dead letters

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/15323862.

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dead letters

by the_casket_girls

Summary

dead · letter

noun

noun: dead letter; plural noun: dead letters

1. a law or treaty which has not been repealed but is ineffectual or defunct in practice.

2. an unclaimed or undelivered piece of mail.

Notes

welcome, i claim no liability for emotional damages

See the end of the work for more notes.
May 13th, 2026

Klaus thumbed through the letters, barely feeling the paper on his skin. They were marked with locations he barely remembered visiting, all stamped with the same, angry red type: RETURN TO SENDER.

He picked up the first he found. It was heavier than it had any right to be. He flipped it over and broke the envelope’s seal with his fingers. It was the first time he’d ever opened a modern envelope without a pang of nostalgia for the days of cracked wax seals and parchment.

Perhaps he’d spoken too soon, he wondered as a slip of parchment fell from the envelope. He recognised it as torn from one of his old art journals. The penmanship was bold and blocky, written with a ballpoint pen rather than the calligraphy ink this parchment was suited for. It made sense—Hayley would never have the patience to work with smudge-able ink.

He wondered how much more he could discern about the letter without actually reading it.

Shoring up his wits, Klaus forged on and read.

It was one of the hardest things Klaus had ever done, not creasing the paper in shaking hands. He folded it with slow, controlled movements and slid it back into the envelope. He closed the seal, smoothing his thumbs over it until it lay flat.

As long as he didn’t release it, he could pretend the seal had never been broken.
June 2nd, 2022

Hayley raised a hand to cover her phone, shielding it from the splash of lake water sent her way. Even sitting on the front porch of Mary’s place wasn’t far enough to protect her from the water-bombs the kids were doing into the lake.

No new messages. No texts. No voicemails. No indication that her own many, many texts and voicemails had been received. Hayley knew the situation was serious, but that didn’t stop her from calling Klaus’ current behaviour what it was: a sulk.

“Still nothing?”

Hayley raised a hand to keep the sun out of her eyes as she caught a good look at Lisina. “Nope.”

“I’m sure he’ll come around.” Lisina didn’t sound convinced, but then she wasn’t Klaus’ biggest fan. None of the wolves were, but Lisina did a better job of hiding her distaste than the others. “I think we’re about to purge the crawfish. Wanna pitch in?”

“Oh course.” Hayley tucked her phone away and took the hand Lisina offered to help her stand. She searched for Hope out in the water, heart skipping a beat when she was confronted with a distinct lack of strawberry blonde hair bobbing up and down in the water.

“She’s with Mary,” said Lisina. “Maybe she’ll want to help us?”

“I’ll go see. You can get started without us, though.” Mary’s actual place was some miles away, but she’d agreed to move to the shack by the lake to be closer to the road—and everyone that wanted to check on her. And ‘shack’ was a loose term at that point, since the pack had spent the better part of last month doing the place up with fresh paint and new insulation in the walls. There was even an AC, something Mary had fought tooth and nail against … until she was moved in, at which point she went oddly silent.

Hayley found Keelin in the kitchen-slash-dining area. After Mary refused a live-in nurse to care for her (“I don’t want no stranger in my house and in my business!”), Keelin stepped forward and used her lone wolf mojo to convince Mary she was trustworthy enough to keep around. At this point, if Keelin wasn’t on shift at the hospital, she was here. It wasn’t sustainable, but it wasn’t meant to be.

There was already a pall of death over the house. It wouldn’t be long now.

“She’s with Mary,” said Keelin, voice soft.

The door between the living area and the bedroom was slightly ajar. Soft singing filtered out from it. *Hope.*

Keelin stood and slipped her fingers into Hayley’s arm. “Still nothing from him?”

Hayley shook her head, biting back the well of emotion inching up into the back of her throat. “I think something broke there. I just don’t know what it is.”

“I can talk to Hope for you,” Keelin offered. “Maybe she’ll tell her favourite aunt.”

*Don’t let Rebekah hear you say that,* Hayley almost joked. The words stopped on her tongue. Rebekah wasn’t here. If she was, none of this moody Mikaelson bullshit would be happening.

“It’s fine,” Hayley told Keelin. “She’ll come to me when she feels she can.”
The singing continued, filling the silence. Hayley had to strain her senses to hear the rasp of Mary’s breathing beneath the song. She blinked rapidly, fighting back tears.

“She’s been at it for almost an hour,” said Keelin. “Started with stories, moved onto songs when she ran out of material.”

Hayley dabbed at her tears. “Is that—”

“Simon and Garfunkel? Yeah, I think so.”

“Oh, god.” Hayley chuckled through her tears. “I guess I didn’t exactly sing her nursery rhymes growing up.”

“It’s cute,” Keelin assured her, squeezing her arm. “You should take Hope out for the purge. I hear crawfish boils are a big deal around these parts.”

“Something like that.” Hayley turned into Keelin’s half-embrace for a moment. “Thank you for being here. I know nursing terminal patients isn’t really your area, doctor.”

“I go where I’m needed. And we both know Mary would’ve chased away anyone else you sent by.”

“True.” Hayley disengaged from the hug and cracked the door open, sticking her head inside. Hope stopped singing when she realised she wasn’t alone. “It’s time to purge and clean the crawfish, Hope.”

“But Mom—”

“Do as you’re told,” said Mary, pinching Hope’s cheek. “Crawfish boils were my favourite part of summer when I was your age.”

“You didn’t have Netflix when you were my age.”

Hayley’s objection was smothered first by Mary’s laughter, then by her coughs. Ironically, her lungs were one of the only places the cancer hadn’t spread yet.

“Are you okay, Mary?” Hope asked.

Mary nodded, making it through the last of her coughs before saying, “Of course,” with a rough, phlegmy voice. “Now give me a kiss and go cook some crawfish.”

Hope pressed a kiss to Mary’s weathered cheek. “Do you want us to bring some back for you?”

“I’m not sure I could stomach it, baby. You promise to enjoy it twice as much for me and tell me all about it?”

“We could make some into a smoothie for you! Aunt Freya can bring over her thermomix.”

“Come on, Hope,” said Hayley, extending her hand to her daughter. “Let’s not keep Mary from her rest.”

Sighing, Hope took Hayley’s hand and let herself be led out. Hayley gave Mary a reassuring smile before snatching a giggling Hope up into her arms and leaving.

They’d cleaned most of the crawfish by the time Christophe Benoit turning the hose in his hand away from the bucket and towards his son, Henry, instead. Henry squealed, cackling as he dove
away from the water and ducked behind Lisina.

“Sina! Sina!” he shrieked, trying to clamber up onto her back. His cries of laughter turned to those of betrayal when she swept him up in her arms and held him in front of her, exposing him to his father’s watery assault. Hayley and the other adults trusted with the hoses followed suit, taking gleeful aim at the kids.

From there, it became pandemonium. What had started as a coordinated attack by the adults became chaos when Hope used magic to steal Christophe’s hose, turning it on him. Henry freed himself from Lisina’s grip (she set him down gently and let him think it was his achievement) and joined Hope’s rebellion.

The water fight became a mud fight, parents against children until everyone had to be dunked into the lake just to clean themselves off. Hayley barely rescued her phone from the onslaught, though others weren’t so lucky.

Hayley had just finished sloughing the mud out of Hope’s hair when Keelin stepped out of the shack. Hayley locked eyes with her, finding a solemn gaze staring back at her. A quick listen for Mary’s rattled breathing confirmed was she suspected, as she did the slight shake of Keelin’s head.

Hayley took a moment to breathe—in, then out, then in again—before she turned back to her daughter. “Come on, sweetie,” she said, tucking her into her grip and pulling them both up onto the boardwalk. “Time to dry off.”

Hayley, Hope, and Keelin arrived back home late that night. Hope was napping in the back, belly full of crawfish and the smores they’d cooked over the fire. Hayley carried her out of the car, into the compound’s courtyard where Freya was waiting with a novel and a glass of wine. She perked up at the sight of Keelin.

“You’re home,” Freya said, delighted. Then her face fell. “Does that mean …”

Keelin nodded. “A couple hours ago.”

“I’m going to put Hope to bed,” said Hayley. The adults had managed to coordinate and keep the kids from knowing about Mary just yet, and Hayley wanted to keep it that way. Hope should at least sleep well tonight.

She woke, of course, the moment Hayley put her down into bed. It brought back memories of her infancy—rather, the later stages Hayley was privy to, after Rebekah had her and before Klaus cursed Hayley and took her daughter away.

“Mom?” Hope asked, blinked dazedly.

“We’re home.” Hayley smoothed a hand over her hair, still damp and straggly from the lake water. “It’s time to get some sleep.”

Hope readjusted herself in the sheets, looking less likely to drop back off like Hayley had hoped. “Can we go and see Mary in the morning? I didn’t get to tell her about the boil.”

“We’ll see,” said Hayley, slipping into the bed beside Hope. “For now, it’s time to sleep.” She held out her arms to let Hope clamber into them, tucking her head under Hayley’s chin. Hayley stopped fighting back her tears, letting them slide down her temple and onto the pillow just as long as Hope couldn’t see them.
“Mom?”

“Yes, sweetie.”

“You’re never gonna get sick, right?”

“I’m part-vampire—I can’t get sick.”

“So you won’t get old like Mary?”

“No, I won’t. And neither will you.”

Hayley felt Hope nod against her chest. “Good.”

“Why do you ask, sweetie?”

“Because I think it would be scary if you did get sick and die like Mary.”

Hayley froze, taking a moment to remind herself that Hope didn’t know, not yet. The die was hypothetical. “Well, you don’t have to worry,” Hayley promised. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Hope stopped asking questions after that. Her breathing evened out, heart slowing until she was really asleep. Hayley waited another hour before easing herself out of the bed. She kissed her fingers and pressed them to Hope’s nose, then crept out of the room.

Hayley took the longest shower known to man, scrubbing the bayou out of her hair and skin until she smelled like another one of the endless pretentious soaps Klaus had stocked the compound with. He’d made the order when she was still pregnant with Hope; they still hadn’t run out.

Freya and Keelin had gone to bed by the time Hayley came out, clad only in a bathrobe and with her hair twisted up into a towel. She checked her phone for messages, still finding none.

God, she was tired of being ignored.

Hayley brought up the text conversation, embarrassed to find she would have to scroll up for several minutes to find the last time he had sent a message. The entire space was populated with her begging him to respond. Evidently, she needed to switch tactics.

Klaus’ painting studio was the same as he’d left it. He hadn’t had much time for art the last time he’d been here, focusing on Hope. There was a half-finished painting of Hope and Hayley on the easel. She brushed her fingers against it, almost wishing the paint was still wet if only because it meant he’d still be here.

She located one of his art notebooks, the expensive ones with parchment inside. Tearing off a sheet, she fished around the desk for a pen. There were several ink pots and some dip pens, but nothing she’d be caught dead using in a million years.

Giving up, Hayley brought the sheaf of parchment back downstairs with her, into the ground floor sitting room. There was a tin of pens on the bureau left of the doorway, and Hayley selected the largest one triumphantly and clicked the nib out like she was cocking a gun. She sat down on the same chair Freya had been on, using the discarded novel to press the letter against.

And froze.

She was angry—angry that she’d been left alone in this, alone in her worries, alone in her daughter’s
life. Klaus had promised to call, to stay in touch and make sure they were all right. He’d made all sorts of promises, and now all he gave them was silence.

Did this make her a single parent?

Hayley took a moment to swallow her anger. There’d been plenty of that in the thousands of messages she’d left him before.

When she touched pen to paper, it was different.

Dear Klaus,

You’d have been proud of Hope today. She’s back home for summer break. I brought her out to the bayou for the crawfish boil, hoping she’d play with the other crescent kids, but I turned around and she was gone. I found her inside at Mary’s bedside, telling her stories and singing to her.

Sometimes I think about all the unlikely things that led to her existence. You and I, born a thousand years apart, and all of the petty crap that brought us to that one night in Mystic Falls. It’s been hard ... but the truth is, I watched her curled up next to that dying woman and I knew I wouldn’t change a thing. In all my life, I’ve never felt lucky before her.

She froze, pen hovering above the paper. Kind regards? Best wishes? All my love?

No:

Anyway, we miss you,

Hayley
May 13th, 2026

The second letter was dated at the top with 19th June, 2022. The impact of the first line, *I figured I should start dating these so the passage of time reminds you of what you’re missing*, wasn’t lessened at all by the film of tears that separated him from it. Vampire eyes refocused and gave him no choice but to confront the reality of what was in front of him.

He had missed so much.

*It’s Father’s Day today. Hope wasn’t herself, but we did what we could to distract her. I had a special guest to help with that.*

*Mary’s funeral last week was a real lesson for Hope, and not the kind I wanted to have so soon. The permanence of death isn’t something I wanted to explain to my ten-year-old, and certainly not alone. Lisina helped Hope carve Mary’s name into the tree under the one you did for Jackson, just so she’d have something left of her. It’s not really a wolf thing, permanence. I guess that’s why we burn our dead.*

*Hope asked about death. I told her we’re all immortal, but I’m worried she’ll hold onto that too much. She can’t just distance herself from mortality to cope. It breaks my heart to see her hurt, but she has to understand what it means to be gone. That’s how we protect her.*

*I know I’m probably a broken record at this point, so I’m going to save my dignity and stop begging you to reply. I know you care. Even if you never respond, at least I’ll know you have these letters.*

*I think Hope’s nervous about going back to school. I promised to stay nearby for the first two weeks, but I think not being able to talk to you this year is making her nervous. Caroline says you haven’t called for an update since whatever happened in February, and I guess Hope’s realized you aren’t going to be a part of that anymore. She held onto your weekly Skype sessions a lot, and not having them won’t be helping her nerves.*

*Okay, so maybe I’m still guilt-tripping a little. But can you blame me? She hasn’t painted in months. Marcel and Rebekah bought her paints and canvases for her birthday. She hasn’t touched them. I’m not sure how to help her.*

*We miss you,*

*Hayley*

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June 19th, 2022

Hayley flipped the pancake over, wincing a little at the charred side that was revealed. She’d only avoided burning half the pancakes she’d cooked so far, and what had happened to the waffles was
unspeakable.

Whatever. There were enough pancakes for Hope and Freya, and Hayley was more in the mood for the eggs she was boiling up.

“Hope! Breakfast!” she called, waiting a moment to listen for Hope’s response. It was more of a grumble than a word, then footsteps stomping down the stairs and heading toward the kitchen.

“You’re still in your pyjamas,” Hayley observed as Hope hopped up onto a stool at the aptly-named breakfast bar Klaus had installed when he was here. She set the plate in front of Hope, leaving the bottle of maple syrup for her to use unsupervised.

Just today, she’d allow it.

“I was busy reading,” said Hope, dribbling an amount of syrup that made Hayley cringe internally.

“Well, get dressed after this, okay?”

Hope nodded, tucking into her pancakes. She wasn’t nearly as expressive as usual—hadn’t been since February, and now even more since losing Mary.

Freya entered the kitchen, dressed in jeans and a fitted leather jacket Hayley thought she recognised from her own closet. “I’m gonna go pick up Keelin from her shift.”

“Wanna take some pancakes for the road?” Hayley waved a spatula at the remaining stack.

Freya eyed the charred mess skeptically. “I think I’ll pick up a liquid breakfast for Keelin and I from Starbucks. Thanks, though.” She kissed Hope’s head before departing.

Hayley watched Hope play with her pancakes in silence, gaze never leaving her plate. “You okay, sweetie?”

“Yeah.”

“What were you reading this morning?”

“One of the grimoires in the library.”

Hayley had been hoping for something more like a Judy Bloom novel, but she guessed that was suitably diverting. “That’s nice. Any spells in particular?”

“Not really.”

Hayley didn’t quite think that was true. “Do you wanna pick one to show me? Maybe there’s something you’ve been learning at school that I haven’t seen before.”

“We learned some locating spells, but you’ve seen them all before.”

“I’ve never seen you do one.” Hayley leaned down over the counter, bracing her hands on the cold surface. “Do you think you could show me?”

Hope shrugged. “I guess.”

And that seemed to be as much of a commitment as Hayley would get.
The spell didn’t take long. It was one that didn’t require blood (the kids weren’t allowed to use their blood for spells until they were in the witchy equivalent of high school), and some salted soil led the way across a map to the hospital where Keelin worked, revealing Freya’s location. Hayley wondered if she should start talking about respecting people’s privacy, but that conversation could wait.

“That’s great, Hope,” Hayley praised. “Can you only track people, or do you think you could find my missing sweater?”

“It’s in Aunt Freya’s room.”

Hayley laughed. “Yeah, I could’ve guessed that.”

Downstairs, a door opened and closed. Hope perked up a bit. “That’s not Aunt Freya,” she said, looking at the map in confusion. “Is Vincent coming over?”

“Nope, and it’s not Josh either—he won’t be awake until noon.”

“Then who is it?”

Hayley let a grin spread across her face. “It’s a surprise. Come on, let’s see who it is.”

They descended the stairs carefully, Hayley’s hands clamped over Hope’s eyes. She exchanged a look with Marcel. “Three more steps down,” she said, seeing her daughter safely down to the courtyard.

“I know it’s Marcel, Mom.”

Hayley dropped her hands, smothering her disappointment.

“Of course she did,” said Marcel, stepping forward and tugging Hope up into his arms. “She’s got a good nose.”

“You smell stinky,” said Hope.

“Hey! You wouldn’t smell like roses either if you had to fly in from New York.” He set her down, making a showing of sniffing the top of her head. “And you smell like dirt, so I’m not sure why you’re throwing stones from your glass house, young lady.”

“I was showing Mom a locator spell.”

“Really? A no-blood one, I assume.”

“We’re not allowed to use the blood ones.” Hope almost sounded dejected.

“Why the long face?” Marcel asked, chuckling.

“Lizzie says the dirt ones aren’t as accurate.”

“We can ask Aunt Freya if she can show you one when she gets home,” Hayley suggested. “Maybe Marcel wants to play hide and seek?”

Hope’s head whipped around to look at Marcel questioningly.

“Sure,” he said, grin broad. “If you think you can catch me.”
“I’m getting faster,” Hope said proudly. “And I can jump all the way up to the balcony.”

Marcel raised an eyebrow at Hayley. She nodded, rolling her eyes a little. Discovering Hope’s physical talents was terrifying while it happened, but it had become mundane by this point.

“Okay,” said Marcel. “Show me.”

Hope didn’t grin, didn’t smile, did nothing to betray her excitement, but Hayley could tell she was thrilled. Her hands fisted at her sides as she stepped back, gauging the distance between herself and the balcony. She took a run-up and jumped, sailing right over the balcony and landing on the other side. She whirled around to great applause from both Marcel and Hayley.

“Can we play hide and seek now?”

Marcel glanced at Hayley. She nodded.

“All right,” he said, clapping his hands together. “I’m gonna count to ten. You’re not allowed to leave the compound or go into the tunnels, but everything else fair game.”

“Can I use hiding spells?”

“If you can do them in ten seconds, starting now!” Marcel clapped his hands over his eyes. “One … two … three …”

Hope bolted away, headed for her bedroom.

Smothering a laugh, Hayley patted Marcel on the shoulder and whispered a quiet, “Thank you.”

Freya and Keelin came home in the middle of the second round. They seemed to sense the importance of keeping Hope distracted, so Freya put a sound barrier around hers and Keelin’s bedroom to give her girlfriend a chance to sleep off her shift without being disturbed by the game, and then they began. Freya and Hope joined up as a team, leaving Hayley and Marcel to compete against each other and see who could outrun the witches.

Hayley quickly figured out that Marcel was better at hiding in the house than her. He knew everywhere to put his feet to avoid making the floorboards creak, he knew every crevasse, and despite living there for years she was at a definite disadvantage every time he disappeared into a secret passageway she’d never seen before.

“Stop cheating,” Marcel hissed back at her as she ghosted him, stepping everywhere he did.

“She’s just using her hearing this round,” Hayley replied, “and you know all the sneaky bits.”

Marcel doubled his pace, outstripping her and leaving her literally in his dust. She coughed when she caught a face of it.

“Got you!” Hope cried triumphantly, jumping onto Hayley’s back. Freya arrived half a minute later, panting slightly.

Somewhere upstairs, Marcel chuckled at Hayley’s misfortune.

“Can we please use spells next round?”

“Only if we extend the boundary!” Marcel called, reappearing. “You guys can chase us in the car.”
“That’s not safe,” Freya objected.

“Then we can do it in the bayou,” said Hayley. “And Marcel and I will only use human speeds to get away. But we’re allowed to climb the trees.”

“And hide in the ground.”

Freya raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to bury yourself? In those jeans?”

“Your sister bought me like ten pairs.”

“Why would you need so many?” asked Hope, nose wrinkling.

Freya swept Hope up, laughing. “A better question is probably ‘Why can’t you just dress yourself’?”

“A bold statement from someone wearing Hayley’s jacket,” Marcel pointed out.

“Okay, okay,” said Hayley, raising her hands. “Let’s all make sure our phones are charged and our bladders are empty before we head out to the bayou, okay?”

“Yes, Mom,” Hope and Freya intoned, heading out to do as instructed.

Hayley was about to follow when Marcel patted her shoulder, stopping her.

“You still haven’t heard from him?” Marcel asked.

“Nope. I, uh, kinda stopped texting him and stuff. It didn’t seem to be working. I sent him a letter last week though, so hopefully that makes more of an impact.”

“Do you want me to track him down?”

“No, it’s okay. He doesn’t respond well to being pushed by anyone other than Elijah.”

Marcel paused awkwardly. “I have something to tell you.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not … bad, I don’t think. Do you want me to wait until after Hope is asleep tonight?”

Hayley listened into the goings-on downstairs where Freya was getting Hope a glass of water and offering her something to eat. “I think we have time. What’s going on?”

“I ran into Elijah in New York.”

“What?”

“I kept him away from Rebekah and told him to leave. He’s gone now, I don’t know where.”

“What was he—is he okay?”

“He’s fine. He, uh, he was with someone. A vampire he called Antoinette. They seemed pretty close.”

Hayley hoped the swoop her heart did wasn’t plain on her face. From the look Marcel gave her, it was.

“Are you okay?” he asked.
“I’m fine. I mean, it makes sense. He’s not unappealing, and without memories he’d find someone else.”

“Do you want me to tell you she’s ugly?”

“That would be super fucked up.” Hayley blinked back the most embarrassing tears. “But maybe.”

They shared a laugh. Marcel touched her shoulder again, this time for a reassuring squeeze. “You know he did this for all of you. If he had his memories—”

“The first time Klaus fucked up he’d be right there, I know.”

“I was gonna say the first time you got lonely, but that works.”

Hayley sniffed. “I’m sorry you have to deal with all of this. I know Elijah isn’t one of your favourite people.”

“You are.”

“I’m trying not to cry, you asshole.”

“Sorry.” Marcel banded his arms around her shoulders, pulling her in for a hug.

Hide and seek went well in the bayou. It ended up becoming a pack-wide ordeal, with Christophe, Henry, Lisina, and all the other families joining in. The game went on into the night, all the wolves chasing after Hayley and Marcel until the kids were exhausted (and the adults even more so).

Freya drove home, being the least tired of them all. Keelin was awake when they returned, announcing that she’d ordered pizza and had time to eat with them before she had to head back to the hospital. Hope was excited—she rarely got to eat with Keelin while she was on night shifts—and Hayley had a feeling Keelin had had her shift moved forward a few hours just to help keep Hope occupied tonight.

Hope picked a movie out of the selection the grown-ups decided they could tolerate, and a plot was made to fashion a blanket fort in the living room. Hayley took the time the others spent building the fort with Hope to write a letter for Klaus, this time on plain printer paper she’d bought for that purpose. It was hard, letting go of the weight of bitterness in her chest and reminding herself that she cared about him, that she’d promised she would never give up on him.

She also took extra care not to mention anything about Elijah and his new friend.

“Mom!” Hope called, running into Hayley’s bedroom. “Marcel can’t find the popcorn.”

“It’s behind the baking supplies.” Hayley folded the letter up and tucked it under her pillow. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Hope raced down to the kitchen, Hayley hot on her heels. They located the kernels, butter, and mini popcorn machine, setting them all up on the kitchen counter. Hayley went to shove a pile of bills aside to make room when one caught her eye. She plucked it out and ran a finger over the red ink that declared RETURN TO SENDER.

Her letter for Klaus.

Marcel came up behind her, spying the letter. “Bastard,” he said under his breath.
“What’s that?” asked Hope.

“It’s nothing,” said Hayley, clutching the letter to her chest. “How about you go help Aunt Freya and Auntie Keelin get some more blankets out of the linen cupboard?”

Hope narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, the look of a child that knew they were being treated like one. “Fine,” she huffed, disappearing and leaving Hayley alone with Marcel and the letter.

“What’s that?” Marcel asked.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” said Hayley, dropping the letter. “Just that he’s not at that address anymore.”

“I can try and find a current address for you. Maybe Rebekah has some idea.”

Hayley nodded, not taking her eyes off the letter in her hands. “That’d be helpful, thanks.”

He tucked an arm around her shoulders. “Come on. Let’s get this popcorn started.”

“Yeah,” Hayley agreed. “I wanna get it over with and get little miss to bed before nine.”

Marcel tossed the bag of kernels at Hayley’s head. “Good luck with that.”

May 13th, 2026

Klaus went to fold the letter up and place it with the first when writing on the back side of it caught his eye. There was no introduction, no signature, just two sentences:

I got the first letter back, but Marcel’s going to find out where you are, and then I’ll send another. I’m not giving up on you.

Blinking back tears, Klaus added it to the stack with the first letter.

