of my head, and go back to sleep. That was until, of course, the pillow was wrenched from my hands. “No,” I grumbled. “Oh, yes.” Winston simply stated from above me. I started to retreat underneath the covers, there was no way that I was going to let him win without a fight. Just when I had started to think that he would let me sleep some more, all of the covers were torn from the bed; leaving me shivering from the unexpected flow of air-conditioning. “Really dude? You just couldn’t let me sleep, could ya’?” Now facing him, I saw that he had blood shot eyes with purple bags descending from his lower lids with an unnatural grace, he had worry lines around the edges of his mouth, and I swear- if he were like thirty years older, there would be little sprouts of white hair on his head. Something had been clearly bothering him. The worst about this was I thought that I was the one who had caused all of the worry. Even though I hadn’t been around to do too much damage to our paranormal society. Then it occurred to me that maybe that it wasn’t about me disturbing the paranormal society- it was just about me. Had he really been that worried about me? My snarky attitude quickly diminished.

“Winston what is bothering you?”

“What do you think Stephanie?” No matter how much I inwardly shouted at them, I couldn’t get my lips to move. All I could do was stare at him with guilt rushing into my system, ready to consume me yet again, but only this time for a completely different reason. I looked away from him, not being able to look at a person whom I had obviously hurt so much. The really sad thing was that I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why he was so pissed off at me. I mean I knew that he was hurt that I didn’t tell him where I was, but why was he mad?

I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something seemed very off about- well everything. His apartment was a mess, there were stacks upon stacks of towering pizza boxes, dirty clothes were strewn all over the place, and his books were no longer organized. I knew that something was wrong because that kind of life style was not the way my Winston lived. He was always my neat little freak. This was definitely not normal. “Winston, talk to me!” I begged. “What is bothering you? Really?” He wouldn’t answer me, he just went to his desk, sat down and started reading a book. I took that action as a cue for me to leave, so I got up and headed toward the door. I looked at him, but didn’t say anything except, “So that is how it is.” He looked up at me and sighed, “Go to school Stephanie, there should be about three hours left. Then we will talk.” I stormed to the door, with more than one part of my body aching beyond belief, so I only made it to the half-way point. I couldn’t believe that he would wake me up just to get me to go to school.

“Alright. Fine. I’m leaving now.” I looked at him, waiting to be stopped before I reached the door.

“Almost there.” Still waiting for a response.

“I am turning the knob now-”

“Stephanie will you please just leave!”

I was so shocked. Where had that come from? Why wasn’t he telling me anything?

I didn’t stick around to find out.

I sprinted back to my ally, ditching school. It took me a while but I finally made it. I had to take a few breaks to clutch my stomach; it hurt like no other. I definitely should have jacked some painkillers before I left Winston’s. Once I got there, I took the scene in with an intake of breath. My backpack was still there, but it was in shreds, something was looking something. There were tire skid marks left from Elric’s car, there was the littlest amount of blood spatter from where I had hit the ground, and there was a note with a flower on top of it- held down by a rock. Numbly, I bent down to retrieve it. The flower was a rose- and the rose was blood red. I unfolded the note and I nearly collapsed in utter shock. It read:

*You’re next Stephanie. Just wait.*

In Lilly’s elegant hand.

I scanned the slip of paper over and over again, trying to figure out how all of this was even possible. How was she still undead? I clearly remembered beheading her and then feeling like a total piece of trash that somehow had betrayed her best friend afterwards. It was impossible. I had never seen a zombie come back from a beheading; it just wasn’t normal- if you could call an impending apocalypse normal.

My head was reeling with incomplete thoughts. I could barely cling on to one; everything was such a blur. What the hell was going on?

Call me stupid, but I decided to go back to the castle- but just for investigating. It wasn’t like I was asking for an early death sentence or anything- the chances of Lilly being back there were slim-to-none. Before I could stand up, though, I heard footsteps behind me. For a second I thought that the zombie had returned, but boy was I in for a shock.

“Elric, what the hell are you doing here? Ditching school are we?”

“Oh, like you aren’t doing the same, Stephanie. Your poor mother, what would she think about this?”

