

Chapter 14

Beatrice disapproved of humor. It was, in her opinion, the least vampyric of all human feelings. Well... she supposed a good chuckle at the foolishness of mortals was acceptable as long as it was in moderation. But a big gut wrenching, nostril trembling spew of giggles that served no dark Gothic perspective on life? Completely unacceptable. Which was a real shame, because Raul Quixote was proving to be as hilarious as he was charming.

It was hard not to laugh. She kept choking whenever he made a joke, in a futile effort to hold back her giggles. Then, when the sound finally did manage to escape she did her best to keep it to a monotone. Laughter of course was a "ha ha." Beatrice figured she just released it all as a "haaa" it didn't actually count against her.

"You see, Morgana, you must always make sure the noodles are done just right. Overdo them and your lasagna will taste like paste. Undercooked and it will taste like toothpicks." Morgana found herself liking Raul. He had accepted her choice of names without batting an eye. He was by far the most accepting adult she had ever met. Raul took one of the noodles and shook it on a fork, hissing at it like it was a snake. Beatrice "haaa'ed."

"Now, we will just have to make the garli-" Raul stopped himself in the nick of time. Morgana smiled. Most humans were not so sensitive of her condition. "Actually, I would enjoy having good breath tonight. Let's just put butter on our bread, eh?" Beatrice nodded enthusiastically, she wished Grandma Valentine understood her this well. "So tell me, Morgana, why are you here so early? You said something about a fire?" Raul had turned back to the hamburger and seemed distracted.

"Yeah... someone lit the cafeteria on fire before class started this morning. Grandma Valentine told me to come right here after school... and

well... school never started, so I just walked here. I hope that's all right."

Raul Quixote turned back to her with a mouth that dripped tomato sauce. He slurped at it frantically before it could drip onto his shirt. Morgana almost swallowed her fangs again with laughter.

"Of course! No problem. In fact, you come here anytime you want. You're Marjorie's granddaughter, that means we're like family. *Mi casa es su casa. Comprende?*" Morgana liked the idea of being family with the silly old man... if that jerk face Homer got left out of the transaction somehow. She had been shocked to find out that Homer lived in a scrap yard, and would have used this as an insult against him had not Raul lived in the same place. She didn't want to call the sweet old man garbage simply because his grandson belonged in a trash can.

"Well... thank you again. And I'm glad I can help you make dinner."

Morgana curtsied and gave her cloak a respectful swish. It was the most respectable gesture she could produce.

"My pleasure, *senorita*. Now tell me more about yourself. We have some time to kill until the noodles are done. Homer never talks about any of his friends." Raul said.

"That's because Homer doesn't have any friends." Morgana said it so automatically she was blushing before the sentence was over.

"I have... worried about that. No one? Not even people at school he only talks to there?" Raul leaned forward in his wheel chair, concerned. Morgana looked at her feet and coughed. Just because she was undead was no call to forget all etiquette.

"Well... he talks to me and another boy named Paul sometimes in History. I've never seen him talk to anyone else. He eats lunch by himself away from all the other kids.... but I don't see him all day so I could be wrong!"

Morgana added quickly when she saw the old man's expression sag.

"No... I think you're right. No need to feel sorry for it. The truth is the truth. *Que serra serra*. I just wish he would... be happy. We all want our children to be happy." Raul took a sad moment to tend to the items on the stove top. "Did you know Homer lost his father when he was small?" Raul added unexpectedly.

"I... I never heard that." Morgana didn't like thinking of someone she disliked in such human terms. Being a vampire was all well and good until someone's feelings got hurt.

"Marjorie told me you lost your parents too. I was sorry to hear that. Your father was a good man. I knew him when he was little." Morgana tried to smile politely.

"I... I don't remember them much. I know my dad and Grandma Valentine didn't get along. But she won't tell me why." Maybe one day she would hunger for stories of her parents, but for now? For some reason it failed to strike a chord within her.

"He didn't pick up the family... business. I think Marjorie wanted a daughter, and never forgave him for being a man. It's hard to accept that sometimes it skips a generation."

"What skips a generation?" Beatrice asked, feeling herself shiver. It reminded her of the way she felt at church. Like someone was speaking into her whole body like a microphone.