“You’re finally reading those?” asked Marcel, strolling in with a glass of bourbon in each hand.

“I have a lot to catch up on.”

Marcel set the glass in front of Klaus and sat down beside him. “You, uh, might want to pace yourself. There’s a lot there. Not all of it’s happy.”

“She didn’t get to turn away. Why should I have the privilege?”

“You did have that privilege. Seven years of it, if I recall.”

Klaus flinched. “If this is the part where you scold me for my wrongdoing—”

“Well, first of all, that’s not my job. Second of all, if you think I have the energy to do anything but drink and wallow, you’re sorely mistaken. In case you forgot, I just said goodbye to a woman that’s now my ex for the third time, fought my sister to try and save her life, dealt with the guy that basically killed my daughter once, and now I’m here with you. Why the fuck would I add to my own misery?”

Klaus froze, kicking himself internally. Marcel may have showered, but he still reeked of his own blood—blood spilled trying to keep them all safe. Trying to keep Hope safe.
He reached out to touch Marcel’s shoulder, surprised when he didn’t flinch away. “I am sorry, Marcellus. I find myself wishing for a lot of things lately, and I’ve realized your happiness was never the priority it should have been.”

Marcel scoffed into his glass. “You're telling me.”

“I am,” Klaus confirmed, gripping tighter. “And I think you should go to her.”

“Rebekah doesn’t want to see me.”

“No, Davina. Your daughter.”

Marcel set his glass down. “You know, she’s never really approved me calling her that.”

“Is that not what she is?”

“She has … issues. Her dad was a monster.”

“You can commiserate, then.”

Marcel looked up at him, concern creasing his forehead. “Are you referring to yourself or … him?” He’d never spoken his birth father’s name, not even to Klaus.

“Either. Both, and for the same reasons. Marcellus, please … you should go to her. Be with the family you made when you saved her, when you took her into your home, when you walked her down the aisle to marry my … wanker of a brother. Leave all this and be with them. You’re not caught between Rebekah and New Orleans. You have another option, and you cannot miss it.”

“I do have another option. She’s upstairs in a magical coma because losing her family was so devastating she decided to risk everything to save them from themselves. You think I can walk away now?”

“You’ve been there for her. All these years, every moment I couldn’t. You were there for both of them.”

Understanding dawned in Marcel’s eyes as he glanced at the empty envelope on the table. “You read the first Father’s Day letter.”

“It was the second one she sent. You were the special guest that helped distract Hope, weren’t you?”

Marcel nodded. “We played hide and seek in the bayou and watched superhero movies in a blanket fort until midnight. She was happy. We all were, even if Hayley was pissed about her letter not being delivered.”

Klaus swallowed down his guilt with a nip of bourbon. “What’s it like?”

“What?”

“Being a single father to a teenager.”

“It’s … like diving into the Mississippi with a blindfold on.”

“Really?”

“No, I fucking hate metaphors. You just have to figure it out. Teenage girls aren’t a monolith, and yours is … unique. For now I guess just being physically present has enough novelty to smooth over
any major mistakes. Beyond that, ask Caroline or Alaric.”

“You’ve met them?”

“I visited Hope at school a lot. Caroline talked me into chaperoning some dances.”

Klaus couldn’t stop the laugh that erupted at that image—perhaps the first laugh he’d had since he returned to town. “I would pay good money to see that.”

“You won’t have to. I’m sure you’ll have to do the same eventually. Everyone’s parents have to pitch in at some point, and Hayley only got out of it because she was on pack business and I volunteered instead.”

“How much do I have to pay you to do it again?”

“No sum in the world. I don’t know if you’ve met the Saltzman twins, but they were … a handful and a half. One spiked the punch, the other spelled the goddamn balloons to stalk me the entire night.”

“Thrilling,” Klaus commented drily, as though sarcasm would conceal just how much it hurt that he’d missed it. “I have some more letters to get through. Do you mind keeping an ear out for Hope?”

“Freya and Keelin are with her now.”

“Freya just helped her take on a near-lethal amount of power, and while I may appreciate Keelin’s role in Hope’s life I have barely spent more than ten consecutive minutes with her. You’re the only one I trust right now.”

“A refreshing change from normal.” Marcel stood, stretching a little. “I’ll move my stuff into the room next to hers. If she wakes, I’ll know.”

“Thank you, Marcellus.”

Marcel shrugged. “She’s my sister.”

“No, it’s … Thank you. For more than I know yet”—he gestured at the unopened letters—“thank you.”

Marcel nodded in understanding, then left Klaus alone with his thoughts.
May 13th, 2026

The date at the top of the third letter read June 28th, 2022. It was stained with a ring of coffee. Klaus pressed the paper to his nose, trying to chase the scent that had been lost somewhere in transit while this letter travelled to Barbados and back.

He remembered little of Barbados. Booze and blood, mostly. To think of all that happened while he was there …

Ignoring the pain, Klaus read on.

June 27th, 2022

Hayley glanced in the rear-view mirror to catch a look at Hope in the back seat. She had one of Freya's smaller grimoires stretched out on her lap as she played with her braid, dragging the end over her face.

A thousand memories of looking into the back seat to find Hope sucking her thumb flashed through Hayley's mind, all blurring together. "You okay, sweetie?" she asked.

"Uh-huh." Hope clopped the book shut. "Are we almost there?"

"I'm just turning into their street now," said Hayley, flicking on her indicator. She heard Hope's heartbeat pick up a little. "You sure you're all right?"

Hope remained silent for a moment. "What should I say to him?"

"To Henry?" Hayley asked. She had to peek through the mirror again to see Hope's sullen nod. "Well, sweetie, there aren't a lot of things we can say to make this stuff better. It just takes time, you know? And it helps to stay connected, which is what we're doing today by coming over."

"How will I stay connected after I'm back at school? I don't want him to think I don't care about it."

"I'll talk to Lisina. Maybe she and Henry can come over when I facetime you on Wednesday nights?" They had a long-standing tradition of staying in touch during the school term, though Hayley always stayed at a motel nearby for the first two weeks just in case. None of the other parents did, but Ric and Caroline were accommodating of Hope's … situation.

"Is that gonna be enough?"

Hayley slowed down as the road got rockier, the bumper of her SUV scraping and rutting a little as she pulled up toward Lisina's house. "I'm sure it'll be enough," she promised Hope. A lie.

She'd lost her parents as a baby. She had no memories, but she still felt that hole in her heart.

Henry had spent last Tuesday night sleeping in his father's bed after a nightmare. He had a thousand memories, and Hayley doubted any one of them would stop hurting him.
There was a pang deep in her chest. *He's just a boy.*

"We're here," Hayley announced, pulling up alongside the house. Though Christophe and Henry had lived in a house on the outskirts of the city, Lisina's place was deep in the bayou where her grandfather had built it with his bare hands fifty years ago. When she'd offered to take Henry in a few days ago, he'd made it clear that he didn't want to return to his family home.

Lisina's house was always a comfort to the kids anyway, full of toys and the latest gadgets that Hayley knew she bought just to keep them entertained. Lisina had lived here long enough to see the rise and fall of the pack, and she loved knowing that the children born after their curse was broken may never live to see such misery.

Hayley put the car in park, pulling the key out of the ignition. She sped over to Hope's door to open it for her. "You don't need the grimoire, honey," she said gently, prying it from Hope's grip and setting it on the middle seat in the back row. "Lisina has plenty of toys."

Though Hope didn't need the help, Hayley picked her up and set her down on the ground as a force of habit. The front door opened, revealing Lisina all alone. Hayley could hear Henry inside, sitting at the dining table if the squealing of his bare feet rubbing on the table legs was any indication.

"Hi," Lisina greeted, her smile a little dampened at the edges. She folded Hope into a hug, dropping a kiss to her hair, then ushered her inside. Hayley followed, shutting the door quickly behind her to keep the air conditioning inside.

"Henry!" Lisina called, her arms still on Hope's shoulders. "Hope is here to see you."

The boy came when called, more obedient than usual. He didn't seem to have slept well—the circles under his eyes didn't belong to a boy his age. But he did brighten up at the sight of Hope, and that warmed Hayley's heart to see.

Despite her misgivings in the car, Hope spurred into action when faced with a crisis. "Hey, Henry," she greeted. She didn't move to give him a hug, rightly gauging that he needed his space. "Have you set up your room yet?"

"I still have some stuff to unpack."

"I'll help!" Hope announced. "I know some really cool spells to help keep things tidy. Aunt Freya taught me how to enchant things to go back where they belong when I stop needing them. Wanna see?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess." Henry was usually receptive to Hope's magic, so offering to show him more was a good guess even if he seemed less than enthusiastic.

"Come on!" Hope grabbed his hand and tugged him down the hall toward the spare room that had become his.

Hayley found herself blinking back tears when Lisina tucked an arm around her waist, sniffing as well. "He's barely talked all morning," she said, giving Hayley a half-hug. "It's good to have you both here."

Returning the embrace, Hayley dropped her head against Lisina's. "It's good to be here."

"So," said Freya, taking a long sip from her wine glass, "how did it go today?"

Hayley scoffed into her beer, the burst of breath whistling down the neck of it. When she responded
with, "About as well as you'd expect," her words echoed back at her a little, springing back up from the bottle. She took a long swig to banish the sound of her own bitterness.

"How's Lisina adjusting?" Freya dropped her wine glass-free hand to touch Keelin's forehead, smoothing back a lock of hair while her girlfriend slumbered on, stretched over the sofa.

Hayley pulled a foot up to rest on the dining table, tipping her whole body back until she could barely see Freya anymore. "She's devasted to lose Christophe but trying to bury it for Henry's sake."

"That's to be expected. They've been friends for a long time."

"Yeah. I think it may have been … more than that."

"Really?" Freya's tone carried some of the intrigue it might have if Christophe were still alive, but it was smothered in disappointment. "Do you think they were together?"

"I thought it might be heading in that direction. I guess we'll never know." Hayley pressed her bottle to her lips, not drinking, just feeling the glass against them. "To be honest, I was one more longing glance away from locking them in a closet together somewhere while I took Hope and Henry for ice cream."

"Oh, Lisina." Freya's voice didn't drip pity as some might have. It was more like the dreadful dawning of understanding.

"Yeah." Hayley pressed the glass harder against her skin until she felt her front teeth cut into her trapped bottom lip. She had to force herself to take the bottle away before she drew blood. "The hits just keep coming, don't they?"

"I take it my brother still hasn't responded."

Hayley swallowed the lump in her throat down with a gulp of beer. "I got the second letter back to me this morning. Return to sender, just like the first."

"Are you going to send a third?"

"I've been meaning to. Just haven't felt … motivated. How am I supposed to tell him about all this? He never even met Christophe."

"He understands loss, Hayley."

"I don't know that he's ever understood me."

Freya went quiet. "You don't really believe that," she said, tone gentle.

"I don't know what I believe anymore. If he just—" She broke off, choking up a little. "He won't respond to me. It's like he's not even there."

"When do you think you'll stop writing to him?"

Hayley wiped away her tears and closed her eyes to ward off more. "The last time we talked, at Hope's party … I told him I'd never give up on him. I can't break that promise." She sniffed and cracked open one eye. "It sounds stupid, I know."

Freya smiled softly. "No more so than 'always and forever'. Our family is stitched together with promises. Maybe that's the case with most families. I wouldn't know."
"Neither would I."

Freya hesitated. "Didn't you … I mean, Rebekah told me you had a family once. They adopted you."

A chill settled over Hayley, banishing her tears. She hadn't cried over them since they chased her out, and she had no intention of starting again. "I don't really talk about them."

"I'm sorry to bring them up. I just thought maybe you'd like to talk about it."

"Well, I don't." Hayley's tone was curt, but the look on Freya's face was understanding. She felt no impulse to apologise.

"It's late," said Freya, draining the last of her wine and setting her glass down on the coffee table. "We should be heading to bed." She shook Keelin's shoulder to stir her. "Hey, come on. You need to sleep in a real bed before your next shift."

Keelin groaned a little. "But it's comfy."

"It'll be comfier up there, I promise." Freya dropped a kiss to Keelin's head, then tried prying her into an upright position. "Come on, I don't want to have to get Hayley to carry you."

That did the trick, spurring Keelin up a little until she was on her feet. "Perish the thought," she replied, words slurring together a little. The night shift at the hospital was truly hell on her, and Hayley had half a mind to compel her a better schedule at the hospital.

Freya shot a pleasant, "Good night," over her shoulder. Keelin added on a monosyllabic noise that sounded like it was her attempt at the same nicety. Hayley lifted a hand in farewell as they walked out of the room, arms wrapped around one another.

Despite the fire, Hayley felt suddenly stricken with cold. She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her chin atop them, beer bottle tipping perilously in her grip.

Maybe things would be easier tomorrow.

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June 28th, 2026

Things were not, in fact, easier tomorrow.

Hope woke at 3am after a nightmare. She refused to let Hayley into her head to see it, but since it had been powerful enough to shudder the house on its foundation she filled in the blanks herself.

It took hours to get Hope calm enough to rest some more. She napped in Hayley's arms from dawn until 9am when Freya came home with consolation beignets from the bakery down the street.

If pressed, Hayley would never admit that she'd been hoping to see some change in Hope after the rough night. She'd had a dream strong enough to wrench an outburst of magic from her, yet she seemed as fine as she ever did lately. If she could survive a nightmare unblinking, what other horror could she hide from her own mother?

Hayley dusted the powdered sugar off her daughter's chin with her thumb, then used the pointer finger of the same hand to draw a loose strand of her auburn hair back behind her ear. "How about you and I have a PJ day today, huh?" Well, Hope was in matching summer PJs; Hayley preferred one of Elijah's old shirts and some ratty running shorts. Whatever, it counted.
"I think I'd rather have a shower," Hope said, tone unaffected.

"Do you want any help picking out your clothes?"

"No, Aunt Freya already did." Hope jumped down from the stool at the breakfast bar, her messy hair bouncing.

"All right, well give me a yell if you need anything."

Hope's response was a nod and nothing else. Hayley watched her go anxiously.

"She'll be fine," Freya assured her, squeezing her shoulder. "Witches' nightmares are always more dramatic than others'."

"This feels more than that."

"How so?"

Hayley shrugged. "Just instinct." Sometimes that was all she had left.

"Well, not to prioritise the opinions of a witch over the instincts of a wolf, but … she's going to be okay. It's not gonna be hard for good, just for now."

Hayley nodded, showing an agreement she didn't feel. "I have to call Caroline Forbes. I wanted to talk to her about Hope's art when school goes back."

"I'll keep an eye on Hope when she comes out of the shower. Say hi to Caroline from me," Freya had taught for a few weeks last year when their resident witch, Bonnie Bennet, was called away to New Mexico to deal with some supernatural drama there. Though Freya had fussed about being away from Keelin for so long, Hayley had been able to tell how much she loved the school. She could only imagine how it felt for Freya to see young witches taught in such a loving environment, given her own training and upbringing.

Freya departed, heading upstairs to stay near Hope. Dialling Caroline's number, Hayley tucked her phone between her ear and her shoulder in a way that always made her feel like a harried single mother in a nineties romcom.

Ever the efficient communicator, Caroline answered after two rings. "Hayley—hey, hi, how are you-it's so good to hear from you," she gushed without taking a breath.

"Likewise. And we're good, I think."

"You think?" There were some shuffling sounds like wind against the speaker. "Hang on, my daughter is trying to fall off a cliff—JOSETTE LOUISE, YOU GET BACK BEHIND THAT RAILING OR SO HELP ME GOD I WILL LOCK YOU BACK IN THE CAR."

Hayley heard an indistinct—but familiar—whine, as well as Ric's admonishment. She strained to hear more, unable to stop her eyebrow from raising.

"Sorry about that," Caroline said sweetly.

"I take it the Grand Canyon is going well?"

"Well, it's hot as the devil's armpit. Trust me, I've met him."

"I thought we didn't discuss Damon Salvatore."
Caroline's laugh crackled down the line. "Ha, yeah, he and Elena moved to San Francisco last week for the start of her surgical internship. Nothing to report on that front even if I wanted to. Anywhom, tell me more about what's obviously bothering you."

"Just the usual."

"He still hasn't responded?"

"Nope."

"Would you like me to hunt him down and kick his ass?"

It didn't sound like a bad idea, sending Caroline to badger Klaus until he snapped out of whatever mood he was in. "I'd love that, but it feels a bit premature."

"Just say the word—I'll keep my bags packed. How's Hope?"

"She's doing okay, considering."

Caroline tutted. "Oh, yeah, I heard about Mary. I'm so sorry." Plenty of Caroline's students were New Orleans born and raised, so it made sense that she'd caught that news from one of the other parents. "I know you guys were close."

"She was family."

"Of course. How is Hope dealing with it all?"

Hayley picked at the last beignet on the plate, drawing a delicate, lop-sided heart in the powdered sugar with her fingernail. "Oh, you know. Kids always take these things the hardest. Another member of a pack was killed in a hit and run a couple days ago, and that's been harder."

"Oh, god. Was she close with him?"

"His son's the same age. He and his wife actually visited us when we were on the run in Georgia."

"Christophe Benoit?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess I told you about him." She didn't remember, but then she didn't remember telling Caroline most things. Having coffee with her in Mystic Falls usually ended with secrets unspooling from Hayley's mouth like an endless chain of handkerchiefs from a birthday party clown's pocket.

"I'm so sorry. I know how precious that friendship was to you. Is Henry all right?"

"Hardly, but he will be. Another member of the pack took him in."

"Thank god. I can't imagine surviving something like that without a support system."

"It takes its toll." Hayley cleared her throat. "Anyway, the reason I actually called was to talk about Hope at school."

"Makes sense. Everything okay?"

"Yes and no. I don't think she's as excited about going back as she was last year. She might get back into the swing of things once she's there, but it's been hard to read her lately. It's like all this grief is turning her into a different person."
"I can imagine it would. Do you want to have a playdate before school starts back? Maybe it'll help her if she hangs out with the girls a bit. I can even arrange to have Bonnie stop by and mention some of the spells they'll be learning this year."

Hayley blew out a relieved breath. "Yeah, I think that might be great, actually."

"Awesome! We're driving back home in three days, but I'll see what I have booked after that. Maybe we can meet in the middle?"

Hayley snapped out of her reverie a little, grabbing the beignet and sticking it in the fridge for later. "No, I'll bring her to you. It might help her to be at the school for a bit."

"That makes total sense. We can even get a headstart on decorating her room for the year if you want."

"That could help." Hayley doubted it, since Hope wasn't very interested in interior decorating, but making the space her own was a process that could help. "I also wanted to chat about any art programs you guys have there."

"Like the arts generally, or drawing and painting specifically?"

"The latter," Hayley said, flattening the cardboard beignet tray with her hands to stick it in the trash.

"We don't have anything set up for the younger students, but there are a few arts subjects given to the older kids that she could have a look-in on."

"I don't know that she'd be comfortable sitting in a room full of older students right now. You guys have individual music lessons for some of the kids, right? There was an option to sign her up for them last year."

"Of course! We don't have one-on-one art classes currently, but I can see if we can work something out with Mr. Raymond. He teaches art and drama to the older kids, but that's only three lessons a week. He should have time to work Hope in for some private tutoring."

Hayley grabbed a sponge and ran it under the tap to wet it down, then started in on the sugar-streaked benchtop. "We'd be happy to pay a fee."

"Oh, nonsense! You pay more than half the kids here anyway."

Technically Klaus paid, but he'd left most of his wealth in Hayley's name when he took off. It still didn't quite feel right though.

"That sounds great. I'll see what Hope thinks." Hayley tosses the sponge into the sink. "But you might want to warn the teacher that she hasn't really been doing much lately. I wanted her to draw some more—she even has new paints—but I guess she just hasn't been feeling particularly motivated."

"Happens to the best of us," Caroline said breezily. "We'll see how we can snap her out of it."

"Thank you," Hayley breathed. Caroline did seem to have a magic touch with Mikaelsons. First Klaus, then Hope, then even Freya. "I really appreciate that."

"You don't have to thank me," Caroline dismissed. "She's a great kid; she's just been through a lot. Whatever we can all do to help her get past it ... that's just what we'll do."
"Yeah, I guess."

Silence crackled down the line.

"It's all gonna be okay, you know," Caroline said. The wind cut off with the slam of a door, leaving Hayley pretty sure she'd shut herself into her car. "No one's hurting in a way that can't be fixed."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Of course I do." It really did sound like she was telling the truth. "We just have to have faith."

"Not a lot of that going around."

"Then get your ass to Mystic Falls next week and come get some."

For the nth time in the past week, Hayley felt herself tearing up. "Thank you."

"No, thank you. You're helping me print and fold the hundreds of welcome brochures for the lobby while you're here, FYI."

Hayley laughed out loud. "Okay, deal."

Caroline's responding laugh cut off abruptly with a sigh. "God dammit, these girls are going to turn me into the first grey-haired vampire, and Ric's gonna be right there encouraging them."

"Go deal with them," said Hayley. "And enjoy the rest of your vacation."

"Give my love to everyone," Caroline sang. "Bye!" She hung up with a click.

Sighing, Hayley lowered the phone and surveyed the kitchen. Their plates were still there, and the tray Freya had used to make eggs that morning was still on the stove.

Whatever, she'd deal with it later. She had a cup of coffee to finish and a letter to write.

June 28th, 2022

Klaus,

There are lots of things I wish I could tell you that I can't. Some because they're too hard. Most because they're lies.

Hope's preoccupation with death continues. Losing Mary was a blow, but I'd done what I could to prepare her. I hoped she'd get through it in time, and Freya and I had contingency plans in place in case she had a magical reaction. I guess we forgot we can't plan for every loss she'll ever face.

Last week, Christophe Benoit was killed in a hit and run. I don't know if you knew him; he was one of the Crescents, and his son Henry is friends with Hope. She's spent time with them out here, and he and his wife, Emily, brought Henry to play dates with Hope back when they were barely more than babies. She and I were hiding at the time, carting your family's bodies in coffins, but it all felt so normal.

Emily died before we saw them again, and Hope has no memory of her. But Christophe reached out, and he and Henry helped smooth things over with the pack when I returned.
When we got the news that he'd died in a hit and run, the air left my lungs. I didn't realise I'd taken a single breath since Mary's funeral, and there it all was, gone again.

Hope's taking it worse than I am. She's terrified every time we walk down the street. The funeral was painful, rushed and uncomfortable. I didn't want to take her, but I'm the alpha and I couldn't leave her at the house alone. It was probably naïve of me to assume that being a leader and a mother would never conflict with one another. I'm ashamed to say being a mother didn't win this time.

It's been a few days now and things aren't getting any easier. I worry more, hover more, and Hope pulls away more. I don't know what's happening with her, but I can't do this by myself. Freya's around a lot, keeping her entertained with spells until school goes back. The magic occupies her mind sometimes, but she's moving through the spells too quickly. Sometimes I worry what she'll do with them.

I'm thinking about putting her in some art classes. She's shown interest in some of your paintings, but she still hasn't touched the paints she has. Hopefully it will help her feel more connected to you. Caroline has promised to help me with it. Please write back with some suggestions. Neither of us knows anything about magic, but at least one of us knows something about art. You can help her here. Please do.

Still missing you,

Hayley

May 13, 2026

Klaus took a measured breath, sucking it in between his teeth, tracking its movement down his throat and into his lungs. He hadn't thought the letters would be packed with new information—just the tedium of the everyday he'd never been able to experience. He had anticipated pain, but never surprise.

He'd not known Christophe Benoit, but the boy, Henry, had been the hybrid strung up by Greta and her lot. He hadn't imagined that Hope knew him well. An assumption that pained him, knowing it was borne of ignorance; if he had only asked her, she might have told him more of the boy. As it was he'd considered the matter of bargaining her blood settled by Hayley before she was lost.

A stupid mistake, caught hopefully not too late to correct it.

From elsewhere in the house, Klaus heard Hope sigh deeply in her sleep. He froze, waiting to hear more. Her breathing deepened once more, remaining as even as her heartbeat. Still, she slept.

He was terrified of just how much longer that would be the case.
May 13th, 2026

Klaus was halfway through the next letter when Kol entered.

"I thought you were leaving."

"Well, I do have quite the appointment waiting for me," Kol drawled, leaning against the wall, "but if I left without checking on my darling niece, Davina might actually murder me."

"Because of course you wouldn't want to check on her for your own peace of mind."

"Never. Not like we've spoken almost daily since she first discovered the magical art of pranking." He pushed off from the wall and dropped down beside Klaus, the force of his impact nearly knocking the letter from Klaus' hand.

"And not before then?"

"There had to be something in it for me," Kol joked. "And watching her prank Freya for the thousandth time was definitely thrilling."

"I'll take your word for it." Klaus looked back at the letter clutched in his hand, clearing his throat awkwardly. "I, uh, I didn't realise you were married. Not until I returned home."

"Yep." Kol kicked his feet up on the coffee table. The soles of the shoes he'd borrowed were perilously close to the stack of read letters. "It was three years in February."

"I am … I don't mean to assume you'd want me at the wedding, but I'm still sorry I missed it."

"Davina would've hated having you there," Kol agreed. "But if you could've attended, that would mean the Hollow was gone, which means Hope could've come too. I have a feeling that would've made up for it where she was concerned."

"She's close with Hope?"

"I think she identifies with the whole teen witch prodigy thing, yeah. They talk on the phone sometimes. Hope FaceTimes us a lot. I guess all the others—Hayley, Marcel, Freya, Keelin, even Rebekah—they like telling her off, making sure she's behaving. She knows when she calls us that we're going to find her latest mishap amusing, or at least be sympathetic."