I was more shocked than anything that he was threatening to tattle. Especially since we were in high school, not elementary. My response was gratified, though, with his face going completely pale. I said, “I don’t know, she is right behind you- why don’t you ask her yourself?” He turned around and there she was. Believe me I was a little taken aback as well, seeing her there. I mean how many people knew about my damned special alley? I mean, I never shared the location with anyone. I never said, “Hey Winston, I am not going to school like you just told me to do, I am going to my special alley.” Nope. Nothing.

“M-Miss Reaper! I am so sorry I had no idea that you were there! I-I-“

My mom didn’t even give him the chance to finish. “Where the hell have you been Stephanie Alaria Reaper! I haven’t seen you for weeks, and when I called Winston, he told me that he thought that you were with me! Explain yourself this instant!”

“Not now, Elaine.”

“What did you just call me? Did you just call me Elaine!”

“Well that is your name.”

“Yes, but-“

“Anyway, we have company in our midst, would you care to please be polite?”

“I could care less who is around us! I demand to know where you have been!”

That was when I snapped. “Why the hell do you care! You are the one who kicked me out in the first place!”

“Yes, but-“

“And you are the one who blames me for Lilly’s death!”

“That’s not true, I-“

“Just leave me alone *mother*, I will come home when I actually feel welcome again.”

I had never in my life seen my mother close to tears, but just then she did. She ran out of the alley, I heard her car door slam shut, and I heard the tires skid against the pavement as she sped away. I sighed, with a whole renewed grief of my own. I knew that Elric was watching me, so I quickly put my mask back on, hoping that it still gave off the I-don’t-take-shit-from-anyone vibe. I looked at him and said, “Not a word.”

“Sorry-“

“Not a wor- wait what?”

“I said that I am sorry.”

I looked at him, trying to figure out what he was apologizing for. After a while, I decided that I wouldn’t say anything. What was the point? I mean, I already hurt one person today, why not another? Especially since he deserved it.

“What are you holding? Is that a rose?”

I clenched my fist, crushing the rose’s stem and note into my palm. A thorn pricked the delicate skin on my hand, freeing a little drop of blood. “Nothing,” I said quietly. “Other than a measly red rose that I stole from someone’s front yard.”

“You’re shaking.”

“I am just a little more than pissed off right now, Elric.”

“I don’t think that is what is bothering you.”

“Oh? Then what is bothering me, Swami?”

That was when he decided to go all- goofy I guess people would call it. He sat down on the ground doing a yoga pose, you know the one where you cross your legs and make two of your fingers form a loop. Yeah that one. Then he started humming. I had the sudden urge to kick him in a spot where he wouldn’t be able to recover easily. “I am sensing,” he said in a ridiculous know-it-all tone. “I am sensing that you are- ok I give up.”

The look on his face was so innocent and juvenile that I burst out in laughter.

**Chapter 7**

My laughing stopped immediately after I realized what I was doing. I was having a good time with the enemy. Unforgiveable. When I grounded myself back into reality, I noticed that he was staring at me with a calculating look. Hell must have been frozen over, that was the first time I had ever seen him think so hard. “Don’t hurt yourself,” escaped my lips. “Why are you always mean to me?” He asked. He couldn’t be this stupid. It was just too insulting. The only conclusion that I could come to was that he was trying to piss me off even more.

When he realized that I wasn’t going to answer him, he cleared his throat and handed me my cell phone. After the familiar piece of technology was in my hand, he said he forgot to bring my jacket. I couldn’t believe that he said what he said next. “It will give me an excuse to see you again.” Call me whatever you want, but for a moment I actually started having little fantasies, and he was my boyfriend. Even though he already had two girlfriends.

“You’re staring at me.”

Dammit.

“No I’m not. You’re imagining things.”

What he did next- well I didn’t even see him coming. He kissed me. A tingly emotion burst up and down my spine. I had never felt such a wonderful kiss- well any kiss for that matter- before him. I was just about to wrap my arms around his neck when I realized that this wasn’t right. Even if we had a chance to be together, it would just be wrong. It would end badly. I forced myself to make a split decision- either take my chances and truly kiss back or nip this problem in the butt and go on with my life. Shoving whatever emotion I had down, I kicked him in the shin and said that the next time would be his groin. I had too much crap going on to worry about a relationship of any kind. I sighed and then looked at him, “I need a ride. I hope that your leg still works.” I walked past him and got into the passenger side of the car and then reached over and swung his door open. “Get in.”

