

"Yep, I have a seriously sucky birthday," I told my cat, Nala.

(Okay, truthfully she's not so much my cat as I'm her person. You know how it is with cats: They don't really have owners, they have staff. A fact I mostly try to ignore.)

Anyway, I kept talking to the cat as if she hung on my every word, which is soooo not the case. "It's been seventeen years of sucky December twenty-fourth birthdays. I'm totally used to it by now. No big deal." I knew I was saying the words just to convince myself. Nala "mee-uf-owed" at me in her grumpy-old-lady cat voice and then settled down to lick her privates, clearly showing that she understood I was full of b.s.

"Here's the deal," I continued as I finished smudging a little liner on my eyes. (And I mean a little—the line-your-eyes-till-you-look-like-a-scary-raccoon is definitely not the look for me. Actually, it's not the look for anyone.) "I'm gonna get a bunch of well-meaning presents that aren't really birthday presents—they're stuff that's Christmas themed because people always try to mush my birthday with Christmas, and that seriously doesn't work." I met Nala's big green eyes in the mirror. "But we're going to smile and pretend we're fine with the dorky birthmas gifts because people do not get that they can't mush a birthday into Christmas. At least not successfully."

Nala sneezed.

"Exactly how I feel about it, but we'll be nice 'cause it's even worse when I say something. Then I get crappy gifts and everyone's upset and things turn all awkward." Nala didn't look convinced, so I focused my attention on my reflection. For a second I thought I might have gone too heavy on the eyeliner, but I looked closer and realized that what was making my eyes look so huge and dark wasn't anything as ordinary as eyeliner. Even though it had been two months since I'd been Marked to become a vampyre, the sapphire-colored crescent-moon tattoo between my eyes and the elaborate filigree of interlocking lacework tattoos that framed my face still had the ability to surprise me. I traced one of the curving jewel-blue spiral lines with the tip of my finger. Then almost without conscious thought I pulled the already wide neck of my black sweater down so that it exposed my left shoulder. With a flick of my head I tossed back my long dark hair so that the unusual pattern of tattoos that began at the base of my neck and spread over my shoulder and down either side of my spine to the small of my back was visible. As always, the sight of my tattoos gave me an electric thrill that was part wonder and part fear.

"You're not like anyone else," I whispered to my reflection. Then I cleared my throat and continued in an overly perky voice. "And it's okay not to be like anyone else." I rolled my eyes at myself. "Whatever." I looked up over my head, half surprised that it wasn't visible. I mean, I could definitely feel the ginormic dark cloud that had been following me around for the past month. "Hell, I'm surprised it's not raining in here. And wouldn't that be just great for my hair?" I sarcastically told my reflection. Then I sighed and picked up the envelope I'd laid on my desk. The heffer family was embossed in gold above the sparkling return address. "Speaking of depressing . . .," I muttered.

Nala sneezed again.

"You're right. Might as well get it over with." I reluctantly opened the envelope and pulled out the card. "Ah, hell. It's worse than I thought." There was a huge wooden cross on the front of the card. Staked to the middle of the cross (with a bloody nail) was an old time scroll-like paper. Written (in blood, of course) were the words: He IS the reason for the season. Inside the card was printed (in red letters): MERRY CHRISTMAS. Below that, in my mom's handwriting, it said: I hope you're remembering your family during this blessed time of the year. Happy Birthday, Love, Mom and Dad.

"That's so typical," I told Nala. My stomach hurt. "And he is not my dad." I ripped the card in two and threw it into the wastepaper basket, then stood staring at the torn pieces. "If my parents aren't ignoring me, they're insulting me. I like being ignored better."

The knock on my door made me jump.

“Zoey, everyone wants to know where you are.” Damien’s voice carried easily through the door.

“Hang on—I’m almost ready,” I yelled, shook myself mentally, and gave my reflection one more look, deciding, with a definitely defensive edge, to leave my shoulder bare. “My Marks aren’t like anyone else’s. Might as well give the masses something to gawk at while they talk,” I muttered.

Then I sighed. I’m usually not so grumpy. But my sucky birthday, my sucky parents . . .

No. I couldn’t keep lying to myself.

“Wish Stevie Rae was here,” I whispered.

And that was it, what had me withdrawing from my friends (including boyfriends—both of them) during the past month and impersonating a large, soggy, disgusting, rain cloud. I missed my best friend and ex-roommate, who everyone had watched die a month ago, but who I knew had actually been turned into an undead creature of the night. No matter how melodramatic and bad B movie that sounded. The truth was that right now, when Stevie Rae should have been downstairs puttering around with my lame birthday details, she was actually lurking about somewhere in the old tunnels under Tulsa, conspiring with other disgusting undead creatures who were truly evil, as well as definitely bad-smelling.

“Uh, Z? You okay in there?” Damien’s voice called again, interrupting my mental blahs. I scooped up a complaining Nala, turned my back on the terrible birthmas card from my ’rentals, and hurried out the door, almost running over a worried-looking Damien.