Klaus could picture it now: Hope, in tears after an argument, feeling all the bitterness he'd felt when he was her age but being able to call her Uncle Kol and Aunt Davina to make her feel better. He wondered how different his childhood would've been if he had the same. "How did Hayley feel about that?"

"She told Davina she appreciated Hope having that balance. It was never that Hayley nagged her or wanted her to feel under pressure, but it still happens anyway. Kids need an outlet."

It made sense. "Thank you for doing that for her."

"I think that might be the first time you've ever really thanked me for something."
"I am grateful."

"I don't doubt it." Kol eyed the letters. "But what you're really feeling is guilt over these."

"Shouldn't I be?"

"Oh, definitely. Hayley was pissed at you for leaving her all alone. But she'd also have been pissed at your guilt."

"She could get into moods, couldn't she?"

"First of all: pot, kettle. Second of all, she'd be pissed because this is useless. Your guilt does nothing for Hope now, so let it go and focus on what you can do. You never have to leave her again, so don't."

"I have no intention of letting her out of my sight."

Kol nodded. "So we've swung from distance to hovering. Great. I'm sure she'll adjust to that quickly."

Klaus winced. "You're sure you can't stay a while to smooth things over?"

"Wow, does my fearless big brother need my help with something?"

Klaus shoved him into the side of the sofa. "Shut up."

Laughing, Kol righted himself and patted Klaus on the shoulder. "I'm afraid Davina can't take time off work to join me, and I do prefer to be near her. No one back home knows she's a witch, but …"

"She'd be in danger if they did."

"Most likely. I just prefer to keep an eye on the local coven."

Klaus nodded, immediately understanding his brother in a way he hadn't for the longest time. "If you need help with that, call. We'll bring hell for you."

Surprise flitted over Kol's face, quickly replaced with a self-assured grin. "Of course you will." He nudged Klaus none-too-gently, then stood. "If you don't mind, I'm going to get check on the poppet before I leave."

"Poppet?"

Kol stuck his tongue into his cheek. "I have to give her at least one nickname she hates. It's my prerogative as her young, hip uncle."

Klaus harrumphed in response and turned back to the letter.

July 16th, 2022

"Wow," said Hayley, taking in the dorm room. There were two beds, though Hope wouldn't have a roommate this semester (Hayley and Caroline had agreed it was for the best). The walls were painted a light mint colour and there was a plushy rug in the center of the room. "This looks awesome, Hope."

Hope nodded sheepishly and hopped up onto the bed, taking care not to mark the frilly yellow
"Caroline helped put the lights on the board. She said I could put some pictures on it."

"Yeah," Hayley agreed, jumping down next to Hope and tucking an arm around her shoulders. "We can even ask Aunt Rebekah and Uncle Kol to send some postcards if we want. I'll get you some pins before I leave."

"You're leaving?" Hope asked, anxiety sharpening her voice.

"Not 'till you're settled," Hayley assured her. "You know I wouldn't leave you if you needed me, right?"

"Of course."

Hayley didn't think Hope really meant it. Which made sense, given that Klaus had totally bailed.

"Are you hungry?" Hayley asked, patting Hope's belly.

"No." Hope's stomach growled, and she giggled a bit.

"Well, that was a lie," Hayley said, chuckling. She bent over Hope and tugged her into her lap so she could run her fingers over her daughter's sides, drawing shrieks of laughter from her.

"Come on," said Hayley, pulling Hope up onto her shoulder. "I think lunch is almost ready in the cafeteria. Wanna show me?"

Hope panted, hanging over Hayley's shoulder. "I think it's spaghetti," she said, sounding dejected. Hayley set her on her feet. "You love spaghetti!"

"Not this one," Hope said matter-of-factly.

Taking a moment, Hayley checked the hall and closed the door, giving them privacy. "Wanna go get pizza instead?"

Hope's eyes widened a little. "We're supposed to all have lunch together, all the kids and their parents."

"I know," Hayley confirmed. "I thought maybe we'd break the rules." She headed to the window and slid it open. There was mesh over it, but it was easy to remove without damaging it.

"We're going through the window?" Hope was hesitant but excited.

Hayley turned back to her with a grin. "Yeah, it'll be fun. Come on."

Hope stepped forward and took her mother's hand. "Are you sure this is okay?"

"It's okay to break the rules sometimes," Hayley explained. "Not all the time, and only when it's an emergency."

"This is an emergency?"

Hayley pulled Hope up into her arms. "Pizza is always an emergency."

Pizza morphed into a long drive which morphed into ice cream at 5pm two hours away. Hayley told herself it was for Hope, but maybe part of it was for her as well.
They climbed back through the window at 7.30, just on bedtime. Hope brushed her teeth and readied for bed with little reminding, and soon Hayley was tucking her in as tightly as she could, until Hope was giggling every time she tried and failed to sit up.

Hayley leaned in close and rubbed their noses together. "I'll be right back in the morning, okay? I want you to show me the greenhouse where you grow all the herbs for your spells."

"There's a kids versus parents football game after lunch."

"Well, then I can't wait to kick your butt." Hayley leaned in to brush her eyelashes against Hope's cheeks and give her butterfly kisses. "Sleep well, sweetie."

"I will." Hope extricated one of her arms so she could kiss her fingers. Hayley mimicked the action and hooked their fingers together.

"I love you."

"I love you too, Mom."

Hayley bent down to give Hope one last kiss on the forehead, untucking the blankets a bit as she did. Giving her daughter a wink, she flashed over to the window and jumped out, sliding it shut behind her. She stayed on the ground outside a moment, listening until Hope's giggle went quiet and her breathing deepened, leaving her in sleep.

"She doing okay?" asked Caroline, leaning against the side of the house.

"I think so." Hayley joined her to lean against the brick. "Coming early and decorating her room helped. She was psyched about filling the board up with pictures."

"That was Ric's suggestion, actually. He thought it'd help her feel like there's potential in this semester."

"Well, I'll have to thank him. It definitely did. And I'm sorry for bailing on today's activities."

Caroline waved a perfectly manicured hand. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about it. It seems like it was what she needed. You'd better be volunteering for the parents' football game tomorrow, though. They'll need you."

"I'm totally there," Hayley promised. "If she's still struggling in the morning I might call in the big guns."

Caroline grinned. "How are Kol and Davina?"

"They're doing well. Davina got a job as an archivist at Oxford."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Seems like something she's simultaneously underqualified and overqualified for, right?"

Caroline nodded. "Weirdly, yeah, but that's fantastic. I bet she's thrilled."

"You should hear Kol gush about it. He was ready to compel her whatever she wanted but she just went after it herself, I guess. He's thrilled."

"I'm so happy for them. Mostly for Davina, because she never tried to kill my friends."
"Who among us hasn't?"

They shared a chuckle.

"Well, I'd better get going. I still haven't checked into my motel."

"If you can't find a room, I have a sofa."

Hayley would bet good money that Caroline's sofa was more comfortable than any bed she'd get a motel, but still—she needed her space if she was going to start getting Hope to start getting along without her.

"I think I'll be all right," Hayley assured her, then pushed off the wall. "See you tomorrow."

Hayley did end up bringing in the big guns. Hope wasn't particularly melancholy, but she'd messaged Kol about it and he got Davina to commit to a time after she got off work.

It was just before noon when Hayley's phone started ringing. She accepted the call, watching as Davina's smiling face appeared on the screen.

"Hi!" she greeted, her voice made shrill and tinny by the connection. "I'm just walking in the front door now. Here's hoping Kol isn't having one of his naked days."

Hayley snorted. "You and me both. I'll go find Hope." They'd separated for the morning after Hope had shown Hayley the greenhouse. Hope was with the twins somewhere while Hayley sat at a parents' mixer downstairs. Hence why she got so many weird looks when Davina mentioned Kol's potential nudity.

She found Hope out at the bleachers with some of her friends. It wasn't hard to pick out in the mass of them; her scent was one Hayley would know from a mile away and the ridiculous bow in her hair had looked big even on Rebekah's head the one time she wore it.

"Guess who I've got!" Hayley called across the field, waving the phone in her hand.

Hope jumped up a little when she realized, quickly excusing herself from her friends so she could race across the grass at was definitely wasn't human speed.

As an aside, Hayley knew she should really stop putting having Hope's full physical capabilities assessed by someone.

Hope arrived in a matter of seconds, taking the phone in her hands to greet Davina—and a blessedly clothed Kol, who had joined as well.

"Hello there, darling," he drawled. "You look flustered."

"I just ran across the football field," Hope said, fixing her hair in her reflection.

"Are you having fun at school?" Davina asked.

"I've only been here for a day and a half."

"Yeah, and are you having fun?"

"I guess. Mom took me for pizza and ice cream yesterday."
"Oh really?" Kol sounded intrigued. "On orientation day?"

"Oi," Hayley objected, leaning into view. "In my defence, I have it on authority the alternative was some really crappy spaghetti."

"Well that's perfectly understandable," Davina intoned. "Do you wanna tell me more about what classes you're taking this semester? Are there any you're really excited about?"

Hayley interjected before Hope could respond. "How about we move this inside where it's a little cooler?" She lifted Hope up with one arm around her middle, making sure not to go too fast and make her drop the phone.

"Can we go in through the window again?"

"You went in through the window?" Kol asked. "That seems safe."

"It was safe," Hayley bit back. "And no, Hope, we can't do that when there are people around."

"Because lying is good and you should never be foolish enough to get caught."

"Stop it, Kol," Davina reprimanded, but her objection was smothered by Hope's laugh.

To Hayley, that laugh was the best sound in the world.

13th May, 2026

Klaus ran his thumb over Hayley's name, the place where she'd signed off. It was rushed and messy, like she'd been in a hurry to get it done; he supposed she had. Face warm with the firelight and eyes wet with tears, he couldn't help but read it all over again.

Dear Klaus,

It's been a good day.

Hope's still struggling, of course, but she was brighter. A bit more engaged with me, and definitely more talkative about her studies. I was wondering if I might have to extend my stay here for her, but now I think it'll all turn out okay. I can't risk smothering her, not when she's indicating that she might be ready for her own space.

I sneaked her out of orientation day for pizza and ice cream. We drove and drove, and when we got back I climbed up through her window to return her. I think it made her feel special, knowing that I would take her anywhere and do anything. It definitely didn't set a good example, but the way she smiled made certain I'd done the right thing.

She FaceTimed with Kol and Davina this morning. I'm not supposed to say anything, but since you're AWOL and likely won't ever read this, I guess I can break my promise: they're getting married! They waited until after Hope had gone to lunch to tell me, since she can't go and they wanted me to be the one to tell her the news. They're not sure where they want to have it yet, but Davina is keen to find a way for me to be there. I assume Marcel, Vincent, and Josh are going, so it'll be just like old times.

They're so in love, Klaus, I can hardly stand to look directly at it. At this point I'd do anything to make sure they stay that way.

There were more activities after lunch—like a parents vs. teachers football game that almost ended
in bloodshed (but definitely entertained the kids). Hope was exhausted by the time dinner was over but she kept talking to all her friends until they were ordered to clear out of the cafeteria.

It's a beautiful place for her here. I wish you were around to see how it lights her up from the inside.

I can hear her coming back from the bathroom and I'm trying to keep the letters a secret from her at the moment, so I'll have to sign off here.

Still missing you,

Hayley

Resisting the temptation to read it again, Klaus folded it up and set it on the pile of read letters. Instead of rushing to open the next one, as usual, he took a moment to savour the happiness stirred up by Hayley's words.


Downstairs, he heard Kol slipping on one of Elijah's coats. A cab pulled up to the curb outside.

Leaving the letters behind, Klaus sped downstairs in a blur until he'd joined his brother at the threshold.

To his credit, Kol didn't blink at Klaus' abrupt arrival. "Is this the part where you twist my arm to make me stay?" he asked.

Klaus shook his head and pulled his brother in for a hug. Kol froze against him at first, then finally returned the embrace.

"Well, this is less violent than your usual methods."

"Shut up," Klaus said, and hugged him tighter. The embrace went on for almost a full minute before Klaus came to his senses and released Kol.

Again, it was to Kol's credit that he appeared unruffled. "If you let anything happen to my niece, I'll track down that dagger we made for you and put you in a box. We'll see how you like it."

It was an empty threat that didn't even smart, so Klaus brushed it aside appropriately. "Tell Davina—tell her she's welcome here. That she will see no harm from me, and that she is always welcome in my home for as long as I live in it."

Kol blinked, finally taken aback. "Am I to assume that invitation extends to me?"

"I wish I could say that it always has, but I hope you'll allow me to mend past grievances by saying you always will be." Klaus extended his hand, watching his brother take it tentatively.

"You know Davina will still try to hex you, right?"

"I can take a hit or two to settle old scores."

Kol released Klaus' hand, tucking his own in his pocket. "I'll hold you to that, brother."

"Good. Now go." Klaus inclined his head toward the front door. "Your cab driver is growing impatient."

"God forbid he be kept waiting." Kol's smirk dropped as he glanced back toward the courtyard, gaze
drifting upward in the general direction of Hope's heavy breathing.

"I'll notify you as soon as she wakes," Klaus promised.

"If you need us, we'll come."

"Never doubted it." Klaus clapped his brother on the shoulder. "Travel safely, brother."

"I will."

For the first time in a thousand years, Klaus watched his brother go with no bad blood between them.
May 13th, 2026

The fifth letter was from several weeks after the fourth. The ink switched colours halfway through, indicating that it had been written in multiple sittings. The script was rushed and messy, though he'd begun to wonder if that was just how she wrote.

Settling in comfortably, Klaus began to read.

July 22nd, 2022

Hayley tapped on her leg impatiently, watching the level in her glass of water shake as her upper arm rubbed on the edge of the table. She felt like she was vibrating, like everyone who looked at her would see nothing but a blur.

"How much coffee have you had to drink today?" Vincent asked disapprovingly.

"None." It was the truth—she'd only downed a glass of orange juice before she came to meet him at Rousseau's an hour ago.

"Then why do you look like you're trying to vibrate yourself into another dimension?"

Hayley stopped tapping, uncrossing her legs so she could sit forward. "I'm just restless. I haven't had a good run in a while."

"Spending all your time cooped up in the compound … it'd have an effect on your instincts. Why haven't you done anything about it?"

"I don't know." She did know, she just didn't feel like getting into the gritty details. Not having Hope around left her at a loose end, but actually doing something to occupy herself meant she wasn't worrying about Hope, which subsequently made her feel bad. She knew it was irrational and Vincent would call her out on it, so she left it be. "I'll go out to the bayou this afternoon."

"As alpha or as a wolf that needs to play?"

"Both." She took a gulp of her water, setting the glass back down none-too-gently. "Has Josh answered your text yet?"

"Not since you asked five minutes ago."

Hayley swore under her breath. "He's an hour late. Do you think maybe he's in trouble?"

"I think he's preoccupied with his new man and he'll come down when he's ready." For an infamously paranoid witch, Vincent was surprisingly cool about the situation. Hayley told him as much, which made him chuckle. "Yeah, I've been dealing with my own shit. What happens, happens."

Hayley narrowed her eyes. "Have you been taking Xanax or something? You're pretty blissed out."

"Started with a new therapist. It does wonders for the soul. And the skin, weirdly enough."
"I thought the glow was just some lady friend you hadn't told us about yet."

"Nope," Vincent replied easily. "Doubt I'd be ready for that anyway. The doc says I have wounds to heal or something. You know, after Eva."

"So you're seriously seeing a shrink?"

"Yep. You might consider the same, if you're gonna keep getting all twisted up every time you drop your baby off at that school."

"I don't need a shrink," Hayley dismissed. "I've got our little chats for that."

Vincent snorted. "Hayley Marshall, no money in the world could convince me to take any responsibility in the mental wellbeing of a Mikaelson."

Though she knew Vincent called her a Mikaelson in a way that wasn't exactly complimentary, Hayley couldn't help but like it. Just a little.

"Let's order some food," said Vincent, rubbing his hands together and picking up a laminated menu. "Looks like we're gonna be here a while."

Hayley followed his example and examined her own menu. The layout was different, as was half the menu inside. "New menu?"

"New chef, too." Vincent inclined his head toward the kitchen, though Hayley couldn't see it from this angle. "I've heard he's good."

From the smells wafting through the room, he definitely was. "Should we order for Josh, too?"

"And have his rude ass arrive to a hot meal and a welcoming atmosphere?" Vincent asked. "Hell no. Let him wait for his food like the rest of us have waited on him."

Hayley laughed, nodding.

The server came by to take their orders. Vincent settled on pancakes, since it was a half-hour before the breakfast menu was closing and he was apparently desperate for some sugar.

"And you, miss?" the waitress asked of Hayley, her pen poised over the pad.

"Uh, you guys don't serve the club sandwich this early, right?" Hayley asked.

"I can ask." She disappeared into the back to ask. An Irish accent replied in the affirmative, and she reappeared again. "Of course we can! Is there anything else I can get y'all?"

"We're fine, thanks," Vincent replied, packing up their menus for her to take.

"Much obliged!" the waitress replied, grinning at him as she took them and left.

Hayley turned to Vincent with a smirk. "She likes you."

"You think every woman that looks in my direction likes me."

"Because I'm a rational human being."

"You're a lot of things—human ain't one of them."
"But I am rational," Hayley pressed. Having something to focus on was doing wonders for her frayed nerves, and goading Vincent was an excellent pastime. "And I know that women love a guy that seems in touch with the world, and you move through life like you're connected to every fraction of it."

Vincent rolled his eyes. "I'm a witch. We're all connected to nature, and that doesn't just mean the green kind. The humdrum, the people, the"—he waved a hand at the street beyond the glass window—"background noise, it's all got meaning. We're the ones that have to figure out how to be in tune with it. It takes discipline."

"Do you ever take a compliment and not turn it into a lecture?"

He shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Why not? My smarts are just about all I've got left."

"That's not true and you know it. Why don't you even try? There are plenty of women—or just people, generally—who would love to get to know you better. Why not open yourself up to the possibilities?"

"Because some doors get welded shut by past experience, and it ain't worth the time trying to pry them open when you've got better shit to do." And by past experience he meant Eva, his late wife of the child-murdering variety.

A dozen empty platitudes got stuck in Hayley's throat. Vincent's pancakes arrived before she had to pick one. He thanked the waitress sincerely but gave her no more attention. She was busy enough not to show her disappointment, but Hayley knew she wished he'd talk to her more. So broody, these supernatural men.

Not that Hayley could talk about brooding.

"Is it any good?" she enquired of his food, changing the subject entirely.

Vincent moaned in the affirmative, taking his time to swallow the mouthful he had in already. "I don't know why you're saying I need women in my life when pancakes are an excellent substitute."

"Not going to dignify that with a response."

Chuckling, Vincent pushed the plate toward her a little. "You want some?"

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Please. You have a wolf's appetite and there's no way I'm gonna be able to finish all of this. I think our friendship is secure enough to survive sharing a plate of pancakes."

"Fine," Hayley said, giving in. "But if you order a milkshake with two straws, I'm leaving."

They shared the pancakes, Hayley taking two of the five piled high on the plate. The waitress brought more whipped cream by when it became clear they were demolishing them together.

Hayley had just finished wiping the last of the syrup off her chin when the smell of garlic cloves and vegetable oil hit her nose. It wasn't unpleasant, but there was undercurrent of sweat and hard work that didn't make it appetizing, either.

"The club sandwich?" a voice asked—the Irish one from earlier. Hayley turned to meet the bluest pair of eyes she'd ever seen, set deep in a charming (if sweaty) face.
"That would be mine," she replied, clearing room for it. "Thank you for being so accommodating."

"No problem. Enjoy your food." He ducked back into the kitchen without another word.

"That's the new chef?" Hayley asked of Vincent.

"Guess so," Vincent replied, watching her carefully with something like … mischief in his eyes? "I guess I'm not the only one with admirers."

"What?" Hayley asked, pausing with the sandwich half-way to her mouth. "He just brought me my food."

"That's no less than what the waitress did before you were practically planning our wedding."

"She was giving you eyes," Hayley defended.

"Just like he was giving you."

Hayley scoffed. "Whatever," she said, finally taking a big bite of the sandwich. She couldn't stop herself from emitting a groan identical to Vincent's—it was a good sandwich. "This is amazing," she said, words slurred by her full mouth.

"I guess you'll have to thank him in person."

Hayley screwed up a napkin and tossed it as Vincent's head, sparking a round of laughter from him.

"What are we laughing about?" asked Josh, dropping into his chair. She hadn't even heard him come in.

"Your inability to stick to a schedule," Vincent replied. "And the intense love affair Hayley is about to have with the new chef."

"Declan?" Josh's eyebrows hit his hairline as he pivoted to face Hayley. "Excellent choice."

"I am not going to have a love affair with the chef."

"You don't want to eat like this every day?" Vincent asked incredulously. "Just curious, do you really hate yourself that much?"

"No, but I sure hate the two of you right now," Hayley responded, cheeks flaming. "Can we talk about what we actually came here to discuss?"

Josh whined. "But it's so much more boring than this."

"Whatever. Where's the waitress? She can come order your food and Vincent can chat her up."

"Poppy?" Josh asked.

"Yeah, the cute one with the pig-tails."

"She is cute," Josh allowed. "She's also a lesbian, so good luck setting that relationship up."

Vincent coughed into his glass of water, smothering his laughter with a sip.

July 30th, 2022
The bayou was sweltering, dripping with a heat almost wet enough to drink. The trip from the car to Lisina's front door may have felled a lesser wolf, but Hayley travelled it in a second and was rapping on the door.

Lisina opened it immediately, cringing at the heat that washed into the house with the action. "Come in, quick."

Hayley breezed into the house, shutting the door at vampire speed. The old air con in the living room was almost whining under the pressure of cooling the space, but it was doing its job well enough.

"God, it's hot out there." Lisina dabbed at her forehead. "I felt like I was sweating the moment I stepped out in it."

"Nope, I'm pretty sure that's just the sweat radiating off of me," Hayley said, pulling Lisina in for a hug.

Despite returning the embrace, Lisina said, "Ugh, yeah, it's definitely you."

They laughed as they separated.

"Where's Henry?"

"In his room. I installed AC in there, so he's been reading in there most of the morning. Can I get you something to drink? Old Frank brought lemonade by," Lisina wandered into the kitchen to fetch a pitcher from the fridge.

"He's really driving around the bayou in this heat, huh," Hayley said, sighing. She turned to grab some glasses from the cabinet overhead and set them down on the bench. "I'll talk to Ceci."

"I doubt even she can convince her father to stop courting heart attacks every summer." Lisina passed Hayley a glass of lemonade, watching her down it with amusement in her eyes. "Thirsty?"

"You have no idea." Hayley poured herself another glass, then put the pitcher away. She followed Lisina into the living room where they sat on the sofa closest to the ancient AC. "How is Henry?"

"Fine. A little less quiet, but I don't know what that's worth." Lisina drew a heart in the condensation on her glass. "I don't know what I can really do to help him at this point."

"I'm sure what you're already doing means the world."

"Maybe."

Hayley reached out to grip Lisina's forearm. "How can I help?"

"You're already doing enough," Lisina assured her. "These visits are—"

"—no more than I did before. You know, because we're friends. What can I do to help with Henry?"

"The playdates with Hope in the beginning were good. Some of the parents in the pack have been bringing their kids by. He doesn't respond to them as well, but it's good to have the distraction. And school's given him structure, which I think is good." Every word Lisina spoke sounded uncertain. Hayley could relate.

"Have you thought about sending him to a counsellor? I can find someone if you need me to. Compel them, even, if he needs to talk freely to a human."
"I'll see what he thinks about it. Don't know if I can force him to go and talk."

"Maybe that's what he needs?"

"I guess. It's just … so hard to tell sometimes. Is it like this with Hope?" Lisina cringed a little. "Not that I'm Henry's parent—"

"Yes, you are. I don't see anyone else here, showing up like you have."

"Anyone else would've done it if I hadn't."

"But they didn't—you did." Hayley watched Lisina blink back tears.

"Sorry," she said, wiping them away quickly. "I should really be past this."

"Don't apologise." Hayley grabbed the tissue box from the table and set it in front of Lisina. It went untouched. "Is this …" Hayley paused a moment to consider her words carefully. "Is this what you want? To just suddenly be a parent like this?" Hayley didn't know what she'd do if the answer was 'no', but she'd have to do something. In a moment Lisina's entire life had changed, and Hayley hadn't even checked in to make sure it had changed in a way she wanted.

"I feel gut-punched," Lisina said, sniffing. "I started feeling like I'd tapped into something in me, something that meant I could take care of people. I thought that gene had skipped a generation, because my dad was so good at it but I was just—" She broke off, grabbing a tissue after all. "I never had good timing or the right words, so how could I be a comfort to someone else?"

"But then I left you all, and the pack needed leadership." The years Hayley had spent on the run with Hope, carting coffins around in a truck—the wolves had been all alone, their alpha gone. Jack, Aiden, and Ollie were all dead. Mary wasn't strong enough to take over. Hayley knew Lisina and Christophe had stepped up in a big way.

"Yeah," Lisina said. "And I took on more than I thought I could. Emily died, and Christophe was devastated, so I … helped. And it wasn't like I insinuated myself into their lives—they needed me. Everyone needed me. And it feels good to be needed. Even right now, every time Henry asks me for something I just feel useful, like there's a reason I'm doing all this, suffering like this. He needs me and I need him to need me." She laughed. "Isn't that just monstrous?"