“Where are we going?”

“You will find out when we get there.”

The rose and note were resting in my lap when we pulled up to the all too familiar castle, which was now a crime scene. “Why are we here Stephanie?” asked Elric. I looked from the note to him and then sighed, “We are here to investigate.”

“Investigate what?”

“The crime scene of course.”

“This is not a good idea Steph,” Elric said for the umpteenth time.

“I told you that one of my cop friends asked me to stop by and pick something up for him, and don’t ever call me *Steph* again.” Of course what I just told him was a complete lie. I knew no cops nor was I ever invited to the crime scene, but hey a girl’s got to do what girl’s got to do. “You know,” he kept rattling on. “I didn’t have to drive you here. I haven’t forgotten your little threat and the damage that you have done to my precious leg. I have to carry our team to state with these legs and they’re the only pair I got.” I rolled my eyes- sometimes he was just so full of himself. We had already passed through the corridor of mousetraps and the hall of cobwebs, and we were coming up on the room of despair. The little living space within the mansion that I was first devastated with the knowledge of Lilly being infected. As we got closer, I got testier.

“I still don’t think that we should be in here Steph, I mean the yellow tape *did* say ‘crime scene keep out’. Also I am pretty sure that you don’t have a cop friend and stuff and-”

“Would you just shut up for TEN freaking seconds!” He looked at me like I was the queen of all b’s, and to be honest- I didn’t have any random excuse to sputter out to defend myself against that look. I was too preoccupied with the thought of me going back to the beginning where everything basically ended. I kept on ignoring Elric’s sad attempt at a death glare and counted the doors as we passed them. The Door was three rooms down on the right from the last painting on the hall.

*One. Two.* ***Three****.*

I stopped to reach for the handle and Elric ran right into me, not paying attention. I glared at him and then opened the door. It was just how I had remembered it. A bed in the corner with a racecar bedspread, a nightstand right next to it with a musty old lamp on it, a desk up against the wall near the door with nothing on it but a key, and a rocking chair in the farthest corner of the room.

“Hey what does that key go to, Steph?”

“I don’t know, and don’t call me Steph!” Elric pushed through me and went farther into the room, while all I could do was just stand there. The memories of what went down in this room drowned me. All of a sudden Lilly was sitting in the rocking chair, rocking back and forth rhythmically, I was sitting at the desk with my laptop hooked into the rotting outlet that still surprisingly worked, we had a bunch of books strewn all over the bed, and we were having a blast. It was our secret hideout because the room had been forgotten about for years, no one in town remembered the one room that was actually sanitary in the old Cursed Castle. She was laughing at a joke that I had just made and then got really serious. She asked me what I was working on, and I lied and said that it was for a research paper, when it was really for a case that I was working on. The thing about Lilly was that she was really smart and when she thought that you were lying, she would call you out on it. “I don’t believe you. What are you working on, really?”

I turned around in the chair to look at her, blonde hair blue eyes and all, and sighed. “I am doing a favor for Winston. He is writing some lame-ass paper about monsters, and I am helping him out by doing some of the research.” Truth be told, though, I was researching Keres for a completely different reason. A Ker is a nasty female death spirit with grinding teeth and unbelievably sharp talons, and she always thirsts for blood- preferably human. And one was plaguing the streets of our city, waiting for peoples’ most vulnerable moments. I was doing research on a Ker’s weakness so I could get rid of the sexist bitch. For some reason she was only after the men. Lilly didn’t know that though, but she smiled anyway and said, “Alright. Now was that so hard?” I smiled back at her and said no, that it wasn’t. It wasn’t hard for me to lie to her- it was painful. As I turned back toward my computer to do more research, out of the corner of my eye I could have sworn that I saw her drool. The only conclusion that I could muster up was that my eyes were playing tricks on me. I didn’t give it a second thought after that. Time passed by, I had finally finished my research and we were gossiping. Lilly asked me, “Hey are you hungry?” “No,” I laughed. “We just ate dinner!”

