

PRAISE FOR MINA AND THE UNDEAD:

'A dark and thrilling tale of the paranormal set in the nineties in New Orleans. With haunted houses, family secrets and murder galore, this delicious and gruesome tale of the macabre will ignite a whole new generation of vampire fans.'

LAUREN JAMES



'Brimming full of nostalgia and cinematic atmosphere. I loved this heart-pounding mystery so much, I couldn't put it down. A thrilling read and a clever new twist on the vampire stories you love.'

LAURA WOOD



'A book of blood-thirsty fun, from the New Orleans setting to the strong *Buffy* vibes. Amy McCaw brings vampires back from the dead in style. I loved it!'

KATHRYN FOXFIELD



'I could not put this down! Strong *Buffy* meets *Charmed* in New Orleans vibes . . . so much nineties nostalgia. I want to go for drinks at the Empire of the Dead with Mina and the gang. Vampires are officially cool again!'

CYNTHIA MURPHY

‘A fun romp through nineties pop culture – vampires,
Buffy, *The Crow* . . . need I say more?’

DAWN KURTAGICH



‘Bloody, brooding and brilliant! This brought my love of
decadent ’90s vampires screaming back to life.’

KAT ELLIS



‘I very much enjoyed this debut by Amy McCaw.
Smouldering vampires, a New Orleans setting and a
generous dash of bloodshed. A fun YA horror read!’

ALEX BELL



‘I absolutely raced through this book! As soon as I
started it, I was hooked. It has a very distinct flavour,
with lots of horror, 90s references and relationship
drama. I loved it and I hope there will be a sequel!’

HARRIET MUNCASTER



‘I devoured this dark and delicious tale of vampires
in nineties New Orleans. Fresh and original
and packed with pop culture references,
this is *Buffy* for YA readers.’

MARIA KUZNIAR

PRAISE FOR MINA AND THE SLAYERS:

'Mina is back with bite in this action-packed romp of a sequel. It was absolute, murderous fun to travel with her through the gothic atmosphere of vampire-loving 90s New Orleans.'

KENDARE BLAKE



'*Buffy* meets *Scream* in this high-stakes rush through a darkly atmospheric 90s New Orleans.'

M.A. KUZNIAR



'I couldn't wait to sink my fangs into this book and I wasn't disappointed. It leaves you gasping for more and never knowing who to trust.'

CYNTHIA MURPHY



'A fiendishly good sequel, brimming with 90s pop culture, smooth Southern vampires and a body count to rival *Buffy*.'

KAT ELLIS



'Amy McCaw's much-anticipated sequel is everything a discerning horror fan could wish for. With added 90s US police shenanigans!'

SUE WALLMAN



For Mum and Dad

Mina and the Cult is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by
uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

Text copyright © Amy McCaw, 2024
Cover illustrations copyright © Fred Gambino, 2024
Interior images copyright © Shutterstock.com
Spanish moss image copyright © istock.com

978-1-915235-91-6

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The right of Amy McCaw and Fred Gambino to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work respectively has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Becky Chilcott.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Amy McCaw



MINA

and the Cult



uclanpublishing





Chapter 1

If you'd told me a few months ago that I'd soon be on the way to visit my parents with a slayer and my vampire boyfriend, I would've smiled politely and backed away. Now, the weirdest part was that I'd be seeing my dad for the first time in ten years. The existence of vampires was old news to me and even I'd jumped on the slayer bandwagon.

"Can't I crack one window? I'm missing the view! And I'm pretty sure the air conditioning is on its last legs." Libby twisted round to glare at Jared. After a day in the car, her dark, curly hair was especially wild, and even though mine was shorter it wasn't faring much better.

"They're tinted for a reason. Unless you want a dead vampire stinking up the back seat, then sure," Jared said good-naturedly, his accent tinged with Hawaiian. He was used to Libby's moods, but there was a slight strain to his smile from travelling in daylight hours. He slouched down low, readjusting his long legs and jamming his cap down over his thick, wavy hair.

Libby was crabby because we'd left the Mansion of the Macabre closed so contractors could renovate one of the older rooms. Running the horror movie experience where we lived and worked

was expensive, because we had to move with the times.