Hayley shook her head. "Not even a little. Though I might be biased, since that's exactly how I feel about this pack. Some people just need a certain amount pressure to function, I guess. It sure as hell doesn't make us evil. We're just … wolves. We need family, pack, community. It's how we're wired. And losing a member of that community … I guess it makes sense that we'd want to draw in even closer than before." Hayley put an arm over Lisina's shoulders. "And I think this, what you're doing with Henry … it's gonna be really great. Not at first, and maybe not for a while, but if this is what you both need, don't question it. You couldn't ruin it if you tried."

"You really believe that?"

"Of course I do." Hayley drew circles on Lisina's shoulder with the pad of her thumb. "And if you want Henry to be more engaged we can set up some more pack gatherings. Go-karting, swimming, that kind of thing. Maybe there's even a festival or two he's interested in."

Lisina dabbed at her eyes. "That could be great."

"And what about you?"
"What about me?"

"What do you want to do? We can have someone watch Henry and you can come into the quarter and have a night out with us something. You, me, Freya, Keelin. Make it a girls' night."

"You don't have to do that—"

"Do you need it?" Hayley interrupted.

"I—" Lisina sighed. "Possibly."

"I need to be needed, too. So tell me what you need. If not the girls' night, then something else."

Lisina took a moment. "Maybe … something quiet. Not many people. Freya and Keelin are fine. I don't want to be at a club, getting hit on and … whatever. If that's okay?"

"Of course it is," Hayley assured her. "Whatever you need, whenever you need it."

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Dear Klaus,

Things are going well in the Quarter. I met with Vincent and Josh at Rousseau's today and we barely had anything to talk about. We spent most of the time mocking Josh for obviously being late because he was with his new boyfriend. I haven't met the guy yet, but I'm sure Josh will bring him around when he's ready.

Vincent is pretty good. I'm sure you'll be thrilled to hear. I know you two never quite saw eye-to-eye, but I think in another lifetime you might've been friends. The way he sees the world seems like something you'd appreciate.

Everything is pretty mundane around here now that Hope's back at school. I talked to her yesterday and she seemed in pretty high spirits. She has Bonnie Bennet for Supernatural History this year again, and they get along like a house on fire. Yet another fact you'll be thrilled to hear. Did you ever imagine that a Bennet witch would be your daughter's teacher?

Anyway, I'm exhausted and I have to get to bed. Hopefully I'll have time to fill you in on the rest before I post this letter. I know you're so eagerly awaiting it in Siberia. (Really? Siberia?)

I went to see Lisina today. I've been trying to check in without smothering her and Henry, but I think I might have left it too long between visits. She's struggling.

I guess I know what it's like to be a single parent all of a sudden. The tailspin is pretty intense, and she doesn't have any family left to help her out so it's just the me and the rest of the pack. I'm trying to arrange a ladies' night or something to lift her spirits but I get the feeling that'll just end up being irritating for her.

If you have any suggestions on dealing with intense grief, please let me know. I've never been very good at wading through someone else's feelings and I can use all the help I can get.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Hayley

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May 13th 2026
Klaus snapped out of his reverie with the slamming of the front door. Freya was home from her walk with Keelin.

He considered going down to see her. To discuss the day, to clear the air. But she'd helped Hope potentially ruin her life. Even now his daughter slept far too heavily, heartbeat far slower than Klaus was comfortable with.

Zipping onto the balcony, Klaus met Freya at the top of the stairs. She wasn't startled by his appearance, but she did tense slightly.

"Would you like to yell at me some more?" she asked.

"I think that's a feeling that may never go away," Klaus replied, well aware of how biting his tone was. "Is Keelin available to come here?"

"What for?"

"I want her to watch Hope, check her vitals and such. She's been sleeping far too long."

"She's exhausted, Klaus."

"And who's fault is that?" Klaus hissed. He clenched his fists, digging his fingers into his palms painfully to try and control his temper. "Please, Freya. Tell Keelin I will pay her for her services."

Freya shook her head. "She'd come for free if she thought there was any cause for concern. I told her to keep her distance while you were in a mood. At the fire in his eyes, she clarified, "A righteous mood, obviously. Still. I'm not keen on bringing my … on bringing Keelin around right now."

Klaus wanted to object to the assertion that he would ever harm Keelin, but he knew he'd done far worse. "She's in no danger. Call her or I will."

"Fine." Freya sighed and pulled out her phone. "But if she doesn't want to come—"

"I'll find someone else. Just … ask her. I don't want Hope to wake to a doctor she doesn't know, not unless it's the only option."

"I understand. I'll let you know what she says."

"Don't bother," Klaus dismissed. "I'll know regardless." He knew it made him sound like a dick, but he had little interest in speaking with Freya any more than he had to. What she'd done to Hope … it was wrong, and it was going to take more than a phone call for him to forget it.

Returning to the study, Klaus poured himself another glass of bourbon and retrieved the next letter.
May 13th, 2026

Keelin arrived ten minutes after Freya called her. She was still jet-lagged from her trip in (and from farewelling Hayley in the bayou, supporting Freya as she did the same), but she pushed through it with aplomb. Freya must have asked if she was up for it a dozen times before she reached Hope’s bedroom door.

“For the last time,” began Keelin, hand on the doorknob, “I’m fine. I’ve pulled 3-day shifts in warzones; this is nothing. Stop worrying.”

Klaus doubted Freya would grant that request, but her non-verbal response must have been satisfactory enough for Keelin, who turned to the knob and entered.

From his place beside Hope’s bed, Klaus saw little of Keelin until she switched the light on. “Are we trying to wake her or let her sleep?” she asked softly, motioning to the lights she’d just turned on.

“I was hoping you could provide a recommendation.” Klaus stood and moved away from Hope’s bedside to give her some room.

Keelin set her case on the chair Klaus had vacated, cracking it open and retrieving a stethoscope.

“Do you really need that?” Klaus asked.

Pausing, Keelin said, “Enhanced hearing is great—it’s even better with a stethoscope. Do you want to give me some room?”

Klaus stepped back in inch.

“I think she means leave,” Freya said from the doorway. “Come on, I’ll pour you a drink. She can come and let us know.”

Though he was reluctant to leave, Klaus could see that Keelin agreed with Freya’s comment. Since
she’d come here at a moment’s notice, he was inclined to acquiesce to her request.

He was not drinking with Freya, though.

“I’ll drink alone, thank you,” he replied starchy, then left.

Maybe a letter would distract him from his worries for a while.

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December 12th, 2022

Hayley guffawed, tears of laughter springing to her eyes to obscure her vision of Freya in the doorway clad in the ugliest elf outfit she’d ever seen.

“What is that?” Lisina demanded, mouth hanging open.

“I lost a bet to Kol,” Freya replied dejectedly, stepping into the house and out of the sharp, frigid air outside. Her ears were covered in plastic, pointed contraptions that barely fit through the threshold, her lipstick was bright green, and her outfit was unflattering, to say the least.

Keelin appeared in the doorway behind Freya, appropriately dressed in a cashmere coat with the skirt of a red dress peeking out beneath. Her hair was loose and her eyes sparkled at the sight of her girlfriend.

“Isn’t it horrendous?” she asked, delighted.

Hayley wiped her eyes. “I’ll have to send Kol a thank-you note for this image alone.”

Sighing, Freya reached into her bag and pulled out a disposable camera. “He wanted me to ask you to fill the camera with pictures of me in the outfit and then send it to him and Davina so they can put up a collage up in the house.”

Hayley snatched the camera from Freya’s hands immediately. “Sounds like a job for me.”

“What if I want a turn?” whined Lisina.

“We can switch in an hour,” Hayley promised, switching the camera on and aiming it at Freya like a weapon. “Say ‘cheese’!”

“I fucking hate girls’ night.”

“That doesn’t sound like ‘cheese’ to me,” Hayley admonished, taking the shot anyway. Kol would appreciate the murder in Freya’s eyes more than a false smile any day.

“It’s a new variety,” Freya snarked back, igniting yet more laughter from Keelin and Lisina.

“Okay, okay,” said Hayley, taking pity on Freya. “I’ll put the camera away for a while and we can just hang out, okay? It’s almost 8pm and I have to set the Skype up.”
“Is Rebekah in?” Keelin asked, shrugging of her coat. She thanked Lisina when she took it and hung it on the rack by the door, ever the gracious hostess.

“Yeah, she called this morning,” said Hayley.

Freya frowned. “I thought it was date night tonight?”

“Marcel pushed their reservation to tomorrow.” Hayley grabbed her laptop from her bag and set it up on the coffee table while the others sat down. “I think he thinks she’s kind of lonely?”

“Do we agree with that?” asked Keelin.

Hayley opened up Skype. “We don’t disagree with Marcel, since he’s usually right.”

“Does anyone want anything to eat or drink?” Lisina offered.

Freya jumped up, tulle skirt bouncing. “I’ll grab the eggnog. It’s in the fridge, right?”

“I can do it—”

“You offered your beautiful, warm home for our Christmas girls’ night. I can serve the drinks.”

Lisina smiled thankfully. “Okay.”

“Come in here and sit!” Keelin called, ushering her in while Freya made a beeline for the kitchen (more specifically, the alcohol; she was a Mikaelson, after all).

Hayley sat back with the laptop on her knee, watching to see when Davina’s and Rebekah’s accounts went active.

“How’s work?” Lisina asked Keelin as she pulled blankets out from under the coffee table.

“It’s always stressful in the holiday season, but it’s been okay this year. A few bad car accidents when the road gets icy, but that’s not so often.”

Hayley knew Keelin was filtering out the several traumas she’d had to deal with; ‘a few bad car accidents’ was definitely an understatement considering the state Keelin had been in by the end of her shift. But then Keelin and Lisina weren’t that close yet, and Keelin didn’t like unloading to anyone she didn’t know intimately.

Freya returned with a pitcher of eggnog. Lisina passed blankets out among them, and by the time they were settled Rebekah’s icon was active. Hayley clicked on ‘call’ immediately, and three seconds later they were all staring at Rebekah’s smiling, perfect face.

“Well, hello strangers!” she greeted, raising a wine glass.

A chorus of greetings lit up the room. Freya leaned into the shot to raise the pitcher of eggnog before returning to the coffee table to keep pouring it in glasses.

“How are you?” Keelin asked.

“Toasty,” was Rebekah’s response. She turned her laptop to show the fireplace beside her.

“Of course you lit a fire,” Hayley drawled. Rebekah’s pyromaniac tendencies were well-documented and very enjoyed on the winter nights before a magical ghost decided to try and blow up Hope. Just normal things.
Hayley may have sampled some of the eggnog while she helped Lisina make it.

Skype chimed and Davina’s icon popped up. Hayley added her into the call, watching the dots bounce as her video loaded.

Soon Davina’s smiling face appeared. Her hair was tucked into a sloppy ponytail and the red silk scarf Freya had bought her was tied tightly around her neck, her cheeks almost crimson enough to match it.

“Hey!” she greeted, waving.

“Nice of you to join us,” Rebekah drawled, grinning at her screen. “As your fiancee’s sister, I’d rather not know why you were late. Or why you’re wearing a scarf indoors.”

Davina groaned and buried her head in her hands to the sound of a chorus of laughter.

#

December 21st, 2022

“Aaaand welcome home!” Hayley said, knocking the front gate open with her hip. She set the bags down in the entryway and followed Hope into the courtyard, watching her take in all the decorations.

“Did you do the tree?” she asked.

“Of course not!” Hayley exclaimed, tugging on one of Hope’s ponytails. “That’s something we do together.” Well, they usually did it while Skyping with Klaus, but he wasn’t available this year. Hayley wasn’t going to bring attention to that, though.

Keelin appeared on the landing, making a half-jog toward the stairs. “Well, hi there.”

“Aunt Keelin!” Hope practically exploded, shaking off the exhaustion of their journey as she met Keelin half-way up the stairs. Keelin swept her up in her arms and spun around a little on the step. Hope hadn’t even been set back on her feet before she was asking, “Can we do the tree now?”

“After you get your bags back in your room and have a shower. Aunt Keelin and I will grab the boxes of decorations out of the attic.”

“What about Aunt Freya?”

“She’ll join us soon,” Keelin promised. “She’s driving back from visiting Aunt Rebekah and Uncle Marcel, but she should be here just after dinner.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“I don’t know. You’ll have to ask your mom.”

“Mom’s cooking?” Hope asked in alarm.

“No,” Hayley assured her, ignoring the desire to feign offence. So what if she couldn’t cook? She
could do a thousand other things that stopped her kid from going hungry besides. “But I am taking suggestions for what to order in.”

“Can you get the burgers from Rousseau’s?” Hope asked. They were a particular favourite of hers.

“They have a new cook now, so they might not be the same,” Hayley reminded her.

“Can we try them?”

Hayley was more in the mood for Chinese, but the hopeful look in her daughter’s eyes undid her. “Sure, sweetie,” she said, nodding. “I’ll go grab it now.”

“Yes!” Hope exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air.

“But don’t you dare make Aunt Keelin unpack your stuff while I’m gone. She can carry your bags, but the rest is your job, understand?”

Hope deflated a little. “Yes, Mom.”

“And you’d better be clean when I get back, too.”

“She will be,” Keelin promised. “Even if I have to toss her in the bathtub myself.”

Hope shrieked as Keelin caught her around the waist as though she was off to do just that. Above Hope’s squirming, cackling form, she met Hayley’s eyes and nodded.

Hayley mouthed a quick “thank you” and took her leave.

#

The thing about burgers from Rousseau’s was that Rousseau’s didn’t exactly do take away.

Hayley had had an arrangement with previous owner, Georgie, who’d taken over after Sophie Deveraux’s incident. (Well, after she was murdered by the fanatic niece she’d spent the better part of a year trying to resurrect.) Hayley and Georgie had been on good terms, especially after Georgie hired Cami on Hayley’s recommendation, then Josh on Cami’s recommendation, then Poppy on Josh’s, then Amy on Poppy’s, and so on. Hayley had practically built that place, or so she liked to tell herself.

But despite her camaraderie with the staff, Georgie heading back west to take care of her sick mother had thrown a wrench in Hayley’s plans. The new owner, the blue-eyed man that had made her a club sandwich every Thursday for a few months, was a bit more mysterious than sweet, pleasant Georgie.

She wondered if she was going to have to compel him to make her daughter a burger. She hoped not, since Josh and Poppy would most certainly object to their boss’s mind being hijacked by her, even for the most pedestrian reasons. Maybe even especially for those reasons.

So she’d have to convince him herself.

Rousseau’s was packed when she arrived. Few people where there in groups, most just lonely and seeking the company of each other in this holiday season. It was Christmas in four days, and
Rousseaus’ would be closed in two. Perhaps this was just an expression of anxiety from a community stitched together by places like this, wondering what it would look like without it.

Hayley greeted Poppy at the counter, receiving a barely-there response. It wasn’t that Poppy didn’t care—she was cursed with always caring about everything, a rarity these days—but she had swathes of customers waiting for the tenth grief beer and trying to look sober while asking for it.

“Do you mind if I pop in the back?” Hayley asked lightly.

Poppy shot her a worried look. “Boss won’t like it, but I doubt that deters you.”

“Nope.” Hayley stuffed her hands into her pockets and headed for the kitchen, the source of the most heavenly scents she’d ever encountered. Georgie may have been marvellous, but she wasn’t half the cook the new guy was.

Speaking of the devil—he was in the middle of chopping peppers at a rate faster than Hayley thought even she could, barking out orders left and right as he did so. He was sweaty from exertion, cheeks ruddy with the flush of blood. Spotting her, he finished with the last pepper and shucked off his latex gloves, stuffing them in the bin.

“Mary, pop the peppers in with the mushroom and onion—I want it topping steaks in ten minutes.”

“Yes, boss.”

Wiping his hands on his apron—despite having been wearing gloves—the cook made his way over to Hayley. “You shouldn’t be back here, Club Sandwich.”

“I was wondering if you do take out?” Hayley tried to phrase it as a question, tilting her head in the way Rebekah had told her produced her best angle.

The cook was having none of it. “If you want to eat, take a seat.”

“I … was really hoping to do take away.”

His face remained hard. “If you’re that desperate, I can give you directions to the nearest McDonald’s.” He pivoted and made to leave.

“It’s for my daughter,” Hayley said. He hesitated, so she forged on, “She’s just come home from school and she … she loved these burgers, back when Georgie Knowles ran it. I’m trying to keep her occupied, keep her mind off some stuff and she just—this was what she wanted.” She sighed. “I understand if it’s too difficult.”

Finally, the cook turned back to look at her. “Go down the street to the convenience store and get some brown paper bags. I can wrap the burgers in plastic wrap and put them in there. Give your orders to Poppy at the bar and she’ll bring them back for me.”

“Thank you,” Hayley breathed.

“Thank my staff in tips, Club Sandwich.”

“My name is Hayley.”

“And mine’s Declan.” He grabbed a dish towel and slung it over his shoulder. “What about it?”

He disappeared back into his work, giving her no chance to respond.
“Mom, you took ages,” a freshly-showered Hope complained when Hayley returned home.

“You were hardly wasting away,” Hayley replied amusedly, following a bounding Hope into the kitchen. “Did you behave for Aunt Keelin?”

“Yep!” Hope hopped up onto one of the stools at the breakfast bar, her feet kicking mid-air as she did. “I unpacked all my stuff and then we even had time to bring some of the decorations down from the attic.”

Hayley wasn’t thrilled at the thought of Hope in the dusty, drafty attic, but if Keelin was with her then she didn’t mind so much. “Here you go,” she said, passing Hope her burger. “Where is Aunt Keelin?”

“In the shower,” Hope said quickly, stuffing her burger into her mouth.

“Is it as good as Georgie’s?”

“Better,” Hope replied, mouth already stuffed full with her second bite. “Are we gonna set up the tree after this?”

“Of course. Can’t bring all those decorations down for nothing, can we?”

Hope nodded. “And is Dad gonna call?”

It took conscious effort to bury her cringe. Klaus usually called every night of Hope’s Christmas holiday break, and though she knew her father hadn’t contacted her throughout the year part of Hope must have wondered if maybe he’d keep his promise during what should be the happiest time of year.

The time for family.

“I don’t think he will, sweetie,” Hayley admitted, watching Hope’s reaction carefully. She knew it bothered her—she was only a little girl, and her father had left her, possibly for good.

Hope paused her eating for a moment. “Have you talked to him?”

“Not in a while.”

“Is he mad at me?”

“Of course not.”

“But how do you know that if you haven’t talked to him?” Hope asked.

Hayley walked around the breakfast bar to sit beside Hope, resting a hand on her shoulder. “Your dad could never be angry with you. He loves you.”

“You love me, and you get plenty angry.”

“Because I’m here every day and I see you when you’re naughty. And it’s not angry, really. I’m just
disappointed when you don’t do the right thing sometimes.” Hayley cupped Hope’s cheek. “Did you do something you think your dad would be disappointed about?”

Hope shook her head and went back to her burger. Hayley heard her heart pick up a bit, smelled her fear response. She was lying.

“Well, if you think of anything, you know you can tell me, right?”

Hope nodded, chewing much slower than earlier. Awkward tension hung between them, and Hayley didn’t like it one bit.

Thankfully, that was when she heard the shower turn off upstairs.

“Come on, finish up,” she encouraged. “Aunt Keelin’s almost done with her shower—after that she and I can eat our dinner while we talk about how we wanna decorate and wait for Aunt Freya to get here.”

“Sounds good,” Hope said, tucking into the rest of her burger while Hayley could only sit there and watch, wondering just what it was her daughter wasn’t saying.

#

Dear Klaus,

Hope asked me if you were going to call today.

She just got back from school for her holiday break, so I guess she thought maybe you’d try and contact us again. Like you did last year, and the year before that.

Telling her you weren’t going to, that you hadn’t tried to talk to me in a while … it was hard. Harder than I thought it was going to be, and it made me feel so angry with you and devastated for her and a thousand other things I hadn’t wanted to feel this holiday.

I wanted this to be a joyful time for her. Instead I feel like I’m one half of a team that’s always going to be behind, always dropping the ball and missing the mark. I don’t know how to do this time of year without hearing from you, and it scares me.

What I need is for you to come home. I know you can’t do that, and so I need to be able to talk to you. I need to know you miss us as much as we miss you. As much as I miss you.

Hope will be fine. I know she will—she’s strong and beautiful and I love her to pieces. If love is all she needs, I have enough. I just worry that she thinks you don’t have enough for her, too, and that you wouldn’t give it to her if you could. Just the thought of her believing that makes me willing to rip my heart out of my own chest to prove her wrong, but only you can do that.

I guess I just have to accept that you’re choosing not to.

Still missing you,

Hayley
May 13th, 2026

“I think she’s going to wake soon.”

Klaus looked up from the letter he’d been re-reading for the past half hour, shocked that he’d zoned out so completely. Keelin waited patiently for his response, ever-understanding, ever-uncomplicated. He really wished she’d let him pay her for her assistance. Perhaps then he wouldn’t feel so indebted.

“Is she all right?”

“I can’t detect anything medically wrong, and she groaned when I checked her pupil response. I think it’s a matter of hours before she comes around.”

The relief that flooded Klaus at the news was so strong he could’ve kissed her. But because neither of them would’ve appreciated that, he tamped down the instinct and just squeezed her shoulder on his way past, uttering a terse, “Thank you,” that he hoped conveyed everything he wanted it to.

Hope was alone in the room when he arrived, sleeping deeply. He could hear her heart beating but he still took her wrist in his fingers just to feel her pulse against them. It was a small comfort in what was shaping up to be the most difficult time of his life.

And that was saying something.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he said, brushing Hope’s braid up from her neck. “You can do this.”

She stirred slightly, her sigh lifting his heart in his chest. She didn’t wake, but she turned slightly, burying her face into the pillow.

Keelin was right. She was going to be fine.

Rising, Klaus flashed back into the living room to grab the box of letters, returning moments later. He’d finish the remainder of his trip down memory lane at his daughter’s side, and nowhere else.

Klaus Mikaelson had spent the better part of a decade parted from his daughter by evil and his own fear. He wasn’t going to spend another second away if he didn’t have to.

Chapter End Notes

let me know your thoughts! i’d love to hear them
Klaus was accustomed to maintaining full awareness of his surroundings no matter what. He did it while painting, while reading, while sleeping—it was of vital importance to be ready to defend at a moments’ notice.

But reading these letters, Klaus almost forgot about the daughter sleeping two feet from his elbow, and that was saying something.

Though, in the case of the next letter, he could perhaps be forgiven.

#

It is with great pleasure that we

Kol Mikaelson

&

Davina Claire

invite you

Hayley Marshall
Hayley beamed at the slip of paper before her. It contained no date or time or place, and even the words slid away when she dropped it, replacing the elegant, embossed invitation with an innocuous postcard from Maine.

A clever trick of Davina’s devising, no doubt.

She knew the date they were considering—it was while Hope was still at school and out of the city. Davina wanted to marry here, with her home all around her. She may not have the best memories of this city, but who among them did?

In any case, it was gearing up to be the celebration of a lifetime and Hayley, for one, couldn’t wait.

“Oh, you got yours?” Keelin asked, walking in with an envelope in hand. She’d just come home from a shift but seemed … perkier than usual. A bright shine in her eyes.

“You seem happy to get off work.”

Keelin dropped down onto the sofa beside Hayley, slipping her finger nail under the envelope seal of her invitation. “It was a good shift. Got one kid with a half dozen peas stuck up his nose, but that was sorted quickly. The dad promised to bring back some muffins he’s apparently famous for.”

“Can’t wait.”

Grinning, Keelin pulled out her invitation and read it over. “It’s nice to think about, isn’t it?” she wondered aloud. “Having a wedding here, all together. Well, not all of us.”

Hayley hmmed in agreement. “Hope will be upset. She knows it’s coming, but still. She would’ve loved to be here.”

“We can FaceTime or Skype or something. She could even get all dressed up for it.”

“She’d like that.” Hayley still wasn’t sure it’d be enough, but she was willing to try.

#

February 28th, 2023

With careful planning and consideration on the part of Hayley, Caroline, Davina, Kol, and Freya, it did, in fact, turn out to be enough.

Well, for the engagement party, at least.

Caroline arranged for Hope to have school off the day of the party, sequestering her in a spare room in the attic for the spell she had Valerie Tulle perform to project Hope to the party for an hour. She spent it with Kol and Davina, testing the limits of astral projection, how she could tackle Kol’s legs but blow right through them like a ghost.
It wasn’t quite the ideal afternoon. But then, Hayley didn’t think anything was ideal while the family was fractured.

Hope left after an hour or so spinning around on the dance floor and pretending to step on Marcel’s feet (he let out an indulgent cry of mock pain each time without tiring of it). At the school, Caroline had some cake waiting for Hope, plus an afternoon planned with activities to help distract her from the inevitable melancholy. They’d promised to call if there were any issues, so Hayley waited with her phone in her sweaty palm and all but forgot she was even there to celebrate something at all.

“You look serious,” said Lisina, prodding Hayley’s shoulder. Davina had invited her after the two struck up a long-distance friendship, facilitated by none other than their legendary girls’ nights.

“And you look lovely,” Hayley replied, and it was the truth: a canary yellow dress spun around Lisina’s calves, and every inch of her seemed to glow.

Lisina flushed a little. “I had to bulk-buy dresses for this weekend.”

“You and me both,” Hayley agreed with a chuckle. Kol and Davina didn’t want to risk being in the country for long, so every celebration was squashed into the one weekend. The engagement party was on the Friday afternoon and evening, held in a park with a lovely gazebo and a temporary white canvas tent set up. The bachelorette party would be Saturday evening, and the wedding was in St. Anne’s on Sunday.