"I'll let Marjorie tell you that. It's not my place. Just tell her you have a right. That will wear her down eventually." Something wasn't right. Beatrice felt like she was going to sick up.

"My parents were shot." Beatrice shouted unexpectedly, then softened her tone before adding "How did Homer's dad die?" She knew it was a

terribly impolite question but it seemed very important for some reason. Asking it felt the same way that laying down with a cold compress would have felt to a sick person.

Raul turned a cautious eye to her, although if it was because the question was rude or because he was trying to focus on his cooking Morgana could not say.

"It was a... car accident. He died trying to save someone who was in a car accident." Morgana wondered why Raul rubbed his legs all of the sudden.

"Did he save them?" She felt feverish. She felt like she was a bundle of balloons and the hand that bound her together threatened to let her loose in the wind.

"Yes... they lived. Although they may have wished otherwise." Raul swallowed hard. Morgana leaned in, sweating.

What came out of Beatrice's mouth then was not strictly speaking, her voice. Nor was it the accent she sometimes affected when she was being Morgana. It was sound made by her vocal chords. It used air drawn from her lungs. But still... it was not *her* voice. It was something that echoed through the ages. Something that had been before the Earth had been, and would remain when the Earth was gone. "You are not done yet, *Fox*." Beatrice staggered backwards, as though she had been shoved in the stomach, then fell.

It was like whatever had used her voice had flown out of her mouth and used her body as a kick off to jump into the sky. She fell to the floor gasping, her eyes wide with horror. But the terrible pressure... the fever... those were gone.

"Oh Jesus Christ... what are *you* doing here so early?" Homer exclaimed from the doorway.

"Hey... hey Morgana." Paul waived shyly, hiding behind Homer's shoulder. Beatrice was too stunned to respond to either boy. She clutched wildly at her throat, wondering.

"Grandpa this is Paul. Paul this is Grand- Mr. Quixote. What's for dinner?"

Raul shook his head at her, signalling that they would talk about it later. Beatrice swallowed hard before regaining her feet.

When Homer had told him that having him over as a dinner guest would make the evening less awkward, Paul had been flattered. Homer hated everyone, and to be invited to his home as a guest while not exactly an honor, felt exclusive. Paul had never dreamed he was invited as a distraction from Beatrice. The beautiful, ravishing... undead Beatrice. The tomato sauce looked like blood on her porcelain white teeth. Paul smiled at her in dumb fascination. He supposed he could forgive Homer for using him in such fashion.

"Well of course I think it was him. It's a bit too coincidental don't you think?" Homer hissed at his grandfather from the neighboring room. He had excused himself and pulled his grandfather away from the table shortly after dinner. Paul was too busy looking at Beatrice to catch more than passing bits of the conversation.

It wasn't that he had never been able to look at her before. He spent all of History looking at her somedays. It was simply that he'd only ever seen her in school. To see her somewhere that was not school made her seem somehow... *possible*. Like she was a real person who could have real contact with other people and not just some illusion that disappeared the second the last class bell rang. Paul was fascinated with this idea, because it implied that it was possible for him to be around Beatrice when school was not in

session.

"It's not polite to stare." Beatrice murmured around her lasagna.

Paul's eyes widened in horror, and he stammered trying to find the words to apologize.

"No I don't know what their plan is! And I don't care! They burned down the god damn cafeteria for crying out loud!" Paul flinched.

"Homer, be quiet! We have guests!" Mr. Quixote whispered harshly. Paul had only spoken with Mr. Quixote briefly, but he didn't seem like the kind of person you wanted to yell at, wheel chair or no wheel chair. The old man seemed ready for an excuse to jump out of his chair and strangle someone. Paul decided violence was a family trait.

"They... uh... sure do yell a lot here, huh?" Paul tried to make it sound like a joke. He wanted desperately to seem clever.

"It's Homer. What did you expect?" Beatrice shrugged and muttered over her lasagna some more. Paul felt like an actor who was dying on stage.

"So um, how do you know the family?" Paul asked. Beatrice snarled so fiercely Paul almost tipped over in his chair.

"I don't. My grandma does." Beatrice sniffed and turned her head to the side. Paul took a nibble of some green peas. He didn't like eating in front of other people. It made him feel like a hog.