“Sorry . . . sorry . . .,” I mumbled. He fell in step beside me, giving me quick little sideways glances.

“I’ve never known anyone before who was as not excited as you about their birthday,” Damien said.

I dropped the squirming Nala and shrugged, trying for a nonchalant smile. “I’m just practicing for when I’m old as dirt—like thirty—and I need to lie about my age.”

Damien stopped and turned to face me. “Okayyyy.” He dragged the word out. “We all know that thirty-year-old vamps still look roughly twenty and definitely hot. Actually one-hundred-and-thirty-year-old vamps still look roughly twenty and definitely hot. So the whole lying about your age issue is a nonissue. What’s really going on with you?”

While I hesitated, trying to figure out what I should or could say to Damien, he raised one neatly plucked brow and, in his best schoolteacher voice, said, “You know how sensitive my people are to emotions, so you may as well just give up and tell me the truth.”

I sighed again. “You gays are freakishly intuitive.”

“That’s us: homos—the few, the proud, the hypersensitive.”

“Isn’t homo a derogatory term?”

“Not if it’s used by a homo. By the by, you’re stalling and it’s so not working for you.” He actually put his hand on his hip and tapped his foot.

I smiled at him, but knew that the expression didn’t reach my eyes. With an intensity that surprised me, I suddenly, desperately wanted to tell Damien the truth.

“I miss Stevie Rae,” I blurted before I could stop my mouth.

He didn’t hesitate. “I know.” His eyes looked suspiciously damp.

And that was it. Like a dam had broken open inside me the words came spilling out. “She should be here! She’d be running around like a crazy woman putting up birthday decorations and probably baking a cake all by herself.”

“A really awful cake,” Damien said with a little snuffle.

“Yeah, but it’d be one of her mama’s favorite recipes.” I gave my best exaggerated Okie twang as I mimicked Stevie Rae’s countrified voice, which made me smile through my own tears, and I thought how weird it was that now that I was letting Damien see how upset I really felt—and why I felt that way—my smile actually reached my eyes.

“And the Twins and I would have been pissed because she would have insisted we all wear those pointed birthday hats with the elastic string that pinches your chin.” He shuddered in not-so-pretended horror. “God, they’re so unattractive.”

I laughed and felt a little of the tightness in my chest begin to loosen. “There’s just something about Stevie Rae that makes me feel good.” I didn’t realize that I’d used the present tense until Damien’s teary smile faltered.

“Yeah, she was great,” he said, with an extra emphasis on the was while he looked at me like he was worried about my sanity.

If only he knew the whole truth. If only I could tell him.

But I couldn’t. If I did it would get either Stevie Rae or me, or both of us, killed. For good this time.

So instead I grabbed my obviously worried friend’s arm and started pulling him toward the stairs that would lead us down to the public rooms of the girls’ dorm and my waiting friends (and their dorky presents).

“Let’s go. I’m feeling the need to open presents,” I lied enthusiastically.

“Ohmygod! I can not wait for you to open mine!” Damien gushed. “I shopped for it forevah!”

I smiled and nodded appropriately as Damien went on and on about his Quest for the Perfect Present. Usually he isn’t so overtly gay. Not that the fabulous Damien Maslin isn’t actually gay. He totally is. But he’s also a tall, brown-haired, big-eyed cutie who looks like he’d be excellent boyfriend material (which he is—if you’re a boy). He’s not a fluttery-acting gay kid, but get the boy talking about shopping and he definitely shows some girlish tendencies. Not that I don’t like that about him. I think he looks cute when he gushes about the importance of buying really good shoes, and right then his babbling was soothing. It was helping me to get ready to face the bad presents that (sadly) waited for me.

Too bad it couldn’t help me face what was really bothering me.

Still talking about his Shopping Quest, Damien led me though the main room of the dorm. I waved at the various clumps of girls clustered around the pods of flat-screen TVs as we headed to the little side room that served as a computer lab and library. Damien opened the door and my friends broke into a totally off-key chorus of “Happy Birthday to You.” I heard Nala hiss and from the edge of my vision watched her back from the doorway and trot away down the hall. Coward, I thought, even though I wished I could escape with her.

Song over (thankfully), my gang swarmed me.

“Happy-happy!” said the Twins together. Okay—they’re not genetically twins. Erin Bates is a very white girl from Tulsa and Shaunee Cole is a lovely caramel-colored girl of Jamaican-American descent who grew up in Connecticut, but the two are so freakishly alike that skin tone and region make absolutely no difference. They’re soul twins, which is way closer than mere biology.

“Happy birthday, Z,” said a deep, sexy voice I knew very, very well. I stepped out of the twin sandwich and walked into the arms of my boyfriend, Erik. Well, technically, Erik is one of my two boyfriends, but the other is Heath, a human teenager I dated before I was Marked and I’m not supposed to be dating him now, but I kinda sorta accidentally sucked

his blood and now we're Imprinted and so he's my boyfriend by default. Yes, it's confusing. Yes, it makes Erik mad. Yes, I expect him to dump me any day because of it.