Despite her anxiety over Hope, Hayley couldn’t help but feel eddies of delight bubble up through her like air in the champagne being passed around. Her family wasn’t together entirely, but with Freya FaceTiming Rebekah, it was close enough.

“Bon-Bon!” Kol exclaimed, raising the empty champagne glasses that happened to be in his hand. (He’d been on his way to fetch his soon-to-be wife her fifth drink, apparently.)

Hayley had to focus on stopping her jaw from dropping when she saw the object of his greeting: Bonnie Bennet, dressed in a sleek red gown and grinning—grinning—as she walked across the grass towards them.

Davina spotted her and made her apologies to Marcel, who she’d been talking to. Picking up the train of her long, silver dress, she stumbled over to Bonnie. “Hi!” she exclaimed, enveloping Bonnie in a tight hug.

“And hi to you, too,” Bonnie replied, grinning into Davina’s hair. She pulled back and laughed. “I see you’ve been into the champagne.”

“I’ve been supplying it, like a good husband,” Kol contributed.

Bonnie rolled her eyes. “You’re not her husband yet,” she said, smacking his arm with the back of her hand. “I still have time to steal her.”

“The clock’s ticking.”

Davina laughed at the two of them, eyes shining.

Hayley remained rooted in place, barely computing what she was seeing. She heard Freya approach, tossing her the phone Rebekah was FaceTiming in on.

“Is that Bonnie Bennet?” Rebekah asked immediately.
Hayley switched the video link to back camera and aimed the phone at the scene, which remained a happy conversation among what appeared to be old friends. “I know,” she said lowly, right near the mic. “What the fuck, right?”

“Who is she?” Freya asked, craning her neck.

“She’s a friend!” Kol called back, smirking at them.

“You’ve tried to kill her before!” Hayley called back.

Bonnie threw her head back and cackled. “If I let that ruin my friendships, I’d have no friends.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd.

“All right, stop weirding her out,” said Kol. He took Bonnie by the arm. “Let’s get you introduced to everyone, shall we?”

#

Bonnie was a nice fit, surprisingly. She bickered with Kol, talked magic with Vincent and Freya, took touristy advice from Lisina and Marcel, and oohed and ahhed over pictures of Davina’s wedding dress.

The whole thing was so normal, it made Hayley want to find a corner to cry in. If she’d been told even twelve years ago that this was what he life would look like … she didn’t know what she would’ve done. But she definitely wouldn’t have believed them.

She wasn’t going to cry, though, she assured herself. It would only ruin the evening.

Then Marcel’s speech came, and Davina wept into a napkin. When Freya got up to speak about the brother she adored so much, there wasn’t a single dry eye in the house.

#

March 1st, 2025

Hayley woke at dawn after a refreshing four hours of sleep.

She took her time before the rest of the compound woke—everyone in the family was staying there but Davina and Marcel, who were at the penthouse apartment Marcel kept for his holidays back in the Quarter. It was going to be a long day of last-minute wedding business and bachelorette wildness, and she had to be prepared.

Because Mikaelsons had no boundaries, Hayley was unsurprised when Kol wandered into the bathroom while she was brushing her teeth. The rest of the house was still sleeping, and since Kol hadn’t gotten to bed until after Hayley did she was surprised to see him looking so fresh.
“I need a favour from you,” he began leadingly, arms folded over his pajama shirt. There were white splotches on it, clouds or marshmallows or something. Hayley was certain he hadn’t bought it for himself.

“Wha?” Hayley prompted, mouth full of toothpaste. She angled the toothbrush and brushed harder, trying to get that space between her bottom left molars. If she didn’t have it squeaky clean, she’d be thinking about it all day.

“I wanted to have a look through the old O’Connell artefacts to see if there’s something in there for Davina. You have the key, right?”

Hayley spat the toothpaste out and levelled a serious stare on Kol through the mirror’s surface. “Are you up to something?”

Kol raised his hands innocently. “Only ensuring my future wife’s happiness.”

“And you need a dark object to achieve that?”

“They’re not all dark objects, love. Plenty of them are harmless enough.”

Hayley bent over the sink to rinse her mouth out. Wiping the water away with the back of her wrist, she reached for the mouth wash. “Meet me downstairs in five.”

#

Being left as a guardian of a truck-load of cursed objects was quite the responsibility. When Cami died, Hayley had tucked them away in a shipping container and tried not to think of them. Truth be told, she hadn’t set eyes on them since she had Vincent cast protection spells on the area.

“You can come in,” she said, opening the roller door. The container looked empty from outside but stepping in revealed the scene truthfully: industrial shelves Hayley had built herself lined the walls, laden with the objects. She’d discussed having them appraised and labelled more carefully but had never gotten around to it. The bookkeeping the past O’Connell’s had done would have to do for now.

Kol whistled as he stepped over the threshold and joined her, his eyes taking in the scene. “That’s one powerful concealing spell. You invited me in because it would’ve kept me out otherwise?” It was positioned as a question, so Hayley nodded. “Fantastic bit of spell work. I’d love to have a look at it sometime.”

“It’s Vincent’s.” And he doesn’t like you very much.

“I suppose I’ll be asking my wife to get the spell from him then.” Kol ran a hand over the two-headed skull, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Wasn’t this about getting a gift for Davina?” Hayley prompted. “That doesn’t seem particularly romantic.”

“You’d be surprised,” Kol shot back. At her glare, he relented. “No, it’s not. I’m looking for an old necklace. Blue stone, ancient-looking setting.”
“Descriptive,” Hayley quipped. “If it’s not on the shelves, it might be in one of those boxes at the back.”

Kol started rolling up his sleeves. “I guess we’d best get started, then.”

#

It took them almost an hour to locate the necklace. The stone was blue with an underlying shimmer, a pulse of magic that radiated out from it when touched, almost … recoiling?

“It’s because we’re dead,” Kol said. “It prefers to be held by the living.”

“What is it?”

“And old piece belonging to the Devereaux family, originally. It’s protection against hexes and the like.”

“Practical and romantic,” Hayley teased. “But the chain looks like a sneeze would disintegrate it.”

“Yes, I’m having a new one fashioned as we speak. Has to be pure silver or it’ll interfere with the spell work.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Hayley watched him turn the necklace over in his hands, appraising it carefully. “You really love her, don’t you?”

Kol’s eyes snapped up, a bit of surprise flickering in them. “Well, yes. Did you doubt?”

“Not really. I guess I just didn’t … think it through. You never seemed like a deeply emotional person.”

“The duality of man. Or vampire, as it were.” Kol snapped the chain and slid the pendant off into his hand. “Old, blue, and borrowed. Just need the new part.” He tucked it into his pocket.

“Make sure you tell her it was Cami’s,” Hayley said. “It’ll matter to her.”

“As it should. Camille was …” he trailed off, looking around the room.

“Yeah, she was,” Hayley agreed.

“Well, I’m going to get going!” Kol clapped his hands together. “I have a thousand things to do and not nearly enough time to do them.”

“I’ll lock up.”

Kol rested his hand on her shoulder. “Thank you, sister,” he said, then blurred away at vampire speed.

“You’re welcome, asshole,” Hayley replied to the empty space, the smallest smile on her lips.

Maybe she had one more thing to do today after all.
Hayley scuffed her feet on the rough, broken pavement, eyes fixed on the gravestone.

CAMILLE O’CONNELL.

“I’m sorry I haven’t visited in a while,” she began. “Things got hectic. I’m sure you understand what that’s like around here.” Desperate for something to do with her hands, Hayley broke off some of the baby’s breath from a nearby vase and twisted it in her fingers, crushing it and releasing the fragrance. She inhaled it deeply, using it to ground her.

“Davina’s getting married. I know she wishes you were here to wish her well. See Marcel walk her down the aisle—begrudgingly, given the groom.” Hayley chuckles died before they even formed. “There’s so much here I wish you could see. And I guess I try not to think of you because it makes me wish I was seeing it with you.

“I wish you could’ve seen how much Klaus loves Hope. I wish you could’ve seen Freya falling in love. I wish you could’ve seen Vincent really grow into his role as a leader. I wish you could’ve seen Josh take over Rousseau’s like he was born to do it. And I wish …” Hayley cleared her throat. “I wish we could’ve seen the incredible life you would’ve made for yourself, if things were different.”

There was more to say—there was always more to say—but Hayley had to go. She had dresses to pick up and a thousand messages to answer, and she knew Cami wouldn’t consider it a favour for her to seek shelter at her grave all day. If anything, she’d be pissed.

Hayley was stuck in her own thoughts on her way out, so she could almost be forgiven for not paying attention. She ran into something just out near the carpark, someone solid and very Irish in their complaints.

“Oof—watch where you’re going, love!”

Hayley stumbled back, finding the chef from Rousseau’s in front of her. Declan, she reminded herself. “Sorry,” she said, blinking back some of the tears that had formed.

Declan softened a little. “No, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped. Especially here of all places.”

Hayley tried to smile but found her lips entirely uncooperative. Her vision blurred a little, tears too much for her to hold back. His face fell as hers did, and she blushed crimson with embarrassment. “Sorry,” she said, cringing with her entire body. “I’ll just—”

“No, no, it’s fine,” Declan insisted. “I’d offer you a handkerchief, but … it’s the 21st century.”

Hayley laughed through her tears. “I’m so sorry. I’m not usually like this.”

“No, you just prefer to strongarm unsuspecting cooks into changing their mode of business. You know I’m not licensed as a take away? I might get into trouble for those burgers I made you at Christmas.”

“Something tells me you’ll be okay.”

“If I’m not, you’ll be hearing from my lawyers.”

Hayley laughed again, and it felt incredible. “Anyway, I should get going. I have a whole wedding
to prep for tomorrow.”

“Not yours, I hope.”

“No, it’s not”— Hayley broke off, wondering if it was possible to blush deeper than she already was. “You hope?”

“Of course I do. Couldn’t have your fiancé coming after me for making you cry in a cemetery.”

“No, I guess not.”

Declan stuffed his hands in his pockets, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet. “Well, I’d best let you get to it. I hope the rest of your weekend is a sight better than this.” He squeezed her arm on the way past her, leaving her to her thoughts.

Hayley had never attended a bachelorette party before, but something told her the one they held for Davina that night was … unusual.

For one, candles were spelled to hang in the air, cascading like branches from a weeping willow tree. For another, every woman present was supernatural and apparently trying to prove it with their alcohol tolerance.

“There’s no way!” Lisina exclaimed, slapping her hands on the table. It shook the glasses of beer on the table and set Freya laughing. “You’re just a witch. That’s not a biological thing; it’s like—metaphysical, or-or something. I’m a wolf! I have a higher tolerance.”

“If you really think so,” Freya began, lifting up one of the beers, “then prove it.”

This of course spurred on a drinking game to end all drinking games, with Keelin and Lisina up against Freya and Bonnie. Hayley was barred from entering due to her vampire nature, so she adjudicated while sipping just enough cider to keep her belly warm. Davina had excused herself from the game to save herself the hangover on her wedding day, but she still knocked back four glasses of wine before the game was over. She had to lift her fake veil every time she wanted to take a sip.

The wolves won.

After that was dancing at Rousseau’s until even Hayley’s feet ached, until every stiletto was piled in a corner under their table while they danced barefoot on top of the bar. They had an hour-long game where they weren’t allowed to let Davina’s feet touch the floor, instead passing her around among them, Hayley and Josh tossing her to and fro while she shrieked. She danced with her feet on Marcel’s for at least three songs, clinging to him for dear life. They tried one song with the reverse, with Marcel’s feet on Davina’s, but tumbled to the floor in a matter of moments.

Hayley was about to walk over and help them up when her phone buzzed in her purse. She padded over, stockinged feet carrying her across the room until she made it to her ringing phone. It was Caroline, so she answered it instantly.

“Hello?” Hayley sang into the phone. The cider had been … effective.
“Hayley?” Caroline sounded tense but confused.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Hayley replied with a chuckle. “I’m at a bar. Hang on—I’ll just head outside.” She swept up her purse and picked up her heels by the straps, ducking out the service entrance and into the alley. The fresh air whipped through her lungs like river rapids, chilling her instantly. “Okay, I’m out. I’m assuming you’re not calling to congratulate Kol on his impending nuptials?”

“It’s Hope.”

Hayley had been chilled earlier, but those two words froze her blood solid. “What is it?”

“We thought she was in bed—it’s past curfew—but Valerie sensed a commotion upstairs and when we went to investigate, we found her unconscious.”

“What?” Hayley bit back her panic and tried to think. “Was someone else up there?”

“No, it’s—she was trying to perform a spell. Val said it looks like an astral projection spell. She’ll let me know when she knows more about it. We’ve had to take Hope into the ER to get some tests done.”

Emergency rooms were terrifying for normal kids that had been to them before. Hope had never even gotten the flu, and if she woke up there all alone—

“I’m staying with her, but you might want to get here as soon as you can.”

“I’m on my way.”

#

Hayley hardly had the presence of mind to not use vampire speed to get to her car while there were humans around. She ran as fast as she could believably, hair whipping behind her face as she jumped over city-installed garden beds and dodged party-goers until she found her truck where she’d parked it.

She cut off a Bentley on her way out, listening to the abuse that was hurled at her without caring. She sped along as fast as she could without hitting anyone else around her, pulling along backstreets until she’d almost made it to the highway—

When her truck began sputtering.

“No, no, no, don’t you dare—” Hayley beat the steering wheel with her hands, feeling the leather and plastic dent under her strength. She flicked the wheel to turn off onto the side of the road before the truck came to a full stop, leaving her in a furious silence.

“Fuck!” she exclaimed, switching on the hazard lights and throwing herself from the vehicle. She knew next to nothing about cars, but she tossed the hood open regardless.

It looked … like an engine. Wasn’t there supposed to be smoke or something?

Tears burning in her eyes, Hayley had just pulled her phone out to call Marcel when headlights caught her vision, slowing down and pulling off behind her truck. She hesitated with her finger over the call button as her would-be rescuer jumped out, walking toward her just as a silhouette cast
against the bright headlights.

She didn’t need to see his features; she recognised the scent. Wiping her eyes, Hayley tried to look a lot less crazed. Given that she still hadn’t put her shoes on and her makeup was wrecked from crying, she doubted that would work.

“You all right, love?” Declan asked, jogging over to her.

“I’m fine, Declan. Just … in a rush.”

Declan’s eyes creased with worry. “Do you want me to try and jumpstart it? I have cables in my car.”

“That’d be awesome, thank you, but I might have to just call a cab. I can’t be waiting around for this to work.”

“You can’t call your friends?”

Hayley glanced at her phone, finger hovering over Marcel’s entry in the contact list. “Yeah, but they’re at a bachelorette party and I was hoping not to ruin it. My kid, she’s in the hospital.”

Declan paled. “Then lock your car up and leave it here. I’ll drive you.”

“It’s a hospital in Virginia.”

“She’s your kid,” Declan replied. “It wouldn’t matter if the hospital was in Australia. Let’s go.”

“Thank you,” Hayley breathed, dashing back to the truck to grab her keys, purse, and put her shoes on. She locked the truck up and met Declan at his car, slipping into the passenger side.

#

The drive was agonisingly long. Hayley considered bailing out the door and running the distance herself, cutting through the woods on bare feet—or paws, even, if the forest floor became too rough and her human limbs failed her.

Two calls from Caroline, both to assure her that Hope was fine, kept Hayley rooted into her seat. Well, that and Declan, who somehow managed to switch the radio station right when the music began annoying her, to order the coffee she liked without asking when they stopped at a 24-hour diner, and to just generally be as perfect as was humanly (or supernaturally) possible.

Draining the last of her (now cold) coffee, Hayley tucked the cup into the holder and asked, “How did you know?”

“Know wha—oh, the coffee? It’s what you order at Rousseau’s when you’re not drinking booze.”

“Do you remember all your customers’ coffee orders?”

“No,” he answered honestly.

“Why did you remember mine?”
Declan paused. “Why won’t you call any of your family?”

“Because …” Hayley measured her words carefully. Talking to humans was hard, especially when they didn’t know the truth. “Because Hope’s strong, and she’ll be fine, and if I tell them tonight they’ll just freak out and bail on the wedding. It’s important for Davina to get the day she deserves with her whole family there.”

“Except you.”

“My kid comes first. They won’t begrudge me that.”

“And you can’t call her father?”

Hayley stilled. “He’s … not around at the moment.”

Thankfully, Declan said no more about it.

#

Mystic Falls General Hospital was not Hayley’s favourite place in the world. Hospitals generally weren’t; once she’d been kicked out of home she wasn’t covered under her family’s insurance (being fostered, not adopted), and she hadn’t wanted to be wrangled back into the system, so she’d avoided any medical institution like the plague. Thankfully, wolf healing kept her from needing it.

“I’ll drop you off in the emergency bay and park the car,” Declan said as he pulled not the parking lot. “Do you want me to come find her room or hang out in the waiting room?”

“I—the waiting room is fine. I’ll just see how she is first.”

The car pulled to a stop in the bay. Hayley shoved the door open with enough force to almost break it, then shut it twice as hard. If she’d been able to think about anything other than Hope, she might have apologized for almost wrecking Declan’s car.

She ran into the hospital, teetering on heels as she looked desperately for the front desk. She grabbed a nurse coming past by the scrubs and said, “My daughter’s here.”

“Miss,” he said, eyeing her warily, “you’ll have to go to the front desk to ask for her information.”

“Hayley!”

Relaxing her grip, Hayley rushed to Caroline. “Where is she?” she demanded, barely recognizing her own voice.

Caroline took her by the hand and led her on, past rushing gurneys and busy personnel. “I compelled her a room so she’d have some privacy. Her vitals are all stable and there’s nothing physically wrong with her, but she’s not awake yet.”

“You said it was an astral projection spell?”

“Yeah, it …” Caroline came to a halt outside room 25B. Through the cracked blinds, Hayley could see her daughter’s peaceful, sleeping face. “Valerie absorbed some of the leftover energy from the spell, taking it from Hope. She was worried the rebound was doing her harm, but if it was, nothing’s
permanently damaged. Elena did the full work-up herself, so you can talk to her about it.”

“What was the spell for?” Hope didn’t know the bachelorette party was happening that night; Hayley had avoided telling her specifically so she wouldn’t feel left out and do something dangerous.

Caroline glanced at Hope, checking if she was still asleep. “It was an astral projection spell,” she began, voice quiet. “She was trying to get to Amsterdam.”

“Amster—” Understanding dawned, and it wasn’t pleasant. “She was trying to see him.”

Caroline nodded. “And apparently he’s got a pretty serious magical shield on him because it rebounded back at her. All the magic she threw into the spell came back against her.”

“She hurt herself trying to see her dad.” Hayley let the words sink in, going straight to her heart. She bit back anger, rage like she’d never felt before—if he’d only answer his *fucking* messages—

“Say the word and I’m going after him,” Caroline vowed. “I’ll do it, right now.”

“It’s 3am, Caroline.”

“If I can’t get a flight at this hour, I’ll swim.”

Part of Hayley wanted to laugh, but she knew Caroline was serious. “Thanks, but I don’t think that will achieve much.” It was also the furthest thing from Caroline’s responsibility. She cared deeply for all of them, but that wasn’t enough to convince Hayley to toss her into the fire.

There was no telling what Klaus was like right now. Perhaps it was a good thing Hope couldn’t get through.

#

Caroline returned to the school an hour or so later. She insisted she didn’t need much sleep, but Hayley knew that was only true of older vampires and all but forced her to go anyway.

Declan, however, would not be swayed. Even as Hayley sat with her sleeping daughter she could hear Declan’s light snore coming all the way from the waiting room. She wanted to invite him to join her, but the last thing she needed was Hope waking to a stranger in her room.

“You should take a break,” Elena told her sometime after dawn. She’d been on shift there all night, ducking in and out of various surgeries.

“I’m good, thanks.”

“Even if it’s just for some fresh air,” Elena pressed. “You need to stretch, get some blood, freshen up. I’ll sit with her until you get back.”

“You’ll sit with Klaus Mikaelson’s daughter?”

“Maybe not.” Elena sat down on the chair on the other side of the bed, Hope’s chart perched on her knee. “But I’ll sit with Hayley Marshall’s. I have her, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Come to think of it, Hayley really did need blood.
“There’s some in my bag at the door,” Elena said unprompted. Apparently, she recognised the look of hunger on a vampire’s face when she saw it. “Take it outside with you and find somewhere private. You’re too likely to have someone walk in on you in here.”

“Thank you,” Hayley breathed, brushing a kiss on Hope’s head as she stood. “If she wakes—”

“Caroline gave me your number.” Elena patted her breast pocket, the outline of a phone pressing against it. “Go and feed.”

Not having to be told again, Hayley swept up Elena’s bag and left. She walked through the halls, barely taking note of where she was going, just following the scent of fresh air until automatic doors parted like the red sea and gave her clean, crisp early morning air. It was just on sunrise, light beaming over the horizon like an apology for the horrors of the night.

“How is she?”

Hayley turned to face Declan, who must have spotted her walking and followed her out. “She’s good,” she replied. “Same as the last update.”

“Do you need anything? Some food?”

“I’m all good, thanks.” Hayley ran a hand over the bag absently, at least half of her mind focused on the contents. “Would you … I mean, I think it’s best if you want back to New Orleans. You work on Sunday nights and I just—I don’t want you to miss a shift for this.”

“It’s worth it. So, Starbucks?”

“No, Declan, really. I’m going to have to book a motel room and stay here for a while to make sure she’s okay to go back to school. It doesn’t make sense for you to stay here with me that whole time.”

“How will you get back?”

“I’m sure I can entice someone to come pick me up. As soon as the wedding’s over they’ll all want to come here, anyway.”

A pained look crossed Declan’s face, there and then gone. “I suppose there’s not much I can do to help, is there?”

“You’ve done more than enough.” Hayley stepped forward, moving slowly to kiss his cheek. “Thank you so much for this. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

The corner of Declan’s mouth curled up a bit, his eyes sparkling. “Let me get your coffee order right back in New Orleans?”

Hayley was saying “It’s a date!” before she even knew what she was doing.

Declan beamed at her, touching her arm lightly before stepping back. “Let me know how the little one’s doing, okay?”

“I promise.” Hayley raised a hand in farewell, watching him go.
Hope woke up right before Hayley returned to the room. She heard Elena’s intake of breath, her, “Hi there, Hope,” before she was running full-tilt to make it to Hope before she’d even blinked.

“Hope.” Tears filled Hayley’s eyes. She let them fall.

“Mom?” Hope’s voice was small and hoarse, and she tried to sit up a little to get closer to Hayley.

Before Elena could intervene, Hayley had flashed across the room and put a hand on her daughter’s stomach, gently coaxing her to lie down again. “It’s all right, sweetie. Just relax. I’m right here.”

Matching tears welled up in Hope’s eyes too. “Mommy, I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, honey,” Hayley gushed, running her hands through Hope’s hair. “It’s okay. I’m not mad.”

“Really?”

“No.” Hayley laughed through her tears. “I was just so worried.”

“I’m sorry I scared you.” Hope sniffed. “I just wanted to see him.”

“I know, sweetie.” Hayley pulled Hope’s face into her chest. “I miss him too.”

#

When Hayley called Marcel to tell him what had happened, he was furious. But not in the screaming, Klaus-like way; it was contained in the space between his words, the tension with which he spoke. That his sister had been in jeopardy and he hadn’t known about it … that hurt, Hayley could tell.

Perhaps she hadn’t thought this entirely through.

“Would you mind FaceTiming us throughout the day?” Hayley asked. “She’s getting discharged and I just … I need her to feel connected.”

“Of course we can.” Even that response sounded annoyed, like it was a stupid question.

“Look, Marcel,” Hayley began, scuffing her bare foot against the pavement. Hope was inside with Elena and one of the other nurses, leaving Hayley free to sit at a picnic table in the park across the street. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I really am. I just didn’t want to worry anyone or ruin anything, and the moment Davina and Kol knew about this the wedding would be over.”

“I’m not Davina or Kol.”

“I know that, but I didn’t want you to have to lie to Davina either.”

“Yeah, well, I’m going to have to tell her the truth before I leave.”

“Leave? You can’t come here.”

“Hope almost killed herself trying to see Klaus. Believe me, I know how she’s feeling. You have to let me help.”
“And you will,” Hayley assured him. “But today can’t be about your sister. Not entirely. Today’s about Davina.”

“I can hold more than one thing in my head.”

“But you can’t be in more than one place at once. You’re the closest thing to a father she has. Don’t you dare make her walk down that aisle alone. Not after everything.”

The line went quiet. “Fuck,” Marcel cursed under his breath. “You’re annoying when you’re right.”

“Then how can you stand to be around me if I’m so annoying all the time?”

Marcel chuckled. “Cool it. You’re not right that often,” he replied. “Look, I gotta head out. Bring the dress to the church for Davina.”

“She still getting ready up in the attic?”

“Apparently it’s symbolic or something. It’s dumb because she’ll have to sneak back around to the front of the church through a service exit, but whatever. She likes the poetry of it all.”

“It’s gross up there. Does everyone have their tetanus up-to-date?”

“I made sure Davina does. Everyone else is responsible for themselves.”

“I think Davina’s responsible for herself, too.”

“Yeah, well. She’s my kid.”

Hayley couldn’t help but smile. “Yeah, she really is.”

#

March 2nd, 2023

Dear Klaus,

I haven’t sent a letter in a while. Rebekah couldn’t figure out where you were, but once I told her it was somewhere in Amsterdam she managed to identify some of your old patterns and find the hotel you’re holed up in.