"No! We're not sending them home! I don't know what my daughter has been teaching you but you will have manners so long as I'm here!" Paul slunk down in his chair. He didn't think he was supposed to have heard that one.

"Do you want to go outside for a while?" Beatrice asked suddenly.

Paul could say nothing so he stood up so fast that his stomach knocked against the bottom of the table in front of him. His glass of milk toppled.

"Are you serious? People could die and you're worried about manners?" Paul felt very clumsy when Beatrice mopped the spill up for him with a paper towel.

"Thanks... and uh... yeah. I'd like to go outside for a while, too." Paul hoped his knee didn't shake. That happened sometimes when he was around girls he liked.

"Manners are only worth a damn when they're hard to keep, Homer! Is this why you don't have any friends? Too hot-headed to care about people's feelings?"

"I think we can sneak out the door without them noticing." Beatrice did the unexpected then by grabbing his hand and pulling him along behind her. Her skin was cool and clean, like silk sheets that have been set on an outdoor clothesline. The house was small enough that it didn't take them long to reach the front door, and the shouting covered their footsteps.

"Listen here, old man! My life choices are mine! I'm willing to go along with this whole... *business*... but that's my choice! So stay out of the rest of it, thank you very much!" The sounds muted when Paul softly shut the door behind himself.

"What do you want to do now?" He whispered. Beatrice had forgotten to let go of his hand, and Paul wasn't about to remind her of it.

"They have a pet goat. Want to feed it some leaves?"

"Sure." Paul said.

They walked side by side through the car stacks, careful not to step on anything jagged. Paul thought that despite all that had happened that day, the mysterious stranger, the mysterious comic book, and Homer's shouting... well it was all worth it if he got to spend a few moments with Beatrice. From far away the words "Hassan" and "of course they're on the

same side" drifted to his ears. Paul sure wished he knew what they were talking about.

"There sure is a lot of old junk here." Beatrice sneered at their surroundings. Paul smiled at her.

"It's not all junk." He blushed and looked at his feet. Had Paul been looking at Beatrice he would have been surprised to see her do the same.

"So... you know anything about cars?" Beatrice asked, clearing her throat. Paul took note of the fact she still hadn't let go of his hand.

"Some." He replied, not wanting to reveal that he could have smelted his own alloys, cast his own forms, and built his own car with nothing but his bare hands. It was not, Paul thought, a romantic notion. Paul felt himself tugged to the side as Beatrice knelt to pick at a bit of plant life sticking out of the dust.

"Seems a shame to kill it... but the goat has to eat, right?" Paul wondered why Beatrice wasn't wearing her fangs. She usually had them whenever she wasn't eating.

"Yeah, I agree."

"Do you think I'm weird?" Beatrice asked abruptly.

"Not at all, why?" Paul asked, taken aback.

"Just, my Grandma... I mean some people... they see the cape and the fangs and they think I'm crazy. I'm not crazy. You know that, right?" Paul wasn't sure how he and Beatrice ending up being face to face... but he wasn't going to move if she wasn't.

"Paul." His name was like poetry on her tongue. She leaned forward. Paul leaned forward, his leg shaking, and his heart thumping in expectation.

"There's a goat standing on my foot."

Paul looked down. The furry creature had come from nowhere, and

moved silently to reach them.

"Oh." Paul said.

"Yeah." Beatrice replied.

The goat yelled, and jumped up at the plant Beatrice held in her hand, as if she were taunting him with it. Beatrice shrieked, dropped the plant and jumped back. Paul marked her letting go of his hand with regret. There was no telling when he would get to do it again. The goat noisily devoured the small greenery and sniffed indignantly at both of the humans.

"I don't think I want to pet it anymore" Beatrice said. She was leaning against a stack of cars breathing quickly. Had the goat scared her? Paul hoped not.

"What do you want to do now?" Paul hoped it wasn't him that had creeped her out. He worried about that a lot. Sometimes he tried to be nice to people but ending scaring them off instead. He hoped he hadn't done that with Beatrice. She seemed very on edge all of the sudden.

"Why don't you tell me everything you know about cars?" Beatrice said. She was breathing hard again. Paul hoped she was okay.

