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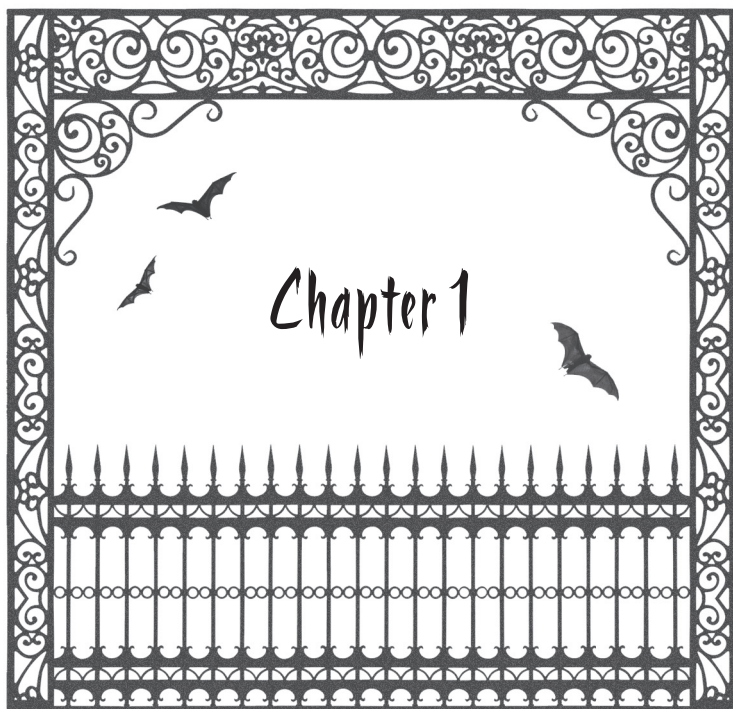


MINA and the Slayers



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Halloween has always been my favourite time of year. I'd spent my childhood in Whitby running around dressed as a tiny vampire and only bit one boy who really deserved it. Knowing vampires were real now gave those fanged, caped kids roaming New Orleans a whole new slant.

My first Halloween in the city was a few days away, but for now I was stuck in school. My English teacher, Ms. Kimble, was dutifully setting homework, her eyes magnified behind tortoiseshell glasses. I wasn't the only one clock watching. In a few minutes, fall break would begin: a whole week to appreciate spooky season and, in my case, to squeeze in some work experience with the police.

I'd had such high hopes for Fang Fest when I arrived in New Orleans this summer, and that had ended in blood and death. I slid the brown leather cuff down over the faded bite marks on my wrist. After the stares at school, I'd taken to wearing it and blaming my non-existent dog. Halloween would be different. I was so engrossed in memories that the bell caught me off guard.

My classmates scrambled for the door, voices raised in excited conversations. Nat appeared, her shoulder-length brown waves and black skull dress immaculate after a long day. A roll of toilet paper arced across our path, unravelling like a crisp new bandage.

"Let's get out of here!" she said.

She hooked her arm into mine and dragged me into the corridor, my backpack weighing down one shoulder. We'd already emptied our lockers, and I was glad of Nat's foresight. The corridor was chaos. Silly string shot into the air, landing on heads with accompanying squeals. More toilet roll arced through the air, getting tangled in a 'Go Vipers' banner.

A bloody-mouthed vampire lunged in front of me, fangs bared and clawed hands raised. I flinched back, pressing against the nearest locker as my arm fell away from Nat's. For a second, the bustling hallway blurred with the cell where John Carter had trapped me and Libby, using his frightening vampire abilities to control our actions. John was dead now, his murder spree ending with his life. His ruthless accomplice, Veronica, was unfortunately still undead – location unknown.

A girl with short, curly hair peeled back the rubbery vampire mask and grinned. "Happy Halloween!"

"Back off!" Nat said to the girl. She looped her arm through mine again and pulled us into the flow of people. I tried to ground

myself in the loud conversations and clamour to escape. On the other side of the corridor, someone shook up a bottle of coke and unleashed the foam.

"Are you all right?" Nat asked, leaning close enough for me to hear.

"I'll manage," I said. "I think I'm still jumpy... after this summer."

"Let me know if you want to talk about what happened," she said, as someone jostled her against me.

"I will – thanks." Nat knew Libby had been arrested and that we'd been through a hard time, but that was all. Even though she was the best friend I'd made at school, I wasn't planning to unload the truth on her, especially not in a crowded hallway.

It was hard not to get carried away by the shared elation around me. Principal Cutter glared disapprovingly by the exit, unmoved by his students' excitement. He caught me looking and the glare intensified, along with extreme *Demon Headmaster* vibes. He took off after a short, skinny guy blasting 'Bad Reputation' from a Boombox.

The fresh air outside lifted the sleepy stuffiness of the classroom. Brown leaves crunched underfoot as we jogged down the front steps, but the obnoxious growl of a motorbike drowned everything out. I guessed who we'd see from Nat's descriptions. We'd fallen hard and fast into friendship over the past few weeks after we discovered a shared love of scary movies, so I hadn't met Nat's elusive half-brother yet. He was on break from college, so this had to be him.