How did I know you’re in Amsterdam, you may ask? Because your kid almost died trying to astral project there. I don’t know what kind of block you have in place, but you need a different one. Valerie Tulle, the witch who found our child unconscious, has enclosed one that should suffice.

If you have any other defensive protection spells in place, reassess them immediately. Caroline Forbes is ready to swim across an ocean to come after you if this happens again, and I’ll be right behind her.
I missed Kol and Davina’s wedding, being in Mystic Falls. We FaceTimed with Marcel for most of it, and Hope tried to keep a stiff upper lip. She was okay once the party was underway and she and I holed up in a motel room to drink soda and eat cake of our own. It was touch and go for a while before that. Watching Marcel and Davina have the father-daughter dance made her cry for an hour after.

When our daughter gets married, will you send your regrets? Will you even get the invitation? I know you can’t be near her, but will you call in? Will you try to meet the person she’s spending her life with? Or will I have to manage the entire day, wondering the whole time if I’m ruining her with my parenting?

You should be here ruining this with me. I don’t know how to stop being angry with you for what you’ve done, for just deciding to cut yourself out of our lives like this.

It didn’t have to be this way.

#

There was no sign-off. No name. The script became loose at the end, shaking as though even her hand was angry with him. The paper was folded haphazardly, all crooked from the way it had been stuffed into the envelope.

He remembered Amsterdam. He’d been so high for a week straight he’d eaten his way through an entire volleyball team. Once, while jumped from rooftop to rooftop in pursuit of the coach, he’d felt something. An intrusion, a pricking at the back of his neck.

At the time, Klaus had shrugged it away.

That had been Hope, holding on to him, trying to break through.

He’d never changed the spell to the one Hayley asked him to. He wondered if Hope had tried to project again.

Dropping the letter, Klaus bent over Hope’s bed to rest his forehead against her arm. “I’m sorry,” he said, voice muffled by the duvet against his mouth. Resurfacing, he said, “I’m so sorry. If you come back, if you make it through this, I’ll spend forever making it up to you. Understand? I’ll never stop. We’ll never be apart, and I’ll never stop apologizing for what I’ve done. Just please, please come back to me.”

She didn’t move.
May 13th, 2026

The next letter was dated months later.

The envelope was lavender, the faded stamp one from the Winter Olympics in 2022 despite the date being months later. The address was written in blue ballpoint pen that had faded out by the end, the ink running dry despite the writer pressing hard enough to all but carve the address into the paper.

The gap between this letter and the last was longer than any of them had been.

Pushing thoughts of Hayley awaiting Klaus’ response for all that time—praying he’d reverse the blocking spell that had hurt Hope—Klaus steeled himself and read on.

#

May 22nd, 2023

Hayley grunted, looking down to check that she was still balancing all right on the ladder. She’d survive if it gave way, but she didn’t want to wreck the banner in her hands on her way down.

“Did you stick it?” she asked Keelin, who was up on the other side, dangling over the stairs to tie the banner in place. They’d chosen pole position for it, hoping it would attract the eye upon entry, but it was proving a pain in the ass to install.

“Yes, I think it’s good. Your side?”

Hayley released the banner, watching it fall and catch its own weight on the ribbons tied to a nail in
the ceiling on the lower floor of the courtyard. Sighing with relief, she jumped down from the ladder to take it in.

HAPPY 11TH BIRTHDAY, HOPE!

“You know I could’ve just used magic for that,” Freya said, appearing from the kitchen with a platter of sandwiches in her hands.

“You couldn’t have said that before we almost broke our necks?” Keelin jested.

Hayley eyed the sandwiches. “You know we’re getting catering from Rousseau’s, right?”

“I know. These are for us. Turkey?” Freya offered the platter to them both.

Keelin grabbed one and bit into it, making a face of rapture. “Ugh, thanks babe.” She kissed Freya’s cheek.

“Gross,” said Hayley. “Get a room.”

“Who’s getting a room?” asked Davina, wandering in with her arms piled high with gifts.

“Freya and I, if we had time,” Keelin responded, grinning into her sandwich.

Davina rolled her eyes and turned to Hayley. “Where do you want these?”

“Are they all from you and Kol?” Hayley asked, eyes bugging out a bit.

“He went a bit overboard.”

“You don’t say. Gifts are on the table over there.”

“We’re here!” Josh announced, breezing in with a cakebox balanced in his hands. Vincent walked in behind him, twirling the car keys around his fingers.

“Welcome to the party,” Hayley greeted. “Thanks for picking up the cake.”

“No problem,” he replied, easing the box into her arms. “If there’s a piece missing, it was Vince. Ooh, sandwiches!” He darted away after Freya, who still held the platter in her hands.

Hayley made a show of eyeballing Vincent as she opened the box, finding the cherry-red iced cake intact. Even the little edible flowers were untouched, the sugar-glazed pearls still ringing the outside perfectly.

“Do you need any help setting up?” Vincent offered, ever the practical one.

“I think we’re all good, actually. But thank you.” Hayley headed past him to put the cake in the fridge. The kitchen was mostly sparkling clean, ready to receive the food Declan was bringing over in two hours. The bread packet was left open from the sandwiches Freya had made, so Hayley twisted it shut and shoved it back in the bread bin, wiping the crumbs from the bench.

It was going to be a good party. She was sure of it.
Lisina arrived with Henry in tow just in time for them all to huddle down and turn out the lights. They laid in wait behind the massive, banquet tables Vincent had borrowed from the church for them, voices hushed as they talked. Josh and Keelin gossiped about his new girlfriend and their Mardi Gras plans, Vincent and Freya discussed a spell they were working on, Henry asked Lisina a thousand anxious questions to which she provided a thousand calming responses.

Finally, Hayley heard a car pull up out front. “Shh!” she said, warning the others.

Silence fell over them.

A key scraped in the lock on the front gate, the metal groaning as Marcel pushed it open. “Here, give me your bags,” Hayley heard him say.

“Why are all the lights off?” Hope asked as she wandered forwards, peering into the half-darkness of the room.

Hayley waited until the others looked at her to raise three of her fingers and tick them off one-by-one.

*Three …*

*Two …*

*One.*

“Surprise!” they all yelled, springing up. The candles shot to life, courtesy of Freya, lighting Hope’s shocked face in a warm amber glow.

Slowly, her smile spread. She clapped her hands over her mouth, tears springing up as she looked around at everyone there. Marcel put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it as she took a moment to process.

“Mom,” she said, wet eyes blinking. “Is this all for me?”

Hayley rushed forward to grab her daughter, lifting her up and spinning her. When she put her down, the smile beaming up at her was breathtaking. “Happy birthday, sweetheart.”

Hope burrowed her face into Hayley’s stomach to hide her red cheeks from the cheering. “Thanks, mom.”

#

The party really kicked off after that. Josh and Marcel bickered over the playlist, Davina and Vincent ran the drinks station (concocting a variety of mixed sodas and non-alcoholic punches that had Hope and Henry bouncing off the walls), Rebekah and Kol conferenced in from their respective ends of the world, and Freya and Keelin started in on the dance floor.

Hayley found herself in the corner with Lisina, watching Hayley and Henry spin around on the dance floor.
“He looks happy,” she told Lisina.

“So does she.”

They shared a look, the kind that said they both understood how important this was.

“I’ve been thinking,” Lisina began, shifting a little closer to Hayley. “Henry’s not doing so well at school. The kids there aren’t great, and the parents still gawk at him. His teacher called him an orphan to his face.”

Hayley screwed up her nose. “Tell Marcel. He’ll take care of it.”

“No, I know he would, but … I don’t want to teach Henry that compulsion or—or violence is the answer.”

“So what are you going to do?” Hayley asked. “You guys don’t live in a zone for a better public school, and the private ones will just be worse.”

“Well, that’s kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. Do you know if there are any vacancies at Salvatore’s?”

“I…” Hayley blinked a bit, taken aback. None of the wolf-kids around here travelled interstate for school, so she hadn’t thought it was an option. “I’m sure there are, and they’re really great with the wolf students they do have. Are you sure he needs to be away from the pack?”

“It’s not ideal, but we can hardly move the whole pack to Virginia.”

“I’ve considered trying it, once or twice. Just to be closer to her.” Hayley watched Hope jump up into Keelin’s arms, streamers in hand. Apparently, she wanted them woven into her hair. “But the others would never go for it. They’re bayou, born and bred.”

“So will you ask Caroline Salvatore?”

“I can contact her for you if you want, but you can call her directly if you’d prefer. I can give you her number.”

Lisina quirked a brow. “It’s summer break.”

“She’s always got her work phone on, trust me. And she gives most parents her personal number anyway, especially the ones that don’t live in the area.”

“That’d be great.” Lisina tried to smile, but it came off a bit crooked. “I’ll be honest, I’m not psyched about leaving him there. I know he’ll have Hope, but still.”

“If your instinct is telling you it’s for the best, then that’s for the best. I’m sure he’ll be fine there.”

Lisina breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

Hayley squeezed Lisina’s hand. “Don’t mention it.”
The party wound down at about 8pm. Declan had arrived four hours previously to provide dinner, working out of the kitchen with two other workers for most of it.

By the time people started leaving, the cake had been demolished, dinner consumed, and one hell of a clean-up was required. Hope was riding her new scooter upstairs under Marcel’s supervision while Hayley cleared the wreckage left of all the wrapping paper and bags her gifts had arrived in. She shoved them into a black trash bag and tied it shut, dragging it into the kitchen to put it with the rest of the trash to be taken out to the dumpster.

“Hey, there,” Declan greeted. He was alone in the kitchen, having dismissed his workers long ago.

“Hi,” Hayley replied, trying to shove her hands in her pockets. But Freya had talked her into a dress, so instead she smoothed her hands over her hips and tried to make the action look natural.

“I’m just finishing up here and I’ll be out of your hair.” Declan turned back to his clean-up, stacking empty, clean metal containers that had held food and loading them onto a trolley.

“You can stay and eat some leftovers if you want,” Hayley offered. There—an olive branch.

“I’d best be getting home. Got a shift at Rousseau’s in the morning, and I have a feeling they’re getting terse about my catering business impacting my performance there.”

The temperature of Hayley’s blood rose a fraction. “You can do whatever you want with your spare time. If they want you working, they should give you more shifts.”

“Thanks for the ire, but I’ve got it handled.” He loaded the last of the trays onto the trolley and surveyed the kitchen. “I think that’s the last of it.”

“You can always come back,” Hayley said. Wincing at how desperate she sounded, she backtracked. “To pick up anything you’ve left behind.”

Declan nodded, not meeting her gaze. “Right. Well, I’ll be seeing you when I see you.”

Hayley raised a hand he didn’t see and waved it as he left.

“Well, that was awkward.”

Hayley jumped a little at the sound of Josh’s voice, then smacked his arm. “Don’t sneak up on me, asshole.”

He just grinned, tucking an arm around her waist. “You love me.”

“I thought you left with Vincent.”

“Nah, he had to get home before his bedtime like an old man, but I’m going out clubbing after this.” Josh smirked. “Why, did you want me to be gone so I couldn’t hear your very suave exchange with Chef Sexy?”

“Don’t mock.”

“I’m not! Well, I’m not trying to.”

Hayley extricated herself from his grip and picked up two trash bags. “If you want to gossip, help me get these out to the dumpster.”

Josh picked up two more bags easily and followed Hayley out through the back door into the alley.
“So things are still awkward between you two?”

“We’re fine,” Hayley bit back, tossing her trash backs into the dumpster.

Josh did the same, then folded his arms over his chest. “He told me your coffee date didn’t go well.”

“It was fine. Everything’s fine.” Hayley turned to head back inside, but Josh grabbed her arm. Not strong enough to hurt, but enough to show her he wasn’t mucking around. She could’ve broken the grip, but instead she stared him down until he dropped it.

“Whatever happened,” he began, “I’m here to talk about it. Elijah might not have been my favourite guy, but he meant a lot to you. Moving on must be hard.”

“It’s not just that.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s …” Hayley wandered back three steps to let her back rest against the brick wall. “I haven’t been with a human in a long time. I don’t like starting a relationship with a lie.”

“You realise that unless you’re going to date someone you already know, you’ll have to be creative with the truth in some capacity. The only people in this city you don’t have to lie to are your friends.”

“I realise that. So I think it might just be easier to … not.”

“Not date? Not enjoy your life at all?”

“I enjoy my life without it. This is fine! I wasn’t dating anyone tonight, and I still had a great time with all of you.”

“You hovered around the kitchen while he was there. It was painfully obvious that you wanted to go in there. Were you really that present tonight?”

“It’s my kid’s birthday. Of course I was.”

Josh raised his hands innocently. “Look, I don’t wanna fight with you. I just think you’re asking too much of yourself. And I think this whole issue with lying to humans isn’t as big of a deal as you’re letting yourself believe. You know it’s bullshit, deep down. That’s why you mentioned it to me and not Freya.”

Hayley winced. If Freya thought Hayley needed a push, she’d toss her out the window. “Can we keep this between us while I figure it out, then?”

“Of course we can.” Josh stepped forward and cupped her shoulder with his palm. “But promise you’ll tell me if there’s anything I can do?”

Hayley covered his hand with her own. “I promise.”

Hope went to bed at almost midnight. The sugar high wore off and she crashed there, still in the little gold dress Rebekah had sent for her. Hayley changed her without waking her, slipping her into her
pyjamas and sliding her under the covers like a spatula under a pancake.

Freya and Keelin were already in bed. Hayley could hear Davina and Marcel talking downstairs, tossing leftover candy into each other’s mouths and laughing. She should join them, she knew. Maybe it would help take her mind off of things.

But there were some things she couldn’t ignore. Writing to Klaus again was one of them.

# 22nd May, 2023

Dear Klaus,

Hope turned 11 earlier this month. I went to MF to celebrate it with her then, but we kept her party until she got home from school. Everyone came by to help me set it up so she’d be surprised when Marcel brought her back from school.

She was shocked at first, but she really loved it. She accepted her gifts more graciously than last year, which I’m taking as a sign of age and maturity. I know she noticed there wasn’t one from you. She didn’t mention it to me, but I could tell she’d realised.

She’s sleeping now, and I’ll confess to watching her. I’ve been doing that whenever I can, ever since she had that incident with the astral projection spell. I know she’s doing fine, but I feel like she’s slipping away from me anyway.

I went on a coffee date with someone a couple months ago. He’s a great guy and everyone loves him, but I just got there and it was like I froze. I barely spoke, didn’t even respond to most of his questions, and in the end I lied about having some emergency he knew was bullshit. I’ve been trying to rationalise my response to myself, to make it about anything but Elijah, but I’m scared that I can’t.

I could really use someone to talk to who understands. Maybe Rebekah would, but I don’t want to bother her. I know how happy she is and I’m scared that telling her anything’s wrong here will just make her miserable.

It would be a miracle if you’d respond and help me here.

Miss you,

Hayley

#
Klaus folded the letter up neatly, slipping it back into its envelope and putting it with the pile of read letters.

The man she’d been on a coffee date with must have been Declan. She mentioned the others liking him, and he was the only one any of them had mentioned. That Hayley had been dodging the man’s affections for four years …

She hadn’t just been missing Klaus. She’d been missing Elijah, too. He had known it intellectually, but seeing it written in ink was different. If he had responded, he might have helped her …

It was too late now.

Klaus read on.
the great thing about this story is that there are basically no cliffhangers and i don't panic about writing intense chapters really quickly and can instead write 4k of pistachio-eating, pack-bonding, almost-dating idiots who love each other. enjoy what good feelings i have eked out of the final season for our entertainment

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER NINE · back to school

May 13th, 2026

The ninth letter was written on thick paper that Klaus recognised as coming from one of his sketchbooks. The edge of the paper was black with charcoal that had rubbed onto it, and even after all this time there was an imprint along one side where Klaus had pressed too hard drawing on the pages above it. There was a sketch of a six-month-old Hope upstairs that would slot into this page perfectly.

Tracing the invisible line of her cheek, Klaus read on.

#

August 15th, 2023

Hayley dug her thumbnail into the crack, prising the shell open to get at the pistachio inside. She tipped it into her waiting mouth, feeling it skate over her pruning tongue, rough with all the salt she’d eaten already.

“I’m so thirsty I might actually just shrivel up,” moaned Lisina, grasping at the virgin margarita pitcher to pour herself another. “Want some?”

Hayley nodded, tossing the two empty halves of shell into the bucket that was already full of them. “God, yeah.” She accepted the glass from Lisina and gulped it down. “That is … terrible, actually.”
“It’s from a mix I bought at the store. Figured I wouldn’t feel like doing anything from scratch today.” Lisina sipped at her own glass and leaned back against the sofa.

Hayley considered Lisina carefully. “You look like maybe you need a non-virgin margarita.”

“A slutty margarita? Probably, but I want to stay sober for now. Just in case Henry needs anything.”

Henry was a thousand miles away at the Salvatore Boarding School, but still. Those first few days were nerve-wracking for parents, especially new ones. Hayley didn’t much feel like getting wasted either.

“Let’s try to overdose on pistachios instead,” she said, picking up another. She tried leveraging it open with her teeth so she wouldn’t have to put her drink down, but it didn’t exactly go as planned. The shell splintered but refused to crack, almost cutting her lip.

“Use your fangs,” Lisina suggested.

“Ugh, genius.” Hayley dropped her fangs and turned the nut in her fingers, slicing through the shell and dropping the inside into her mouth. Some shell came with it, but she picked it out easily. “Hang on,” she said, putting her glass down. “I think I can do this better.”

That was how Josh found them when he arrived: Lisina timing Hayley on her phone to see how many pistachios she could crack and eat with her fangs in sixty seconds.

“Forty-three!” Lisina announced as the timer went off on her phone. “A record.”

Hayley finished chewing everything in her mouth and swigged it down with the remaining margarita, then stood and took a bow.

“You know, I came over here to cheer you two up,” Josh said, shutting the front door behind him.

“We’re way ahead of you,” said Hayley. “But feel free to catch up.” She shoved the bowl of pistachios toward him.

Josh’s left eyebrow hit his hairline as he shrugged off his leather jacket and thumped down on the sofa beside Lisina. “How many of these did you buy?”

“A ten-pound bag,” Lisina replied. “We wanted to see if it was possible to overdose on them.”

“You’d probably puke it all up before you got enough salt to do short-term damage, but if you want to eat salted pistachios for the rest of your lives then make sure you have your affairs in order.”

“Immortal!” Hayley exclaimed.

“Whatever.” Josh picked up the now empty pitcher and sniffed at it. “Is this … virgin?”

“We have to be alert for the kids,” Lisina defended.

“No,” Josh said slowly. “You have to commelebrate.”
“Um, what?”

“It’s like commiserating and celebrating. You commiserate because you don’t have your kids around, but you celebrate because you don’t have your kids around. Commelabrate.”

Hayley screwed up her face. “That’s a made-up word.”

“All words are. So are we doing this or not?”

“Doing what?” Lisina asked, tone a little whiny. “I’ve eaten too many pistachios and I don’t think I can move.”

“I’ll carry you. The bumps on the road on the way out will probably make you puke it all up, and then you’ll be ready to party.”

“If the bumps in the road don’t do it, his driving will,” Hayley contributed, receiving a glare from Josh in return.

“Why do we have to party?” asked Lisina. “Is it not enough to just be sad and eat pistachios?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.” Josh shot Hayley a conspiratorial smirk before sweeping Lisina up in his arms. “Let’s go.”

“I’m wearing sweatpants!”

“Then get dressed into something else.”

Lisina groaned. “I don’t want to pick anything.”

“Well, don’t ask me to do it. I know nothing about women’s fashion.”

“Oh, come on, Josh,” Hayley drawled sarcastically. “*Queer Eye* us!”

“In order to help you get your lives together, I’d need to have mine together too. And since I ate bench pizza for breakfast on the way here, I’d say I don’t.”

Lisina, who’d been letting her head loll back a bit, looked up at Josh. “What the fuck is a bench pizza?”

“Pizza that’s been on the bench,” Josh replied, as though it were obvious.

“Like, all night? Oh, god, I’m gonna be sick.”

Josh jostled Lisina up and down. “Shouldn’t have eaten so many pistachios then.”

“Fuck off.”

Josh shot Hayley a grin as he scooped up as pair of Lisina’s shoes from the rack by the door and manoeuvred her outside. The sound of Lisina’s shrieking laughter and half-hearted protests made Hayley smile. She grabbed all the dirty dishes and set them in the dishwasher, starting it up, and vamp-sped while cleaning up all the pistachio shells so Lisina wouldn’t come home to a dirty living room.

By the time Hayley joined Josh and Lisina out at the car, Lisina was in the front seat where Josh leaned over her.
“I don’t need you to do my seatbelt, asshole,” she said, smacking his hands away.

“Just trying to be helpful,” Josh said, retreating to outside the car and raising his hands over his head.

Lisina bit back her own smile as she clicked her seatbelt in place, then shut the door beside her.

“Sorry,” Josh told Hayley as he scooted over the bonnet of the car to get to the driver’s side. “You’re in the back.”

“Fine by me.” Hayley shared a secret smile with him, mouthed a quick ‘thank you’ and ducked into her seat.

When someone needed cheering up, calling Josh in for backup was always a good idea.

#

They avoided Rousseau’s, ending up at some hipster diner a few streets away instead. Lisina and Hayley were still in daggy house clothes, but the food was surprisingly good enough to make them forget all about it.

Josh put a dozen quarters in the jukebox, playing shrill 90s hits for them to sing along to in one of the back booths. When Josh suggested sharing a milkshake, Hayley socked him in the arm, but Lisina was game to share—or, as it turned out, she was game to drink it all down while Josh was in the bathroom and make him pay for it.

For a night with no booze, Hayley felt pretty delirious by the time the diner closed down. Josh stole one of Lisina’s shoes, so she chased him through crowds of dancing people, through the closed markets, right down Bourbon Street and back before he took pity on her and gave it back.

Josh took Hayley’s purse, and the game started all over again.

After an hour or so, Lisina and Josh decided to take their games to the bayou where they could run as fast as they wanted without human eyes to spy on them. They invited Hayley, of course, but she declined; as she did, Lisina slipped the car keys from Josh’s pocket and made a run for the car, ending up in the coveted driver’s seat while he bitched about riding shotgun.

Hayley’s smile lasted about as long as she could hear Lisina laughing.

She ended up in some back street somewhere, sucking cool night air down her throat like it was pulls of beer from a bottle neck. Checking her phone for messages from Hope or Caroline, she found only a picture from Kol—one of Davina, wrapped tight in blankets, mid-laugh with tears shining in her eyes. The caption read Ethics of wrapping your wife up in blankets so tight she can’t escape? Asking for a friend.

Rolling her eyes, Hayley replied, Something tells me she can get you back even worse, so I’m gonna say go ahead.

Sure enough, the next picture sixty seconds later was Davina, blurred and headed toward the camera with shredded blankets lying on the bed behind her. Hayley laughed aloud.

“Well, that’s not the worst sound in the world.”
Hayley’s gaze snapped up from her phone to find Declan standing just in front of her, hands in his pockets while his eyes creased at the corners.

“Hi,” Hayley said, pressing her phone against her stomach just to give her hands something to do. “It’s nice to see you.”

“Likewise.” Declan scuffed the ground with his shoe—a leather sneaker, not entirely flattering, but functional for a cook that was on his feet all day. “How’s—uh, how’s Hope?”

“She’s good. Just went back to school a couple days ago.”

“And how’re you managing with that?”

“I’ve been okay. I stayed near the school for a couple days; just got back here last night.”

“And she’s been well? Physically, I mean.”

Right. Hope had “collapsed” at school that one time. Declan wasn’t supposed to know the reason, the spell, so he’d been told something about low blood sugar and the flu. “Everything’s been great. She’s a pretty active kid.” It was true. Hope was a wolf, and that meant she did not like being cooped up.

“That’s good to hear.” Declan sounded genuine, and his smile looked it, too. “Look, Hayley, I’ll confess I’ve been … wanting to talk to you. You haven’t been by the bar lately, so it hasn’t come about naturally, but when I saw you back here I thought maybe we could chat.”

“Chat?” The word felt small to Hayley. “Okay, go ahead.”

“I … Look, I know our date was abysmal. I can’t quite fathom why, since it’s so easy to talk to you like this, but once we sat down at that table it felt like everything I said was wrong. I’m sorry about it, really, I am.”

Hayley’s heart twanged in her chest. “You don’t have to apologise. I was being sensitive. Which is rare for me, so I don’t quite know how to manage it yet.” She barely remembered the date, just that Declan mentioned her being a single mother and she’d lost it. She wasn’t a single mother, in her mind. Klaus wasn’t dead, he was just … not here. “It was completely my fault, and I’m sorry.”

“Sorry enough to try it again?”

Hayley inhaled, hissing cold air between her teeth. “Declan, I … I’m not sure that’s such a good idea. I like you, but I think I might not be ready for this.”

Declan winced. “A bad break-up?”

“Something like that.”

Nodding, Declan said, “Well, whoever he was, he was an idiot.”

Hayley chuckled. “I usually agree, but he … has his moments.” She didn’t know which Mikaelson brother she was talking about. It was true of both, so whatever.

“Would you like me to walk you home?” Declan asked. “Only if you’re comfortable. I don’t mean to be—forward. You’ve said no and I respect it.”

Hayley almost wanted to smile at the way he fell over himself to reassure her. She guessed it was appropriate with human women alone with men in the middle of the night, but there was only one
way this man could hurt her and it was most certainly not physical.

“I’d like that, actually,” she said, receiving a grin in exchange. She took the arm he offered and let him lead her down the alley, toward the sound of music.