Cabin fever also seemed to be creeping in. After the distant cities, small towns and endless crop fields of Texas, we'd been looking at the same sprawling, dusty New Mexico desert and blue sky for hours, with only a sleepy town for occasional variation. Small patches of scrub and spindly trees broke up the endless light brown earth and grasses. The Jeep had also developed a greasy fries-and-burger odour after too many takeaway meals, the wrappers of which were clogging up the footwells. Listening to music was keeping me going, and I sang along quietly to The Muffs' cover of 'Kids in America'.

"Spoil my fun," Libby grumbled. "How about using that healing action on my sunburn?"

Her girlfriend, Della, grinned in the rear-view mirror, making dimples in her dark brown skin. In her sunglasses and neat braids down her back, she was faring a lot better with the heat. "I did tell you the windscreen isn't tinted."

"And as always, I should've listened to you. How about it, Jared?"

"You want to wipe me out for hours because you forgot to wear sunscreen?" Jared finally showed his annoyance.

"Yes?" Libby replied, having the decency to let her voice rise in a question.

Jared's healing power was a sore subject. He'd tested it on all of us, most notably when saving Libby's life after Sam stabbed her – the moment he'd discovered his power. His ability saved lives, but it left him exhausted.

"How long until we arrive?" I asked, opting for a conversation change before Libby and Jared started bickering like they meant it.

"We got less than an hour to go," Della said, checking the Jeep's

clock. "Perfect timing – we should arrive right after sunset."

"Awesome," Jared said. "You don't talk about your dad much. Anything we should know before we meet him?"

"There's not a lot to say." I pushed through the urge to close down – our friends needed to know this stuff. "He's originally from New Mexico, and he met Mum on a plane to the UK. They were together until I was eight, when he went back to the States. He's always had strange interests. Never had a job but always had a lot of cash. That kind of thing."

Jared's heavy eyebrows knitted together, and I tried to lift the mood. "You'll like him though. He's definitely charming, and he sees himself as a bit of a philosopher."

"He sounds like a real character," Della said.

"Don't listen to Mina," Libby said, not quite coming across playful. "She's always down on him. He's great."

In the Shepherd family way, Libby would've run straight to New Mexico when we got Mum's postcard about being with Dad. Della and I convinced her we needed to let the dust settle after everything that had happened at Halloween. After I'd killed Sam.

It hadn't taken long for the police to determine I'd acted in self-defence, but I'd still taken a life. The start of panic tightened my chest when I thought about Sam, coming after me when he'd already left Libby bleeding out behind him. I'd done what was necessary to keep me and Libby alive, but it'd weigh on my conscience forever. One small mercy was that our friend Will had forgiven me for killing his half-brother. As far as he was concerned, Sam had deserved it. I felt bad for leaving Will to go and see my parents, but he was doing well. He was spending a lot of time with Fiona, a colleague of Della's who seemed to be one of the good vampires. If they

stayed together, she'd have to tell him what she was.

I'd agreed to miss a few days of school so we'd be back in New Orleans in time for Thanksgiving. Both of our parents had made a habit of ditching us, so they didn't get to have the big family celebration without making serious changes first.

"So you haven't seen him since you were a kid?" Jared asked quietly.

"Nope. He sent the occasional letter and phoned, but it always felt half-hearted. I don't know if he and Mum reconnected when she first moved over here, but they obviously have now." Our parents had never been the sharing types.

Libby made a scoffing sound from the front seat but kept her opinions to herself. I wasn't sure how she'd kept worshipping Dad for all these years.

While we'd been talking, the western sky had taken on a burnt orange shade, bathing the desert in a golden glow.

Jared sat up straighter, sliding off his sunglasses. "About time." Usually, Jared slept during the day, but driving for fifteen hours had thrown everything off. Jared had taken part of the night shift, but he hadn't managed to sleep much during the day with the sun blazing through the windscreen.

Libby grabbed the directions from the glove box. The road was rougher here, but Taz's black Jeep Cherokee was built for the landscape. I still thought of it as hers, even though her family sold it to Della after Taz died. My stomach twisted at the memory of Taz – killed during the battle against Veronica and her rogue vampires at Halloween. Veronica had slammed Taz to the ground, and I'd seen the light go out of her eyes. We'd taken Veronica down, but the hurt remained.