"What do you want to know?" It was such an impossibly broad topic he didn't even know where to begin.

"How does it work? A car. How does it work?"

"Well... you turn your key, your ignition starts. Your starter motor moves the pistons on your engine. That creates the right pressure for the mixture of fuel and air in your engine to begin the combustion reaction that powers your car. The thermal expansion of gases in turns powers the mechanical motion through the pistons. The pistons... why do you want to know this again?" Paul didn't know many girls who liked mechanical things.

"I... I don't know. What else can you build?" Beatrice did not seem well.

Paul skirted around the goat to be closer to her. He didn't know much about medicine but if she was about to have an episode or something he figured it was better if he be close by.

"I'm good at making things. I always have been. Why?" Beatrice was panting. He was just entering arm reach when she grabbed him by the hair and pulled him close, her lips mashing clumsily against his. His knee rattled like a dradel in an earthquake.

Homer thought the way they looked at each other was insufferable. "Couple of idiots." He muttered to himself. Apparently, it had taken them all of ten minutes to fall in love while he had been arguing with his grandfather. Paul and Beatrice walked a full ten feet behind him, so consumed with their utter affection for one another they didn't have the common decency to be wary of Homer's obviously strained temper. "Don't see why I have to walk them to the bus stop."

He knew it was unfair to be angry at them for an argument they had had nothing to do with. But well... he was *angry*. He didn't have to have a focus for it. He could be angry at all of existence if he wanted. *Or maybe I'm just upset because Abbey thinks I'm a starving homeless kid with diarrhea, and I'm jealous.* Or maybe Homer was upset because his grandfather had pointed out rather too truthfully to be anything less than cruel, that he had no friends. Homer risked a peak over his shoulder, saw the couple holding hands, and scowled.

Not that Homer minded having no friends. He considered it part of his honest charm. Loneliness had a long tradition of breeding some of the most truthful, blunt, and unshakably virtuous people in history. All friends did was ask you to make exceptions in the way you lived your life. Nope, Homer

didn't need any friends. No thank you. All he needed was some insufferable people who could be hated for their insufferability.

"So what are you doing tomorrow if there's no school?" Paul asked. Homer grimaced at the tone of the fat boy's voice. *I saved his ass today, Homer thought, and now he's already forgotten his gratitude and has moved on to making gaga eyes at Elvira Queen of the Damned. Where's the respect?* Nowhere Homer could see it, that was for sure.

"Whatever you're doing." Beatrice replied breathlessly. *Yuck*, Homer thought.

Homer wished he hadn't been guilt tripped into walking them to the bus station. The way they were going on they practically deserved to be beaten to death so there was really no reason for him to look out for their safety. Also, he had to walk by Mr. Ali's shop, which he had gone out of his way not to do since he'd saved the poor man's skin.

He didn't have time for this, he decided. He was sure Hassan had burned down the cafeteria that morning. Although, as to why, other than just a general evil, Homer was not sure. The same way he was not sure why the crazy jerk had burned down the homeless shelter. Then there was the argument he kept having with his grandfather over the involvement of Prince Abdullah. Homer came down staunchly on the side of him being the mastermind of the conspiracy, while his grandfather advised caution.

Homer still couldn't get the man to give him a straight answer on why the man's face had been covered with shadows in the alley. Or what he meant by "villains" or anything else he'd let slip the night he was drunk. Homer decided that his shoulder and waist hurt more than they actually did and decided to feel disgruntled about that as well.

"Want to go see a movie?" Paul asked.

"Oh will you two shut up!" Homer snapped, turning on his heel.

"Be quiet, Homer! Just because you're miserable doesn't mean everyone else is too!" Homer couldn't believe someone in a cape with plastic fangs had dared to call him miserable.

"You two look like a couple of morons, standing there breathing at each other like that. It's humiliating!"

"Being happy isn't something to be ashamed of, Homer. Get over yourself." Beatrice yelled.

"Yeah, Homer. What's your problem?"

At that moment Homer's vision blurred. Not caring anymore, he tore his glasses off his face and threw them at the couple. "Life sucks! *That's* my problem. Oh screw it. I'll be back." He turned around and ran, listening for screams.