#

22nd August, 2023

Hayley pulled up in the alley behind the compound, wincing when she turned off the car’s A/C. It was sweltering outside still, despite being early evening in August, and she wasn’t looking forward to the dash inside, especially since the compound was empty and the A/C had been off all day.

Sucking it up, Hayley ducked out of the car and made a dash for inside, not letting herself quite get faster than human speed. She threw open the front gate and the door they’d installed inside, locking them both behind her.

Just about to strip and dash for a cold shower, Hayley stopped short when she heard a heartbeat. Not so alone after all.

Freya was out having dinner with Vincent to discuss witch stuff, which only left one possible candidate: Keelin.

Hayley kicked her shoes off by the door, surprised to find Keelin’s leather skaters missing. She was supposed to be on her shift until 9pm that night, but she was home and her work shoes weren’t in the same place she always put them. A small discrepancy, but Keelin was an organised enough person that it gave Hayley pause.

The breaths that accompanied the heartbeat where heavy and wet, punctuated by sniffs. The air smelled like salt. Was she crying?

Hayley dropped her bag and her coat on the floor and headed up the stairs, making quick work of the space between her and Keelin’s room. The door was shut, so she knocked lightly. Receiving no reply, she opened it slowly.

Keelin was stretched out across the bed, facing away from Hayley. She still wore her scrubs and shoes, her hair loose over the pillow. Nothing about her acknowledged Hayley’s presence, but she didn’t tell her to leave, either.

“What’s wrong?” Hayley asked. She kicked off her shoes and climbed onto the bed behind Keelin, resting one hand on her shoulder. When she didn’t shake it off, Hayley leaned over to get a better look at her. “Hey, hey. What’s going on?”

Keelin shook her head. “’S nothing.”

“Did someone do something?” Hayley asked. It couldn’t have been physically violent—Keelin smelled like blood, but it wasn’t hers. She didn’t usually wear her scrubs outside the hospital, but when she did they always smelled like blood from surgery.
“Bad shift,” was all Keelin said.

It was easy to forget sometimes that Keelin spent her day dealing with crisis after crisis. She was so collected (and exhausted) by the time she got home, and she hardly even mentioned her job. If she did talk about her day, it was gossiping about her colleagues or bitching about the coffee cart outside the hospital. She never talked about stuff like this.

“Can I do anything to help? I can call Freya, maybe?”

Keelin shook her head. “She’s busy.”

“Something tells me she’d clear her schedule for this.” Hayley pulled her phone out of her pocket and texted Freya, her finger blurring over the screen as she typed with preternatural speed.

Pivoting to face Keelin, Hayley opened her arms up a little as an invitation. Keelin took it with mild reluctance, rolling toward her and laying her head on Hayley’s shoulder. “It was a shooting,” Keelin said, voice low. “A kid got someone’s gun, thought it was a game and shot at the swing-set in the backyard. The shrapnel from the frame—” She winced. “He was still talking when he got there, asking for his mom. By the time she got there, he was gone.”

Well, fuck. “I’m sure you did everything you could.”

“He didn’t even make it into the operating room. I couldn’t even give him a chance.”

Hayley tightened her grip on Keelin’s shoulders. “You’re the best doctor he could’ve had. Your senses, your abilities, your compassion—no one could’ve taken care of him better than you. If you couldn’t give him a chance it’s because there wasn’t one.”

“You should’ve seen the look on the mother’s face when I told her.”

It probably looked a little something like Hayley’s face when she realised Genevieve was taking her daughter for a sacrifice and there was nothing she could do to stop her. “And I thought our world was dangerous for kids.”

Keelin laughed humourlessly. “Yeah, the humans don’t fare much better.”

“You should shower, or something,” Hayley suggested, pulling back to get a better look at Keelin’s splotchy, tear-stained face. “You’ll feel much better when you’ve washed today off of you.”

“Probably,” Keelin agreed. “But I might just want to wallow in it for a while.”

Hayley smiled limply and rubbed Keelin’s shoulder. “Sounds perfectly reasonable to me.”

#

Things were better once Freya got home. Keelin was in the shower, so Freya joined her and they spoke in low voices, all Freya’s careful questions and Keelin’s short answers. Hayley changed the sheets to clean, warm ones for Keelin and Freya to crawl into, plugged Keelin’s phone in to charge (she always, always forgot), and made herself scarce.
Still sticky from the bayou, Hayley walked through the streets on dusk. She watched the streetlamps glow into life, the beginnings of rain speckling the pavement beneath them. The older man on the corner packed up his saxophone and gathered up the pennies from his hat, already on the phone to his wife about picking up dinner on the way home. She wanted Chinese, “with the little spring rolls, not the big ones, Jerry, for the love of god.”

Since she wasn’t supposed to be able to hear the other side of the conversation, Hayley hid her smile in her collar when he passed her. It reminded her of her pregnancy, when she was confined to the compound but she could practically order Klaus and Elijah to fetch her whatever she wanted. It had been her primary source of entertainment, calling up Klaus and demanding her get her ridiculously specific combinations, like shaved ham from the deli and green curry from the Thai place and some Ben & Jerry’s cookie dough ice cream from the grocery store.

He’d never complained before.

Smiling playing on her lips, Hayley retrieved her phone and made a call.

“I can’t say I was expecting this.”

Hayley looked up from the news app she’d been scrolling on her phone. Declan stood before her, arms piled high with take-out containers. He set them down on the picnic table before her, right alongside the beers she’d brought.

“Neither was I,” she replied. “I’m just glad you weren’t working.”

Declan hesitated, then sat across from her.

“What?” she prompted.

“I may have … called in sick when you called me.”

Hayley’s jaw dropped. “That’s very irresponsible. I can’t believe I’m encouraging this behaviour.”

“You’re a terrible influence,” Declan agreed. He unstacked the containers and opened some of them up. “Now, I may have realised an issue while I was on the way here.”

“What is that?”

“We have exactly six dishes to eat, and no plates.”

“We can just eat from the containers,” Hayley said, grabbing one of the pairs of chopsticks and tearing the paper sleeve away from it. “If you don’t mind swapping spit. I promise I’m not sick.”

“Don’t mind in the slightest.” He smirked. “Whatever happened to ‘I’m not ready for this’, may I ask?”
Hayley dropped her chopsticks into the container in front of her and reached for a beer can. She’d bought them straight out of the fridge at the liquor store, so it was still cold when she touched it. “It’s still true. But dinner in a park is a friend-thing, right? We’re all out in the open and everything.” She slid a beer to Declan and took one for herself, then started in on her meal.

“I suppose,” Declan hedged. He watched her guzzle beer and food like she didn’t even need to swallow for it to go down. “You look like you’ve had a day and a half.”

“When haven’t I?” Hayley quipped. It didn’t garner the reaction she’d thought—Declan just stared at her patiently, waiting for her to elaborate. “I was out in the bayou with some friends for most of it. After that, I got home and my kind-of-sister-in-law wasn’t in the best way.”

“Freya or Keelin? Or is Davina in town?”

Hayley had forgotten he’d met them all at Hope’s party. “Keelin. She had a rough shift at the hospital.”

“A trauma surgeon, right?”

“Yes. She’s great at it, but it can sometimes be a bit overwhelming. Today was hard.”

“Did she work on that shooting out in the Ninth Ward?”

“Which one?”

“Some kid got his dad’s gun. I live a few streets away, and there were emergency vehicles everywhere.”

“Uh, yeah, it might have been. She wasn’t forthcoming with details. I just know it wasn’t the happy ending she prefers.”

“Not easy,” Declan said. “Working like that. Giving so much of yourself to the possibility that someone can pull through.”

“It’s fulfilling, I think. I don’t know that I’d recommend it for anyone I cared about, but she was already done with her residency before we even met. It’s all she’s ever wanted to do.” Hayley knew a little something about a calling like that. Now that she had her pack, she knew everything she’d been working towards her whole life was about that. Of course, Keelin wasn’t quite so pack-minded, given her family’s history.

Shrugging off her darker thoughts, Hayley said, “Oh, well. The heart wants what it wants.”

“Yes,” Declan agreed. “I suppose it does.”

Hayley didn’t see Declan text anyone while they were together, so it must’ve been while she was in the bathroom. However he managed it, by the time he walked her back down St. Louis there was a waiter standing outside Rousseau’s with a package for him.

“You ordered the gumbo?” the waiter asked.
“I did. Thanks, Ted.” Declan took the pile of takeaway containers. “And if anyone asks—”

“You’re sick at home with a stomach bug,” Ted finished for him. “Got it.” He disappeared inside.

Hayley laughed. “You can’t still be hungry.”

“I’m not.” Declan passed the food to Hayley, easing it into her arms carefully. “It’s Keelin’s favourite. She orders it every time she comes in.”

Hayley froze for a moment, stunned. “You ordered this for Keelin?”

“After the day she’s had, she deserves it.” Declan clapped Hayley on the back. “Come on. Let’s get you home before the food is cold.”

#

Declan graciously declined Hayley’s offer to come in and deliver the food to Keelin personally. Hayley set the food down briefly to shake his hand (perhaps the most platonic of physical exchanges) and bid him farewell.

She watched him go for far longer than was necessary.

#

22nd August, 2018

Dear Klaus,

I’ve been thinking a lot about moving on lately.

It’s a loaded term that I find hard to address when I’ve been in one place for so long. Before Hope, I’d been on the move for my entire adult life, and most of my young adult life, too. Moving on meant leaving when things got hard and finding somewhere else to coast for a little while.

Lately, I feel itchy. Like, the I-need-to-move -now kind of itchy. And I don’t understand it, because I’m happy here. This is Hope’s home, my home—I have friends and family around me. I have a pack. I’ve been sleeping in the same place for almost five years now, and have done for years before that. I should be settled.

Maybe it’s because Hope’s at school. It’s usually not this bad when she goes, but everything feels different this time. I don’t really know why.

Wish you were here to piss me off and snap me out of this funk,
Klaus didn’t know what had been going on for Hayley at the time. She seemed to have pulled things together—she didn’t bolt with their daughter in tow, for one thing. She’d put down roots Klaus could never have dreamed of putting down himself, and her absence was felt across the entire city now she was gone.

She’d been okay, he told himself. She’d been fine.

But he still should have been there.

Chapter End Notes

i’m not making promises, but if you like review then it might not be 12 years of waiting in azkaban before i update. validation is a hell of a drug (and so are flu meds, so see you next time once i’ve woken from hibernation!!). love you all xx
May 13th, 2026

Had he not had preternatural senses, Klaus may have described the tenth letter as bloody. There was a slash of red over the top corner, just near the date, but it smelled of old berries and sugar instead of the rich violence of old blood. That, coupled with the date just by it—November 23rd, 2023—had Klaus concluding its identity to be cranberry sauce. Probably from a bottle or can, given that Hayley, Freya, and Keelin were all hopeless in the kitchen.

He wished he could've seen the Thanksgiving dinner they cobbled together. The only Thanksgiving he’d really sat down at with Hayley and Hope was when the former was still pregnant, the latter unborn. They’d neglected to thaw the turkey and had instead feasted on slices of shaved turkey, stuffing them in sandwiches and eating in silence.

Then there was the Thanksgiving they’d invited Tristan and Aurora, but that hardly counted. Looking back, perhaps it hadn’t been best to waste a family holiday on the de Martels when he could’ve been spending it with his true family instead. *Perhaps.*

Swallowing the regret with a mouthful of whiskey, Klaus continued reading.

#

November 22nd, 2023

Mystic Falls never changed.

It had been a decade since Hayley first set foot there. She’d hated it at first—had found the entire sprawling suburbia trite and irritating, had loathed that Tyler was so attached to the banality of this tiny spot on the map. She’d spent five years on the road by then, ever since her family kicked her out. She’d been bitter and angry and Mystic Falls, to her mind, represented everything she hated about the life she’d left behind. The life she’d been banished from.
Then again, Hope had been conceived here. Hayley didn’t love the memories from that night—at least, she wasn’t supposed to—but she could be grateful for the result. The same result that always brought her back this time of year, ready to pack up Hope’s things and drive her back to New Orleans for Thanksgiving with the family.

But not before another tradition was observed.

Mystic Falls hadn’t changed, and neither had the Grill. Hayley stepped into the same room she’d been in a thousand times before, the same décor, the same smell of old beer and the lunch special (nachos, she guessed). And there, at the same table as every year, sat Caroline, dressed in a pinstripe pantsuit with her hair loose and wavy. She waved Hayley over, her chair squealing when she stood and knocked it back with her legs.

Hayley had never been much of a hugger before she was a mother (and she wasn’t fussed on them now), but Caroline had always hugged with enough exuberance for them both. Hayley let herself relax into the embrace, felt the breath leaving her in one relaxed exhale that Caroline’s grip forced from her lungs. Having to be so careful around the mortals in her life, Caroline really enjoyed letting her true strength show with what immortals she knew.

Released and feeling a little dizzy, Hayley took her seat across from Caroline.

“The lunch special just ended, but it was shit anyway,” Caroline said instead of a greeting. “I ordered you a hot chocolate and some cake.”

“Oh, thank you, god,” Hayley breathed. Her stomach had been eating at her for hours, but she didn’t want to stop and be late for her appointment with Caroline.

“I usually answer to ‘Caroline’, but god is fine.”

Hayley rolled her eyes. “So,” she began, scooting her chair forward a little so she could rest her elbows on the table. “What’s the verdict?”

“You don’t want to wait until you have a warm drink in your hands?”

“I’d rather rip off the band-aid.”

Caroline grabbed her purse from where it hung on the back of her chair, unzipping it with one hand while plunging the other deep inside.

“What is that, Mary Poppins’ suit case?”

Caroline snorted. “No, but I’ve begged Bonnie to look into spells to expand the space inside things. Mostly to apply it to closets, but I’d give my left tit for a purse that can carry my three-ring binders in it. Here we go!” She pulled out what she was looking for—a yellow envelope with Hayley’s name and address on it. “It’s not final and it’s only a half-yearly, so don’t worry about it.”

Hayley winced as she took the envelope. “If you’re prefacing it that way, I shudder to think how bad it really is.” She broke the seal with her thumb and pulled out the booklet inside. The cover was glossy and professional (Caroline’s keen eye for design coming through), with Hope’s name written on the first page inside.

Taking a deep breath, Hayley began to read.

It was … not fantastic.
“If you glare at that paper any harder it might catch fire,” Caroline joked, trying to lighten the tone.

“Not a witch. But all the teachers you have there are, right?”

“We have a few werewolves, but only witches teach the magical classes. Why?”

“Just gauging their experience.” Hayley made to read on but Caroline’s hand on her wrist drew her out of it.

“Look,” Caroline began. “She’s a good kid, and she’s doing her best. No one there is saying anything awful about her character or anything—”

“Here’s your latte, Mrs. F,” said the waiter, setting Caroline’s drink in front of her. He was an older boy, maybe college-age.

Hayley didn’t comment on the *Mrs*. Caroline still went by Forbes-Salvatore, and Hayley had no right to judge; she hadn’t de-hyphenated since Jackson either.

“Thanks, Drew,” Caroline said.

Drew disappeared for a moment, returning with Hayley’s drink and her slice of carrot cake. “If you need anything else, give me a shout,” he said cheerily, then moved onto the next table.

“It’s really nothing,” said Caroline, immediately returning to the conversation about Hope. “It’s just that she’s been distracted and unfocused, and it was only a matter of time before that started showing itself in her grades.”

“But—” Hayley flipped back a few pages to the section on Defensive Magic. “This is a D. That’s what comes right before an F.”

“No, there’s a D-minus in there between them.” At the look on Hayley’s face, Caroline turned serious. “I understand that it’s a shock. She had amazing grades when she first got here, she was throwing herself into the work, but ever since things with Klaus have gotten so tense …”

“She lacks work ethic.”

“I think she’s demonstrated an ability to do better than she is. Things started going downhill last year; you and I both noticed the As become Bs and the Bs become Cs—”

“That was only in a few subjects,” Hayley argued, voice rising a little higher than she wanted. “She was still strong in Defensive Magic and in all the physical classes. She’s a werewolf, for god’s sake. Inactive curse or not, she’s powerful.”

Caroline nodded. “I’m hearing you, Hayley. I think she found some of the subjects she was already invested in easy to skate by on, but things got harder this year. She’s pretty much in middle school now, or at least what passes for that at a magical boarding school. Things took a step up and she didn’t follow it. We both know it’s not her intelligence that’s the issue.”

Scoffing, Hayley pushed the report card away from her as though it smelled bad. “The issue is Klaus.”

“Unfortunately, I think so.” Caroline paused, tapping her finger on the table. “He still hasn’t replied?”

“Every letter I send him is returned a couple weeks later.”
“Are you sure you’re sending them to the right place?”

“I used to get the addresses from Rebekah, but he’s freezing her out too now. Freya has to track him down with spells.”

“And they still work?” Caroline asked, eyebrow raised. “Hope tried astral projecting, but she was blocked. He hasn’t blocked tracking spells?”

“Not yet.” Hayley frowned. “Which … doesn’t make a lot of sense. I’ll ask Freya what she thinks when I get back.”

“Well, if you change your mind about me going after him, I have an overnight bag packed at all times.”

“I appreciate that,” said Hayley, picking at her cake. “And I appreciate you not doing it when I say it won’t help.”

“You know what’s helpful for Hope, and she’s the priority here.”

Hayley nodded in agreement. “So, do you have any recommendations for how I can tackle this at home?”

“Well, speaking as someone who grew up with an absent father, I think …” Caroline sighed, rubbing at her temple. “I think you have to be careful, but I also think that there are vulnerabilities she’s always going to have and that you can’t account for all of them. I could sit here and give you a lecture on exactly how my mom fucked things up with me, but there are just as many ways I fucked it up with her. Dad being gone, the fact that he chose to stay away from us, to never call, to start a whole new life … It left a scar that wouldn’t stop getting aggravated. Every big event in our lives opened it back up again. You can’t heal it over for her. Not for good.”

Hayley took a sip of her hot chocolate to swallow down the lump in her throat. “So my kid walks around with a hole in her heart forever.”

“Lots of people do. She’s strong enough to learn how to take care of herself. We just have to make sure she knows how to do that. And you know a lot about surviving. Something tells me that knowledge is written somewhere in that girl’s DNA, and however hard it is to watch her struggle to find it … we can’t make this okay.” Caroline blinked back something that may have been tears. She looked around the Grill surreptitiously, then leaned in conspiratorially to add, “And this will be weird, coming from a school principal, but grades aren’t the most important thing. When Hope’s at school and she has a terrible day and she feels at her worst, is she crying in bed alone, or does she call her mom?”

“She calls me.” Hayley had the phone bill to prove it—every time there was a fight or a nightmare, Hope called. Every time.

“And when she’s home with you?”

“She comes to me. Crawls into bed and stays there until morning.”

“Well, there you go,” said Caroline. “She knows what she needs to survive this. You’re her mom.”

Hayley had never thought about Hope needing her as anything beyond the basic facts before—the sky was blue, the sun rose in the east, and her daughter needed her. It was just true.

The reality of what that meant hadn’t settled in her chest like this before, like a bundle of bricks tied
to her heart by a swinging, creaking rope.

Clearing her throat, Hayley wrapped her hands around the mug of hot chocolate to give her fingers something to do. “So,” she began, as though she hadn’t just had a painful epiphany and gone silent for a full minute. “I can bring up her grades with her, but I want to be careful. I don’t want things going the other way, with her becoming obsessed with proving herself or something.”

Caroline chuckled, blue eyes sparkling. “You don’t want her becoming like me, you mean?”

“I think Hope becoming like you would be a dream come true,” Hayley replied without even thinking. The certainty in her voice surprised her and had a similar effect on Caroline, whose eyes went wide as her cheeks flushed a little.

“Well.” Caroline coughed lightly, looking down at her latte. “Keep complimenting me like that and I just might bump up a few of those grades.”

“Oh, if that’s all it takes …” Hayley began, cutting herself off with her own laughter.

Caroline nudged Hayley’s knee with her own under the table. “Just don’t tell the other parents.”

“I won’t, I won’t,” Hayley promised, laughter fading naturally to leave them in a comfortable silence.

“Now that we have that business out of the way …” Caroline rubbed her hands together excitedly. “Give me some hot New Orleans gossip.”

“I have something I’ve been saving up for when I saw you next, actually.”

“Ooh, intriguing. Please continue.”

Hayley braced her chin in her hands, smothering a grin. “You’ll never guess what special guest attended Kol and Davina’s wedding.”

“Tell me it wasn’t someone who makes blood flow from water and the world kind of start imploding.”

“No, the Mikaelsons all stayed where they were supposed to. A certain Bennet witch, however…”

Hayley hadn’t been certain if Caroline knew or not, but by the look on her face, she most certainly had not.

“No, Fucking. Way.” Caroline was wild-eyed and her slack-jawed, her palms flat and raised in the air. “I don’t—how—what—”

“Pretty much how I felt when she arrived. Apparently they’re friends.”

“What, Bonnie and Davina?”

“And Kol. She hugged him and everything.”

“What the fuck,” Caroline sang, her voice pitching high and starting to squeak. She took several deep breaths to calm herself. “Tell me everything you know.”
Everything Hayley knew turned out to be not very much at all, but they mulled over the situation for plenty of time. Caroline seemed to enjoy the speculation, and texted Bonnie several messages in all caps demanding answers. There was no response (Bonnie was in a completely different time zone), but that didn’t stop Caroline from progressing to voicemails so excited they made a dog bark as it walked by outside.

They fought over who paid the check, splitting it fifty-fifty and bidding farewell just before school got out. Caroline had another meeting to get to and Hayley had a daughter to pick up, so they had a time limit to observe. Probably for the best, as when Caroline started rambling it went on for hours and Hayley never felt particularly inclined to stop her.

Hayley pulled up at the school at just past four in the afternoon. School ended a half hour ago, giving Hope plenty of time to pack her things. She was waiting in the pick-up area with her suitcase and a backpack slung over one shoulder, Dorian Williams standing beside her to make sure she left safely.

Hope ran to hug Hayley when she parked the car—ran so fast, in fact, that Hayley was only halfway out of her seat before her daughter barreled into her. She gave just as good as she got, squeezing Hope tight and dotting kisses into her hair.

“Hey, Mom.”

“I missed you.” Hayley released Hope and grabbed her shoulders instead, pushing her away a bit to get a good look at her. The eagle parental eye took everything in—the slight tan that had faded since the summer, the added height, even the colour of her hair, faded from the vibrant red it had been a few years ago.

“Missed you too, Mom.”

“Okay.” Hayley clapped her hands together, finally standing up out of the car. “Can you grab your suitcase and put it in the trunk?”

Hope nodded, heading back to take the bag from Dorian. Hayley wandered over to greet him, shaking his hand. She liked Dorian. She hadn’t spent much time with him, but he was close with Ric and Caroline. The twins even called him Uncle Dorian when they weren’t in class.


Like Caroline, Hayley hadn’t dropped the “Mrs” just yet.

“Mr. Williams,” Hayley responded in kind. “Do I need to sign anything to take her away early?” The week’s break for Thanksgiving didn’t start until Wednesday.

“It’s all been taken care of,” Dorian assured her.

“Right, the Caroline Forbes efficiency.”

“We call it omnipotence, actually,” Dorian quipped.

Hayley snorted. “Like she needs that to feed her god complex.”

The trunk slammed shut, promptly ending the adults’ conversation. Hayley raised a hand in goodbye, eyeballing Hope until she said goodbye as well.
Dorian waved them off in the rear-view mirror, already walking backwards towards the front entrance.

#

Hayley had considered broaching the topic of Hope’s grades on the drive to the motel, but reconsidered. They had a week’s break before she went back, and then just three weeks of school before she was back home for Christmas break—there really wasn’t any point in ruining things with a tough conversation just yet. It could wait.

As was custom, Hayley had booked a motel two hours away. She and Hope drove just until dark before they arrived, unloading only the things they needed into a kitschy little bed-and-breakfast. Hayley found it a bit flowery, but Hope loved the little tea-service they did for every room in the mornings.

The next day was dominated by the road trip back to New Orleans. Hayley let Hope pick the music, even going so far as to sing along to some of the pop that whined through her speakers at Hope’s request. It would’ve grated on her nerves if Hope hadn’t been singing too, and while her daughter wasn’t particularly tuneful, it was the sweetest sound Hayley had heard in a while.

Marcel’s car was already parked out behind the house when they arrived. Hayley heard Hope’s intake of breath, saw the way she sat bolt upright in her seat. The excitement that had been building since they hit the city limits bubbled over as Hope threw her seat belt off and bailed out the car door.

The back door swung open only seconds before Hope was flashing towards it, swept up in her brother’s arms. Her legs swung through the air as she squealed, gripping at Marcel’s shoulders.

Hayley watched it with a soft smile. She wasn’t the only one Hope needed.

#

Hayley, Keelin, and Freya were all dreadful cooks. Marcel was good and Davina was decent (though very accustomed to Kol cooking for her), so they volunteered to do Thanksgiving dinner. When Hayley realized it would be a six-hour affair, she vetoed their guests doing anything of the sort and instead contacted Declan, who was happily running catering for the big day.

“Declan, huh?” Davina asked when Hayley mentioned him. “The same one that cooked for Hope’s birthday? That’s nice of him.”

“He’s paid to do it.”

“It’s still nice.” Davina shoved her tongue into her cheek, watching Hayley carefully. They (and Freya) were in the upstairs study, sitting by an open fireplace with red wine in hand. The sounds of a piano drifted through the house, sometimes flowing and sometimes stilted and off-key. Marcel was trying his hardest to teach Hope, but she didn’t exactly have an innate musical ability to speak of.