“Huh, I thought that was like three hours ago.” I looked at her then.

“Are you feeling alright, Lilly?” She looked like she was sweating. I reached to feel for her forehead, but she wacked my hand away. That was all the confirmation that I needed- her hand was so boiling hot that it was obvious she was running an extremely high fever.

“Lilly, you are really hot, I seriously think that we should get you to a doctor.” “And I think that you should get me a snack!” She raged. That was when it dawned on me. Her hair had become stringy, her eyes were red reamed and blood-shot, her mouth drooling, she was running a high fever, and her skin was starting to flake off little by little. She had been infected. Water started to rim my eyes and I choked out, “Lilly, what did this to you? Where is it now?” But I was too late; the infection had spread too quickly. She was too far-gone to respond to me. So I did the only thing that I could do; I ran out the door, leaving my shoes, backpack, laptop, and best friend behind- hoping that I could avoid killing her.

My name was echoing through my mind. I felt like I was in a fun house at a circus. Nothing made sense. My name was called again, making another scene of unwanted flashes of clown heads and unicorns. I wanted to scream. Scream so loud to the point where my eardrums might burst. At least that would give me a distraction from the chaos of my mind. Now my whole world was shaking. As if an earthquake had just struck. What was going on?

“Stephanie, WAKE UP! STOP SCREAMING!”

My eyes opened. There were no more terrifying clown heads or random unicorns. Oh I felt sick. I could hear myself moaning but could feel nothing. I was numb. I could feel myself breath in and out way too quickly. Water was interfering with my eyesight. My nose was plugged.

“What is wrong with you?” I could hear Elric ask me. I could not find my mouth, nor my hands, or my legs. I was paralyzed. I was, I realized, breaking down. I managed to force out, “It was a mistake to come here. Lets go.”

“No.” I could hear myself begging. I would do anything to get out of there.

“No. Why would I go when you are the one who dragged me here in the first place?”

“Please!” I kept begging, but I couldn’t wait for him to reply- I just turned around and ran. Crying. It was just too much for me to bare. There was no point in avoiding the inevitable confrontation that I was about to get from Elric. He was faster than me, but I could sure as hell try to outrun him while I still had the chance. That was until that window was shut. Tightly. He already had his hand on the back of my shirt, with a firm grip, holding me back. Of course, I was fighting to get away from him. To me there was only one thing worse than crying and that was crying in front of a potential boyfriend. “Let me go!” I screamed. Emotions were controlling me, which meant I had no way of controlling my emotions. I was a complete wreck.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Winston asked me as I walked in through his apartment door. “Don’t start with me, Old Man, you kicked me out of your apartment this morning, tried to send me to school, and yelled at me. I have had a wretched month and a hellish day. I am not in the mood for this mood swing of yours that is bound to be coming”, I replied. I walked over to his bed in the corner where all of the sheets and pillows were strewn all over of the place, leftover from this morning. Instead of picking everything up, I gathered everything into a huge pile and fell into the improvised bed, trying my damndest to fall asleep and forget all about what had happened back at the castle.

*The hallways were so dark that I couldn’t see my own two feet and the floors felt like any cleaning service’s worst nightmare. Twist and turn and zig and zag- the hallways were never-ending. Why did this all seem familiar? I was running from something. Lilly! I was running from Lilly! Confusion filled me, why wasn’t I feeling any pain from stepping on the mousetraps? In a flash I was back at the baren wood marker that signifies the end of my only friendship. Something gleaming caught my eye as I was preparing to decapitate my poor best friend. Wait…*

I burst up from the pillow and sheet burrow on the floor covered in a fresh coat of sweat. I knew that I had just seen something very important, but I couldn’t for the life of me remember what it was. How did the object even gleam when there was no light in the room? I could have sworn that it was pitch black- I think. “Morning sleepy head,” rang the most comforting accent. I looked up to see Winston from across the room reading up on something. “You had quite a nasty dream.”