"Thanks," I murmured looking up at him and getting trapped all over again in his incredible eyes. Erik is tall and hot, with Superman dark hair and incredibly blue eyes. I relaxed in his arms, a treat I hadn't allowed myself much of during the past month, and temporarily basked in his yummy smell and the sense of security I felt when I was close to him. He met my gaze and, just like in the movies, for a second everyone else went away and it was just us. When I didn't move out of his arms his smile was slow and a little surprised, which made my heart hurt. I'd been putting the kid through way too much—and he didn't even really understand why. Impulsively, I tiptoed and kissed him, much to the general merriment of my friends.

"Hey, Erik, why don't you spread some of that birthday sugar around?" Shaunee wagged her eyebrows at my grinning boyfriend.

"Yeah, sweet thang," Erin said, and in typical twin fashion mirrored Shaunee's eye waggle. "How about a little b-day kiss over here."

I rolled my eyes at the twins. "Uh, it's not his birthday. You only get to kiss the birthday boy or girl."

"Damn," Shaunee said. "I lurve ya, Z, but I don't want to kiss ya."

"Just please with the same-sex kissing," Erin said, then she grinned at Damien (who was gazing adoringly at Erik). "I'll leave that to Damien."

"Huh?" Damien said, clearly paying more attention to Erik's cuteness than the Twins.

"Again, we say—" Shaunee started.

"Wrong team!" and Erin finished.

Erik laughed good-naturedly, gave Damien a very guy-like punch on the arm, and said, "Hey, if I ever decide to change teams, you'll be the first to know." (Yet another reason why I adore him. He's mega-cool and popular, but he accepts people how they are and never gets an I'm-all-that attitude.)

"Uh, I hope I'll be the first to know if you change teams," I said.

Erik laughed and hugged me, whispering, "Not something you ever need to worry about," in my ear.

While I was seriously considering sneaking another Erik kiss, a mini-whirlwind in the form of Damien's boyfriend, Jack Twist, burst into the room.

"Yea! She hasn't opened her presents yet. Happy birthday, Zoey!" Jack threw his arms around us (yes, Damien and me) and gave us a big hug.

"I told you that you needed to hurry up," Damien said, as we untangled.

"I know, but I had to make sure it was wrapped just right," Jack said. With a flourish that only a gay boy can pull off, he reached into the man purse looped over his arm and lifted out a box wrapped in red foil with a green sparkly bow on it that was so big it practically swallowed the package. "I made the bow myself."

"Jack's really good at crafts," Erik said. "He's just not good at cleaning up the crafts."

"Sorry," Jack said sweetly. "I promise I'll clean up right after the party."

Erik and Jack are roommates, further proving Erik's coolness. He's a fifth former (in normal language that's a junior) and he's also easily the most popular guy at school. Jack is a third former (a freshman), a new kid, cute but kinda dorky, and definitely gay. Erik could have made a big deal about being stuck with a queer and could have gotten out of rooming with

him, and made Jack's life hell at the House of Night. Instead he totally took him under his wing and treats him like a little brother, a treatment he extends to Damien, who has been officially going out with Jack for two point five weeks as of today. (We all know because Damien is ridiculously romantic and he celebrates the half-week anniversaries as well as the weekly ones. Yes, it makes the rest of us gag. In a nice way.)

"Hello! Speaking of presents!" Shaunee said.

"Yeah, bring that overbowed box over here to the present table and let Zoey get to opening," Erin said.

I heard Jack whisper to Damien, "Overbowed?" and caught Damien's help look, as he assured Jack, "No, it's perfect!"

"I'll carry it over to the table and open it first." I snatched the package from him, hurried to the table, and started to carefully extract the ginormous green sparkly bow from the red foil saying, "I think I'm going to save this bow because it's so cool." Damien gave me a thank-you wink. I heard Erik and Shaunee snickering and managed to kick one of them, which shut both of them up. Putting the bow aside I unwrapped and opened the little box and pulled out . . .

Oh, jeesh.

"A snow globe," I said, trying to sound happy. "With a snowman inside it." Okay, a snowman snow globe is not a birthday present. It's a Christmas decoration. A cheesy Christmas decoration at that.

"Yeah! Yeah! And listen to what it plays!" Jack said, practically hopping up and down in excitement as he took the globe from me and wound a knob in its base so that "Frosty the Snowman" started tinkling out around us in painfully cheap and off-key notes.

"Thank you, Jack. It's really pretty," I lied.

"Glad you like it," Jack said. "It's kinda a theme for your birthday." Then he shot his eyes over to Erik and Damien. The three of them grinned at each other like bad little boys.

I planted a smile on my face. "Oh, well, good. Then I'd better open the next present."

"Mine's next!" Damien handed me a long, soft box.

Smile wedged in place, I started to open the box, though I couldn't help wishing I could turn into a cat and hiss and run from the room.

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