Soon, we were driving along the metal fence that lined Dad's property. It snaked off in both directions, barbed wire glinting along the top. Abandoned vehicles littered the weeds beyond the fence. Some cars were completely smashed up or burned out, but a few were in decent shape apart from flat tyres and rust.

"Anyone else getting *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* vibes?" Jared asked. "Either your dad collects wrecked cars or we're about to drive into our very own horror movie."

"We left Texas hours ago," Libby said. "And I think you should start being nicer. That's our dad you're talking about."

Jared shrugged. "They sell chainsaws in every state."

"I'm with you," Della said. "It seems kinda weird to me."

I took a moment to appreciate how Jared and Della were getting on. The vampire/vampire slayer dynamic hadn't always been easy, but they'd worked it out. Jared saving Libby from dying had sealed the deal.

"Let's keep an open mind," I said. "Dad isn't the most reliable guy, but I don't think he's serial killer material." It wasn't the best feeling to say that with a touch of doubt.

"Thanks for ganging up on me," Libby said, without much real hurt. She'd always been the first to defend Dad, but we'd been through enough together that I hoped it wouldn't get between us.

Finally, an opening in the fence interrupted the endless streak of metal. Two red recording lights glared down from a camera on either side of the gate.

"Looks like we're about to see for ourselves," Della said. She let the car roll up to a sign. 'TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT' was painted in red slashes across its grubby white surface.

“That doesn’t mean us though,” Libby said, her confrontational tone daring us to correct her.

“Let’s do this then,” Della said. The gates opened as we approached, adding to the creep factor.

‘Goo Goo Muck’ by the Cramps started playing as Della turned the Jeep onto a long, gravelled drive that wound through a wild growth of weeds and stunted trees. The car bumped over a line of crocodile teeth – no going back this way.

“If it’s any consolation, I have weapons.”

“Not funny,” Libby said, grinning too widely at Della to come across severe. The expression withered on her face.

Through the driver’s window, I saw what had her so rattled. A rusted pickup truck was racing towards us through the weeds.





Chapter 2

The truck was advancing fast, but the windscreen was too crusted in dirt to make out who was driving.

“This doesn’t feel right,” Della said, whipping her head around and jamming the Jeep into reverse. “Right . . . We’re not going over those crocodile teeth unless we want to blow out our tyres.” She put the car into park, hands tight on the steering wheel as we eyed the approaching truck.

“What do we do?” Libby asked, already crossed over into panic.

“Talk to them,” Jared said, his voice like steel. “We have advantages they can’t know about. We’re not the stupid kids in a horror movie. We’re the monster and the people who fight them.”

Pride cut away some of my fear. “Where are your weapons?”

“Most are in the trunk and one stake in the glove box. Not exactly meant for humans . . .” Della trailed off.

But it’d do if we needed it. The four of us had what it took to survive.

The crusty old truck slammed on the brakes in front of us, cutting us off in case we’d decided to plunge on ahead.

A young guy got out, and the four of us followed suit. With the sun below the horizon, the temperature had dropped.

The guy's hair was brown and wavy, falling to an uneven line around his shoulders. He was wearing a threadbare blue shirt open over a white vest that displayed the butt of a gun in a leather holster. His brow was scrunched low over narrow blue eyes, and even though he appeared to be in his early 20s, his skin had the weathered look of someone who spends their days in the sun. "You The Shepherd's kids?" he barked in a thick Southern accent that I couldn't quite pin down.

"Yeah, Mina and Libby Shepherd," I said, gesturing to my sister. He obviously had some idea, so there was no point playing games. "This is Jared and Della."

"Right on," he said, an unpleasant edge behind his easy manner.

"And you are?" Jared asked, almost equalling the guy's hostility.

"Chase," he said, squinting at us. "Hold on." He removed a remote control from his pocket and aimed at the open gate. Even though he clicked a few times, nothing happened. "Piece of junk." He smacked the remote against his palm until the gate finally started to close.