Nat sighed as the motorbike pulled up in front of us. "One day he'll listen to me."

Will had the same colouring as Nat: golden brown skin

and glossy brown hair that hung over one eye and brushed his collarbone. He was slimmer and shorter than my boyfriend, Jared, with a sharp jawline and cheekbones. There was no helmet in sight, but he was wearing a long black jacket. It probably looked very cool flying out behind him when he rode, without the same safety benefits. "You must be Mina," he said, pushing his hair behind one ear. A cigarette was tucked there – his deadly habits were stacking up.

"Hi Will," I said. "Nice to finally meet you."

"I only got back from college a few days ago." He raised an already arched eyebrow at me. "Nice accent. Nats didn't mention you were British." He frowned at the back of his bike, brows sinking low. "I don't think there's room for two of you. Hop on – Nats can walk."

"I'm confused – I'm getting a ride because I'm British?" I asked, drawing a laugh from him.

"Nats told you she didn't need a ride today," she cut in. "I'm headin' to Fanged Friends with Mina."

Will shrugged, unconcerned. He flipped up the collar of his coat, touching an index finger to his eyebrow in a quick salute. "I'll see if Sammyboy wants a ride then."

Nat checked her watch. "He'll be another hour at AV club. Plenty of time for you to remember he hates when you call him that."

"Guess I'll go for a ride 'til then. Catch you later." He released the kickstand with one clompy boot and peeled off.

We watched him go. Nat's other brother, Sam, was quiet and bookish. Even though he was almost a year younger, we were all in the same year at school. He and I were a lot alike, particularly

in contrast with our fun but spiky sisters. Will was an unknown entity.

Nat folded her arms as we set off walking. Expressive eyebrows must have been a family trait. One of hers was raised in an accusing V. "Not you too!"

"Not me what?"

"Don't give me that innocent face. As my friend and possessor of your own cute guy, you're supposed to be immune to my brother."

"Sorry – I'm only human. You know I'm dating Jared, anyway." Human was a word that no longer applied to him. I could never tell Nat that John Carter had kidnapped Jared and turned him, forever changing our relationship. "I'm not the one with a crush on a police officer almost ten years older than me."

I closed my eyes against Nat's outrage for a moment, letting the sunshine warm my face. It was much more bearable without the mugginess of summer. "Excuse me," Nat said, "but he's a *detective*."

"And that makes a difference?" I teased. We paused by a window with a display of Halloween lollipops: witches' hats, spiders and pumpkins. Bat fairy lights blinked among the tangle of plants in the spiral-patterned balcony above us.

"It's all about the suits," she said. "Maybe 'cause I saw him on TV too, talking about that case . . ." She trailed off, her gaze flashing to me. Cafferty and Boudreaux had both got a lot of screen time over the Fang Fest Fiend, and Nat had heard about the case before we were even friends. She returned to less distressing subjects. "Detective Cafferty can investigate me any day. Anyhow, you're the one givin' up your fall break to work with him."

We advanced into the French Quarter, passing a home with a red door that contrasted against the pale turquoise of its battered

shutters. Lanterns hung under the balcony cast an orange glow against loops of thin, black fabric with fuzzy spiders nestled among them.

"Not because I have a crush on the hot police detective," I said. "I choose to use my powers for good instead of evil."

"But you admit that he's hot. Interesting . . ."

I laughed without much feeling. My opinion of Cafferty was complicated. He'd agreed to let me do work experience with him, but he was also one of the detectives who'd falsely accused my sister of the murders John Carter had committed. It wasn't Cafferty's fault. John had gone to great lengths to set Libby up, wrongly assuming our mum would find out and come running back to him. "We've got less than a year left at school, and I need to figure out what to do with my life," I said. "This feels sort of . . . right."

"Then who am I to mock? You follow those dreams, girl."

"I'm working on it – one unpaid job at a time," I said.

I'd never dreamed of being a police officer, but I wasn't going to sit back and let my life fall apart again. Learning self-defence with Della was a good start, but I wanted to help people put their lives back together. I'd convinced Cafferty to let me do work experience, and he'd got his superiors to sign off on it. He thought I had potential after the work I'd done to prove Libby's innocence.

Nat bumped her shoulder against me, smiling. Things were so easy between us. I'd gravitated to her because she had the same giving-zero-craps attitude as Libby, minus the sister angst. Her family was as dysfunctional as ours, with a side of tragedy. Her older sister, Louisa, had died not long ago, my worst nightmare made real, and her dad had left when she was little. We had that

in common. Will was his son, but he'd left him behind with his stepmum – Nat, Sam and Louisa's mum. When it turned out her family had a killer VHS collection, it cemented the friendship.

"I heard something that sucks today," Nat said.

"And you feel the need to share it?"

Nat shrugged, her smile wicked. "I know you. Now I've said that, you want me to tell you."

She was right – she'd woken the inquisitiveness that had landed me in trouble on occasion.

"You got me."

"So this girl Laurel Jenkins, who graduated last year? She was found dead on her street two nights ago."