**Chapter 8**

I told Winston about the dream even though I didn’t really understand exactly what I was describing. There was something very odd about what I saw. “Winston”, I said. “I want to catch up on my reading.” He looked at me with the priceless expression. “Did I just hear you use the word ‘want’ and ‘read’ in the same sentence? I am sorry Stephanie, but you hate reading. You pointed out to me that you would rather spend a whole day in someone’s locker than read.” “Well”, I said. “This time I am donating hours of my precious life to a fantastic cause.”

“And what cause would that be?” Before I could answer Winston’s question, there was a sound at the door.

“Who the hell knows where a librarian lives and then takes that knowledge just to come by and ten o’ clock in the freaking morning?”

Coupled with a glare, Winston retorted, “This may surprise you, but I do have friends Stephanie Reaper.” I pretended to be so surprised that I feinted back into the makeshift bed that I had originally risen from. I heard the door open and then Winston spurt, “Bloody hell!” Smiling to myself into the sheets I decided to stay where I was and wait. That was of course until I heard, “Where the hell is Stephanie? She and I have an unfinished conversation to discuss.” Holy shit! How on earth did he know where to find me? I didn’t think I had told anyone about this place. I seriously started to think about filing for a restraining order against him.

Just picture this- a very young (but proper) librarian pacing back and forth throughout his now crowded apartment, a jock smiling triumphantly at no one while sitting at a desk that was much too small for him, and a girl that manages the supernatural sitting in a pile of sheets who was frothing at the mouth in anger. Welcome to my world. I didn’t think I could be so pissed at anything until then. Handling a Ker? Oh! No biggie! Dealing with a zombie? I have dealt with worse! Being stalked by a stupid jock that liked to stick his nose into other peoples’ business? Someone get me a gun so I can shoot this annoying loser! “There is no way that you can avoid talking about this”, Elric stated smugly. Winston cast me a curious look, “Talk about what, Stephanie?” Looking at him I said, “I may or may not have gone back to the castle.”

“What?” Winston asked in angered shock.

“Well I didn’t feel like going back to school and- you know- I felt like doing something productive.”

“And you thought that breaking into a crime scene was the right thing to do!” I looked at him, “Well if you put it that way, it doesn’t sound like the brilliant idea it was earlier.”

“Oh, and what? The brilliant part involved taking another person along with you? A person, who by the way you’ve complained about for months now, from your school?”

Elric cast a glance over in my direction, “you complain about me?” I let out a huge sigh, “Look, Elric was just in the wrong place at the wrong time,” I told Winston. This statement didn’t seem to help my cause one bit because I had two very angry looking men staring at me. It seemed like I was cornered between a brick wall and a bunch of hungry lions. There seemed to be no way out. I was about to say something, but then something came crashing through the window and hit me on the head. Needless to say I blacked out for a while.

“Stephanie?”

“Stephanie?”

I kept hearing my name echo through my head, and there was no way to make it stop. My head hurt like a bitch and I didn’t know why. It was very unnerving to hear my name over and over again, but I finally worked up the courage to open my eyes. “What the hell just happened,” I asked. Winston dignified my question with a reply, “Someone threw a rock, crushing my window and hitting you in the head.” I try to focus my attention on the two Winston’s in front of me, but I couldn’t seem to pinpoint them. So I eventually just went with saying, “you’re shitting me right?” Elric soon stepped into my line of vision, *all* four men looked extremely concerned.

*Ah shit. A few more brain cells down the drain. It’s not like I had any to spare.*

“Okay, was there anything attached to the rock?” I asked anybody who would answer. Instead, though, I received annoying looks of concern. “Look, either one of you answers me, or I attempt to stand up and see what was attached to the rock myself,” I declared. I still received to no response. I shrugged, “Suit yourselves”. I hoisted myself up onto my elbows, and then clumsily reached for something solid. Of course, I didn’t like what my hand came in contact with. My hand didn’t grasp something that was smooth and cold like a desk or a window sill, it came in contact with something that was warm and full of muscle.

*Dammit. I just can’t win.*

I looked up to see Elric staring down at me with a cocky smile marring his features, “Haven’t we already gone through this, Stephanie?” I felt my cheeks ignite. Damn him.

“Shut up.”