"Follow me." He got into his truck and set off at a crawl, so we clambered back into the Jeep.

"The Shepherd?" Jared said. "I've upgraded my assessment from Leatherface to Charles Manson."

"I know you're going to tell us who that is even if we don't want to know," Libby said.

I'd heard pieces of the story, but Jared always told them better. "I do."

"Just tell us before we get wherever we're going," Della said. We were inching past the wild land on either side, the truck ahead occasionally coughing out black clouds of exhaust. Libby closed

our vents. The encroaching darkness made the land shadowy and even less hospitable.

Jared's eyebrows scrunched low. "Charles Manson was the leader of this cult called the Manson Family. Of course, *they* didn't call it a cult. That's the name people used after all the shit went down.

"In the late 60s, around one hundred members of the Family lived on a commune, taking a whole lot of drugs and listening to this guy Charles Manson's teachings. Manson made prophecies about an apocalyptic war over race, which he said was due to happen real soon. So, basically your average terrible human being. But his members ate it up.

"In 1969 I think it was, three members of the Manson Family broke into the home of a Hollywood actress called Sharon Tate. They brutally murdered her and four friends. The Family were eventually convicted of other murders and a bunch of different crimes. Charles Manson has been in prison for decades."

"Good," Libby said.

"That's horrible," I added. "I don't understand why people follow someone making such ridiculous claims."

"Come on! Our dad isn't a cult leader," Libby said. "And I wish you wouldn't encourage him," she added, glaring at Jared. "Sometimes I swear we're not related."

"You're the odd one out – the rest of our family are all about the weird," I teased, though it turned sour. I was into a lot of the same things as my parents, but I hoped I wasn't going to turn out like them. My mum's obsession with vampires had led her to becoming one, and my dad had always left research around the house about every bizarre subject imaginable. They were more

interested in their strange hobbies than their children.

The narrow road opened out ahead, and I wasn't prepared for the sight. There was a Western town on my dad's property: a string of wooden buildings on either side of a dusty street. Each had a glowing electric lantern attached to it, creating little puddles of light in the darkness.

Chase parked the beaten-up truck at the end of the street. Della pulled up behind him, and the five of us got out. Chase's blue shirt was buttoned up, the point about his gun already made.

Giving a shifty, lopsided grin, Chase spat on the ground between us. "Y'all can drop off your bags in here, then I'll take you on a tour of the Community. I'll be waitin'." He scratched the back of his head, exposing the black smudge of a tattoo inside his wrist. I couldn't see what it was, and I wasn't about to ask for a closer look.

"Awesome," Libby said flatly. "Where's our dad?"

"Not here right now," Chase said, his eye contact straying in textbook avoidance.

We grabbed our bags from the boot, all four of us pointedly not looking at Chase. The building was labelled 'Molly Haggerly's Saloon', and we piled inside. Della grabbed the key sticking out of the front door and locked us in.

"The Shepherd . . . Community . . . We haven't even seen the rest of this place and I'm still going with cult," Jared said.

"I mean . . . Shepherd is our surname, so it's not that weird." Libby dropped down onto the nearest bed. "I call dibs."

Jared and Libby's squabbling faded away. Even the name of our room hadn't clued me in that we were staying in an actual saloon. The beds were covered with fake cow print bedding that looked

clean, thank goodness. The walls and floor were made of a pale wood, and a polished dark wooden bar ran along one side of the room with glasses and rows of bottles behind it. A green-felt poker table with a set of chips and cards took up one corner, and there was a small piano in another. The overhead light had stag antlers wrapped around it, stirring up horrible memories. The bear trap light at the mansion . . . Veronica's mallet in my hands, smashing the chain when Sam walked under it. I scrunched my eyes shut, opening them to refocus on the room.

"So, the two of us in this bed and you two in that one," Della said carefully. "Will you be OK with that?" She directed the last part at Jared.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "I'll be fine. I need to feed tonight, and then I'll be all good."

"I can do it," I said. Jared only needed to feed every couple of days now. He'd been taking some blood from me, but one of the new blood bars covered most of it. Anaemia would be no fun.

"I think we're in agreement that we're getting some strange vibes from that Chase guy. Let's be on our guard and see how it goes," Della said.

"Agreed," I said. "And when it comes to Dad, that was already my plan."

"This was supposed to be a nice trip!" Libby said. "Our parents are finally together, and we know where they are. Can't we take that as a win and try to enjoy ourselves?"

"Sure," I said. "But we can be careful too. Shall we go back out on Chase's tour?" I was nervous but intrigued. Jared's story about the Manson Family cult was mingling with what we'd seen, and I had to know what our dad had been up to all these years.

We headed outside to find Chase smoking something that smelled terrible. “Hey,” he said, crushing the butt under the heel of one battered cowboy boot. “Y’all ready?”

“What is this place?” I asked, gesturing at the Western town.

“Used to be a motel,” Chase said, setting off at an amble down the street. “We don’t do that no more – not since your grandpappy passed.”

The granddad we’d never met. “What do you all do for an income now?”

Chase squinted at me. “This and that – mostly fixin’ up vehicles.” When I was a kid, Dad had given similarly sketchy explanations about money. In the distance, there was another cluster of vehicles that had seen better days: a car with a smashed-up bonnet, a rusty yellow school bus and a TV news van with a satellite dish on top that looked in better shape.

When we passed through the fake-Western town, we hit the real ranch. Lanterns on crooked poles lit our path. I wouldn’t say it was a hive of activity, but there were signs of life. There was a stable on one side of the path. To the other side was a massive greenhouse, and beyond that, a cornfield rippled.

Chase gestured in the direction I was looking. “We’re pretty self-sufficient – ready for when the zombies come.” At the shock on our faces, Chase cracked up. “I’m just messin’ with ya. It ain’t the zombies you gotta worry about.”

“Right . . .” Libby said with a fake chuckle. “So, where is everyone?” she asked, likely assuming as I had that Dad would have people around him like always, and that the ominous term ‘Community’ meant something.

“They’re around,” Chase said. “Mostly in the house at this time

of day. This here's the stable," he said, bringing us closer to the expected animal smell than I would've liked. A few horses were in residence, and they looked clean and well taken care of.

A girl appeared in the open doorway, making us jump. "Y'all The Shepherd's girls?"

"They are," Jared said, saving us from explaining again.

"This here's Rebecca," Chase said, his tone surly even when introducing someone he knew. Maybe it wasn't us making him grumpy.

Rebecca looked about Libby's age. She was wearing a white summer dress despite the cold night. "You're lucky to have grown up with him," she said in a dreamy voice, twirling a long strand of straight brown hair.

"That's one way of describing it," I said.


Libby sidled up to dig an elbow into my ribs. "We do feel lucky," she said.

"I'm sure y'all will like this place," Rebecca said. She gave a broad, provocative grin. Jared seemed about ready to burst, spilling out questions. Libby and Della were making the same kind of warning look I could feel on my face. We weren't here to make conversation. I wanted to see my parents and figure out what we were walking into.

Rebecca rounded on me and Libby. "You're from England, right? I've never left New Mexico, but I'd love to go on one of our missions some day."

I nearly forgot my resolve to get to our parents, because I had to find out what Rebecca was talking about. Chase had other ideas. "Come on – I need to get y'all to the house."

We carried on past a ramshackle hut with a huge padlock on



the door – a ‘contemplation space’, whatever that meant. I was contemplating getting back in the Jeep and going home. We’d suffered through some horrendous things this past year, which had trained me to detect when something shady was going on.

Finally, the house materialised in the distance. If it wasn’t for the lights, I’d say the building had been abandoned. Advancing closer revealed uneven white boards across its front that were shedding paint. The grey roof was short a few slates, and some windows were boarded up. Two peaked roofs at the front were sloping as if the whole place was about to collapse.

“It’s . . . got character,” Libby said. This was Dad’s home we were talking about. The rose-tinted glasses were working hard.

“If that character’s from a slasher movie,” Jared muttered.

Chase coughed out a laugh. “It’s not what the place looks like on the outside. Y’all know what we do here?”

I had some ideas – none of them good. “Not a clue.”

“Y’all had better come on in then.”