“Yes,” Freya chimed in. “Declan’s nice very often.”
“Oh?” Davina raised an eyebrow. “I love that in a man.”

“That he’s often nice?” Hayley asked. “You must be disappointed in your husband, then.”

“Hey, he’s always nice to me,” Davina defended. “He changed the lightbulbs for me the other day.”

Hayley screwed her face up in disgust. “We don’t want to hear weird sex stuff, Davina. God.”

Freya snorted her wine into her nose indelicately. She scrabbled for the tissue box on the coffee table to mop up the mess, narrowly avoiding spilling anything onto her shirt.

“Smooth,” Hayley observed.

“Thank you.”

“I have no idea how you got such a catch,” Davina said, watching Freya wipe the last of the wine trickling out of her nostril. “Where is Keelin, by the way?”

“Out at the bayou. One of the wolves got injured and didn’t want to go to the hospital, so the hospital comes to them apparently. She should be home in an hour or so.”

“Good. I can spend that time brainstorming something outrageous to say to make you do that again.”

“Or you could not be a brat.”

“I can’t help it,” said Davina. “Kol is rubbing off on me.”

“I thought I said no sex stuff!” Hayley objected.

They dissolved into laughter all over again.

Freya let her giggles ease away. “God, I love Thanksgiving.”

November 23rd, 2023

Klaus,

Despite the tone of my last letter, I do have much to be grateful for. Our daughter is healthy and generally happy, our family is alive (albeit scattered), we have a home and safety and good food and excellent company. I could spend all day listing the things I’m grateful for.

However.

This is the part where I’d wait until Hope is asleep and then tell you we need to talk. You’re not here, so I’ll just have to voice my concerns in this letter and pretend not to be offended at yet another non-response.
I had lunch with Caroline, and she said Hope isn’t going so great in school. She’s barely completed her course work, and while she’s not earning Fs just yet she is pretty close to it. We agreed that she’s smart but unmotivated, and Caroline’s pretty sure it has everything to do with your absence. I knew it would be hard without you, but I guess seeing how much Caroline’s issues with her dad still impact her made me feel it more keenly. Will Hope be like her, heartbroken and abandoned by her father? Caroline’s dad has been gone for years but he’s still the most significant barrier to her truly accepting herself. Her self-doubt, her anxiety, it’s all down to him. What will your absence do to our daughter?

Not that her being like Caroline is a negative—we’d be lucky if she was that tough and driven. But it’s not looking like she’s going that way, and it worries me that she just yields so quickly when things become difficult. She can’t just sit there and do nothing with her time. She owes her teachers and her peers her engagement.

I don’t know how to broach the topic with her. I don’t want to push her to the point that she becomes anxious about all this, but what if she already is? How do I start that conversation without making her feel like I’m disappointed in her? Am I disappointed in her?

Maybe I should ask Marcel or Freya for advice. I feel like Hope will be upset if I do, like she’ll think we gossip about her when she’s not around, but this is a big deal. Not the biggest, but important.

If I’m being honest, I am sorely tempted to just make it Marcel’s responsibility. I’m sure he’d do it if I asked. I won’t ask.

This whole parenting thing is hard.

Wishing you were here to suffer it with me,

Hayley

May 13th, 2026

Poor grades weren’t exactly the worst fate to befall a Mikaelson. It didn’t even rate in the top hundred.

Still, Klaus was glad it hadn’t been left to him. He had no idea how to broach most topics with his daughter, let alone one like that. How would you ensure she did not feel cornered or inadequate? How do you illustrate how much you love someone while criticizing them? It was easier to be proud of her magical achievements than to be critical of her intellectual ones. She was an incredible witch, but that should never have come at the expense of her education.

Not that her magic had been the thing distracting her from her studies in the first place.

Despite the late hour—three in the morning, almost—Klaus found himself scrolling through his contacts to find Caroline’s name. She was listed rather cryptically under CF, lest someone obtain his phone and try to chase down anyone he communicated with regularly. It paid to be careful, in his
experience.

They hadn’t spoken via text in some time. Mostly phone calls since his return, some before he dropped off the grid a few years ago. He’d called for updates on Hope’s progress every few weeks and Caroline had happily relayed story after story of his daughter’s achievements. He’d missed those conversations, of course, but he had never imagined that their content would change.

Perhaps when it wasn’t three in the morning, he would call her and ask just how much had changed while he’d been away.

Chapter End Notes

writing this chapter reminded me that de-hyphenated has a hyphen in it, and hyphenated does not. i probably won’t sleep tonight. 1 review = 1 prayer <3
May 13th, 2026

The next letter was written on hotel stationery. *Fancy* hotel stationery for one of the nicer ones in New York, though perhaps not one that would be Klaus’ first pick.

Unlike the last, this letter was written in long, looping script that was both unhurried and almost … cheerful?

And when had Hayley been in New York?

Brow creased, he read on.

#

20th January, 2024

“Hear ye, hear ye!” Josh tapped a knife against a glass until their entire table’s attention was on him. “I hereby call to order the first intra-community supernatural gathering of the year of our lord 2024!”

Hayley joined in with Vincent and Freya’s polite applause. Poppy slowed as she passed their table with a serving tray balanced on one hip, helpfully informing Josh that “Declan says if you break another glass he’ll start charging you for them.”

“I own this place,” Josh argued. “I pay for them anyway!”

“He’ll stop,” Hayley promised Poppy, who nodded and ducked away to serve more customers. Levelling a stare at Josh, Hayley said, “Now that we’ve had that helpful introduction, let’s get started. First item on the agenda?”
Silence.

“Vincent?” Hayley prompted.

Shrugging, Vincent set his glass of bourbon down. “We’ve had no complaints from any of the Nine Covens regarding other supernatural factions. A few of them are pissy about the tourists’ behaviour, but they’re all human.”

“Well, Vincent,” Josh began, tone far too serious to actually be serious at all, “if there’s ever anything the vampires can do to help you manage the drunk white girls that hang out in your sacred cemeteries and make mockery of your traditions, please let us know. We’re very committed to helping you.”

Vincent scoffed. “Thank you. And if your new vampires need more daylight rings, tell them they can earn them by keeping tourists off our sacred ground.”

“Should we start up some loyalty card system?” Freya suggested. “They get a stamp for each drunk frat boy they talk down from the roof of St. Anne’s, and after five they get a free daylight ring?”

“After ten,” Vincent corrected, “they get the privilege of asking to be able to buy a daylight ring for a hefty price.”

Josh finished chewing a mouthful of beer nuts thoughtfully. “Make it seven and you’ve got a deal.”

Vincent and Josh shook hands.

“Well, I’m so relieved we’ve dealt with that,” said Hayley.

“And the wolves?” Josh asked. “How can we rope them into the mutually beneficial arrangement?”

“Well, there aren’t any moonstones anymore, so you can’t use rings to win us over. But … a cut of the tourism profits wouldn’t hurt.”

“The tours don’t go out to wolf territory,” said Vincent.

“The wolves don’t just live in the bayou anymore, and they only did in the first place because they were banished there. Plus, we’re happy to consider extending some of the tours’ boundaries to include our lands. Maybe we can incorporate some crawfish boils and other activities we can run that are family-friendly.”

“You could start that separately,” Josh pointed out. “No need to involve us.”

“No,” Hayley began. “But you both serve on the board for the largest tourism corporation in the city. People pay you for tours, and the wolves get nothing, I understand that it makes sense for this generation because we haven’t been in the city since I was a baby, but things are changing. We should probably be changing our business practices too.”

Josh frowned, about to interject when Vincent raised a hand to stop him. “If you draft a proposal for changing tour routes and demonstrate that there are wolves living in the city and bringing in profits for the city—specifically profits related to tourism—then we can bring it to the board to discuss it.”

“My proposal will include a request for a seat on the board.”

“You can’t just request it like that,” said Josh. “But … we’ll see what we can do.”

Something in Hayley rankled at the noncommittal nature of their comments, but she hadn’t expected
more. “I’ll get working on that proposal.” She barely knew where to start, but surely someone in the
pack would be able to help. Lisina had gone to business school for a couple years.

“You get that it’s not about wanting to isolate you guys,” Vincent said. “If you were all living in the
city permanently, you’d be a part of this already. But I have to be honest, some of the witches don’t
even want the vampires involved. Folks come here for voodoo and maybe for the casket girls
celebration, with a slight mention of vampirism thrown in there. There just isn’t any draw here for
vamp and wolf traditions. So, despite the fact that we share the space, there are elements of my
community that don’t think any of you have a place in the industry. That the profit is ours, and ours
alone.”

Hayley tried to keep the emotion out of her tone. “The wolves have been dying out there, Vincent.”

“I know that, which is why I’m trying to build something better for all of us. Your people never
should’ve been shoved out there, and we need to build a community that won’t let that happen to any
faction again. No monitoring magic, no public executions, no wolves in the dirt. None of it.”

“To be fair, Vincent,” Hayley started, considering her words carefully as she glanced at Josh, “none
of that was wolf-on-witch violence.”

“I’m aware,” said Josh. “And I’m doing what I can to shift attitudes with the vampires, but … a lot of
this was supported by Marcel. Now, he had his reasons—”

“Reasons for keeping my people in subjugation?” Vincent demanded.

“They were slitting kids’ throats, Vince. Marcel had to protect Davina.”

“The Harvest ritual was real,” Vincent insisted. “She was never in real danger.”

“This is beside the point,” Hayley interrupted. “Rehashing the past does nothing but damage what
we’re doing now, and that’s the message we have to send to our people. Recent history might’ve
seen vampires as the enemy, but we’ve all had our turn. The Guerrera wolves killed dozens of
vampires, the witches cursed humans into slaughtering entire churches full of people—violence is
stitched into the fabric of the city. No one has the moral high ground. We just have to work at
helping each other to undo the prejudices that already exist in our communities.”

“And how do you recommend we go about doing that?” asked Josh.

“We talk to each other. Help each other. What are the biggest obstacles? How do we manage them
together?” Hayley waited a moment, greeted only be silence. “Okay, they weren’t actually
hypothetical questions.”

Josh chuckled. “You really think it’s that easy?”

“Not easy,” Freya said, speaking up finally. “But it makes sense. What’s the biggest issue you have
with your people right now?”

Josh thought on it a moment. “Probably anti-werewolf sentiment. The fact that wolves are moving
back into the Quarter is making people antsy. They don’t turn on the full moon, but they keep their
wolf abilities throughout the month. There are concerns that there will be issues.”

“Is there anyone in particular voicing these concerns?” Hayley asked.

Josh hesitated. “Are we really naming and shaming now? Is that a good idea?”
“What, do you think we’ll come after them?” Hayley countered. “We’re trying to help each other here. If there’s someone I can help you reach, I want to do that.”

The remainder of Josh’s hesitation melted away when Vincent nodded at him. “She joined up with us a couple months ago. Her husband was killed by a werewolf back in the 30s. She’s been … sharing her story with the other, newer vampires who haven’t gotten used to the whole inter-species enmity yet. People are afraid.”

“So you think she’s operating out of fear or vying for your position?”

“It’s not a power play, Hayley. Not everything is that. She’s respectful of me and I’m sure she’ll stop if I ask her to. But if I ask her to stop and the others want to hear what she has to say, that creates its own issue. I can’t start censoring my people when they’re afraid.”

“Okay,” said Hayley. “So we arrange some sort of event. I’ll bring Lisina and some of the other better-behaved wolves, and you can bring your best vampires, plus this chick—”

“Greta,” Josh informed her.

“Right, Greta. We’ll see if we can’t figure something out.”

“And will the witches be sitting on our collective thumbs while you all figure this out?” Vincent queried.

“We can bring some of ours too,” Freya suggested. “Maybe Ivy?”

Vincent glared at her.

“Hang on,” said Josh. “There’s an Ivy?”

“A new witch that just moved to town. She’s being inducted this weekend.”

“That’s quick,” Josh observed, looking at Vincent with a sparkle in his eye. “You really like this one, huh?”

Vincent’s expression gave nothing away. “She’s a talented witch. We would only benefit from her contribution to our community.”

Freya chuckled. “Yeah, sure.”

And from there their conversation dissolved into good-natured ribbing and Josh stalking Ivy on Facebook while Hayley watched on, something like worry eating at her stomach.

She caught Declan’s eye from across the room. He winked at her, then headed back into the kitchen to finish out his shift.

The worry eased, replaced by something else entirely.

#
Greta wasn’t what Hayley had been expected. She was small and petite, like a dancer. Her accent was vaguely European, her countenance careful and quiet. She arrived late to the gathering they’d pieced together at Rousseau’s, her strawberry blonde hair gathered high onto her head and her eyes slanted with heavy black eyeliner.

“You must be Greta,” Hayley greeted, offering a hand.

After a beat, Greta took it with a firm grip. “And you’re Hayley Marshall.”

“Great!” Josh exclaimed, clapping them both on the shoulders. “Let’s get drinking, shall we?”

Hayley accepted a glass of bourbon from the bar, intending to make it her only one that night. Around her, the tepid sipping and awkward tapping of glasses suggested that the others felt similarly. No one wanted to be impaired.

Greta didn’t even sip her drink, just perched on a barstool and drew a finger around the top of the glass, making it sing softly. Hayley took the lack of violence as an invitation to sit beside her, half-turned towards Greta while also trying to keep an eye on the rest of the bar. Lisina was talking to Vincent about the tourism proposal she was helping Hayley draft, Josh was trying to hook up a karaoke machine he’d hired for the evening, and Freya was entertaining a group of new-ish vampires with a spell that would keep their drinks chilled for the entire evening.

“It’s a decent turn-out,” Hayley commented, trying to get something in the form of a conversation started.

Greta raised an eyebrow. “You sound surprised.”

“Pleased, mostly. It’s important that we can all get along like this.”

Greta scoffed, but said nothing.

“What?” Hayley asked.

“Nothing.”

“No.” Hayley’s tone hardened. “What was that about?”

Greta looked down into the bottom of her glass, jaw tensing. She snapped her gaze back to Hayley and said, “Fine. I scoffed because you’re right. It is important. How else will you get Vincent and Josh’s support with the city’s tourism board?”

A hot flush crept up Hayley’s neck, taking residence on her cheeks and under her eyes—right where the veins would creep if she let her fangs slide into place. “I won’t apologise for advocating for my people.”

“I’m not asking you to, Hayley. I just wish you’d be a little more honest about your intentions here instead of acting like you’re god’s gift to supernatural kind.”

Josh either heard the conversation or sensed the tension because he danced back towards them, tucking an arm over Hayley’s shoulders in a friendly embrace. If friendly embraces were also accompanied by a bone-crushing squeezing of her shoulder, a hard and insistent and a reminder not to rip anyone apart.
“Hey, girls,” he greeted. “Greta, would you mind helping me out with the karaoke machine? I can’t quite get it going.”

Greta was still looking at Hayley when she said, “Of course.”

Hayley watched Greta slink away, Josh not far behind her. He gave her a warning glare, but she just tipped her drink in his direction and turned away.

“That looked like a fun conversation,” said Declan, sauntering toward her from behind the bar. He was drying a glass, apparently, but Hayley knew that had nothing to do with his job and he was definitely only doing it to look busy so he could talk to her.

“I’m having all kinds of those lately,” Hayley replied. “And shouldn’t you be in the kitchen?”

Declan glanced in the direction of the kitchen and shrugged. “They have it in order. I trained them well.”

“They’ve been working here longer than you, chef.”

“I retrained them well, then.” Declan gave her one of his disarming smiles, the kind that coaxed one from her lips as well. “And how are you this fine evening, Miss Marshall?”

Hayley hid her wince at the use of what technically wasn’t her name. Not that Declan knew that. “I’m well. Yourself?”

“Doing better now.” His roguish grin left no doubt as to why the sudden improvement. “If you want to get out of here, I can sneak out back and call you with an ‘emergency’.”

“Tempting, but no, thank you. I should be more engaged with this all, anyway.” No matter how much she wanted to duck out into a back alley and have an impromptu picnic dinner in the park. “Besides, you’re at work—which I think you should get back to. It sounds like they’re floundering in there.” It was true: she could hear terse voices and scent smoke on the air.

Declan winced. “Yeah, there are a couple new dishes they’re not overly familiar with.”

“I blame poor management,” Hayley quipped.

“Then take it up with Josh, love.” Declan dropped the cloth from his shoulder onto the bar and left at a jog, headed back to his station.

Left alone, Hayley pivoted on her barstool and surveyed the room. Members of each faction mostly kept to themselves, though the wolves and witches mingled a little. The vampires, however, were congregated awkwardly around the broken karaoke machine Josh was still trying to salvage. Hayley considered offering her unhelpful services, but she caught Vincent’s eye instead—an eye that rested beneath a quirked eyebrow as he watched Hayley carefully.

So maybe semi-flirting with Declan in a crowded bar wasn’t the best way to convince her friends that she wasn’t interested in romance at the moment. Though it seemed Vincent was ill equipped to throw stones in that regard, if the way he glanced at his companion was any indication. It was a dark-haired woman Hayley hadn’t seen before, one wearing a long, flowing dress and loose jewellery on every visible limb. She smelled of sage and witch-hazel, but curiously not of vervain.

Abandoning her drink, Hayley sauntered over to the pair of them. She greeted Vincent with a handshake, then turned her attention to his companion with a smile she hoped was more pleasant than predatory.
“And you must by Ivy,” Hayley said. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

No supernatural creatures were harmed in the making of the night’s event. No humans, either, which was always a bonus.

Hayley spent most of the evening with Vincent and Ivy, the latter of which proved to be an interesting companion. She’d just moved from London, needing a change after her father’s death, and she felt New Orleans was as good a place as any to settle down. She’d already secured a spot to sell her wares at the weekend markets, and she was a more than decent seer to boot.

Hayley declined the offer of a reading, promising she’d come and pay for one properly if she ever changed her mind.

The party wound down about 10pm—not that it was particularly raucous to begin with. First the witches begged off, citing early starts at their work. The wolves left soon after, most preparing for the drive back out to the bayou, but Hayley stuck behind with Josh to help pack up the defunct karaoke machine.

“Make sure you get your deposit back,” Hayley said, watching him load it into the truck.

“Yeah, it may take compulsion to convince them I didn’t break it myself.”

Hayley smirked. “Maybe it was your—”

“If you say driving, I swear to god I will break the treaty and strangle you.” Josh slammed the trunk shut in mock outrage, drawing a laugh from Hayley. “So,” he began, resting an arm on her shoulders. “We’re all packed up. You can go home now.”

“I was gonna stick around ‘till closing, actually. But I’ll see you for the council meeting tomorrow.”

Josh scoffed and kissed her temple. “Sure. Say hi to Declan for me.”

Hayley rolled her eyes and shoved him away from her. “Don’t crash your car on the way home.”

“Ha-ha.” Josh jumped into the vehicle and started up the engine, taking off down the street with a roar.

Standing on the curb a moment more, Hayley admired the night sky. Humans couldn’t see it so well through the light pollution in the city, but enhanced senses were good for something. The stars twinkled through the orange glow like tiny lighthouses through fog.

It was the kind of thing Klaus might have painted.

A pricking at the back of her neck had Hayley whipping her head back, nostrils flaring to scent the air better. She just caught the back of Greta heading down the street.

Forcing herself to calm, Hayley tucked her coat in tighter around her body and headed back inside.
Hayley waited until the kitchen closed at 11. Declan sometimes stayed to work the bar or close up, but Poppy had come in to see to that, leaving him free to meet Hayley out front.

“You really didn’t have to wait,” was the first thing he said.

“What are friends for?” Hayley asked rhetorically. “Come on, I’ll drive you.”

“But then you’ll have to walk.”

“I like walking. Been doing it for almost three decades now.”

“It’s the middle of the night in one of the most crime-ridden cities I’ve ever set foot in,” Declan objected. “And I attended culinary school in London. No way am I fine with you walking home alone.”

Hayley laughed. “How do you think I planned on getting home from here?”

“I’ll drive you.” Declan grabbed her hand and pulled her down the street to where he’d parked his car.

“You’re exhausted.”

Declan unlocked the car with the button on his keys, then opened Hayley’s door for her. “Never too exhausted for you.”

Mock glaring, Hayley slid into her side and pulled her coat out of the way so it didn’t get shut in the door. Declan rounded the car, jumping in and revving the engine.

“I can walk myself home, you know,” Hayley said.

“And yet here you are.” Declan put the car in drive. “Seatbelt.”

Rolling her eyes, Hayley clicked her seatbelt in. “Hardly seems necessary. You drive like a grandma.”

“We’ll be sharing the road with others who don’t. Always best to be safe.” He pulled out from the curb and into traffic, making quick work of the one-minute drive to Hayley’s home and parking once more.

“And here we go,” said Declan. “Sleep well.”

“Thanks,” Hayley said, part-genuine, part-sarcastic. “I’m so glad I didn’t have to walk five blocks.”

“What are friends for?”

Resisting the urge to whack him with her purse, Hayley unclicked her seatbelt instead. “I’ll see you … soon. I assume.”

Declan’s eyes sparkled. “Can’t get rid of me now, Marshall.”

Hayley broke their gaze to lean across the car and embrace him. It was awkward and she regretted it the moment they made contact and her face ended up against his neck. She couldn’t reach him
properly, but instead of pulling away she decided to do the worst thing possible, kissing his jaw instead. Was it meant to be a cheek kiss? Was it an accidental bump of her lips? Not even she could tell.

She pulled back quickly. “Right. Bye.”

It took conscious effort not to use enhanced speed to get out of the vehicle. She closed the door carefully, feeling jittery in the crisp night air.

She didn’t settle until she was up in bed an hour later, freshly-showered and doing her best to put the day’s events out of her mind.

#

8th February, 2024

“So, I’m thinking about taking a trip.”

Lisina spun the shopping trolley into the cereal aisle. “I’ll alert the press.”

“Oh, stop it. I’m being serious.”

Grabbing a pack of fruit-loops, Lisina said, “Fine, I’ll be a grown up.”

Hayley watched the packet drop into the trolley. “You might try eating like one.”

“Hey,” Lisina objected. “I’m here out of the goodness of my heart, helping you get groceries while your car is in the shop. Don’t start sniping at me when you’re obviously about to ask me for another favour.”

“Am I?”

“Obviously. You’re the alpha—you can’t leave unless someone else takes over for the interim. Used to be Christopher; now it’s me. You want to know if I can cover for you.”

“It’s just for a few days.”

“Do I want to know where you’re going?”

“Probably not.” It wasn’t supposed to be a secret, but Hayley didn’t feel like Lisina would appreciate it.

“Fine,” said Lisina, stopping by the juice aisle to grab some pulp-free OJ. “But you have to clean my gutters out when you get back.” Lisina was petrified of heights and always trying to find someone else to do it for her. Yet another thing that used to be Christopher’s job.

“I will if you make me lemonade to drink while I do it.”

“I will if you buy the ingredients,” Lisina countered.
“I will if you finally tell me the recipe.”

Lisina shook her head vehemently. “It’s a family secret.”

“You give me the money for them.”

“How much?”

“Fifty bucks should cover it.”

“Fif—” Hayley cut herself off at the sight of the shit-eating grin on Lisina’s face. “Fine. But you have to help me pick out Josh’s birthday gift.”

“I actually consider that an honour, because I’m a good friend.”

“Great! It’s a deal. I should be back by Monday, but if I’m not—”

“Don’t worry about it.” Lisina patted Hayley on the shoulder. “I’ll just find other chores around the house for you to do.”

Hayley forced a smile. “Can’t wait.”

#

10th February, 2024

Hayley hadn’t been to New York in … well, a while.

It had been the first place she came after her parents kicked her out. It was hard, being homeless in a small town, and somehow she’d thought living in the city for most of the month would be easier. More marks, more dumpsters, more space to hide.

She’d been wrong, in many ways she didn’t want to think about.

So coming back for the first time in over a decade was more than a little disorienting. It was the same, but different—the smells were just as awful, but the buildings were denser, the people even more packed in. The drivers were just as rude, which made her glad to travel by taxi instead of driving her car around.

She counted out the cash the driver asked for, then jumped out onto the sidewalk with her suitcase in tow. He pulled off with a screech that made her ears ring for a moment, leaving her stranded on the sidewalk in front of a towering apartment building.

Tugging the suitcase after herself, Hayley located the line of doorbells. Most had names attached, but the one she was looking for just read PENTHOUSE. She buzzed it three times in quick succession, waiting for the slightly irritated voice to ring through the tinny speaker.

“Mrs. Wallace, did you get locked out again?”
Hayley snorted. “Not unless Mrs. Wallace is the dude pissing in the alley.”

Marcel’s laughter was loud enough to make the speaker crackle. “We just can’t escape you, can we?” he asked. The next second, the door buzzed and Hayley found it unlocked when she pulled on it.

The apartment building was decent. Marcel wasn’t one to buy up real estate in fancy neighbourhoods, preferring to rub elbows with the masses. Rebekah must have caved given up a fancy 24-hour doorman for simpler living. Imagining how that argument went had Hayley’s mouth turning up at the corners.

The elevator was relatively modern compared to the building, which was clean but dated. The sleek silver doors were a stark contrast to the cracking paint and old pot plants, as was the AC in the corner. Probably Marcel’s doing, both of them.

Hayley pressed the ‘P’ in the elevator, stomach lurching as it carried her smoothly upward. The doors opened onto a corridor that was vastly different to the downstairs—all sleek marble floors and slate-grey walls. There was even a piece of obnoxious abstract art on the wall that Hayley recognised as Klaus’.

The door at the end of the hall opened to reveal Marcel, dressed in a T-shirt and gym pants. He didn’t smell like he’d been out for a jog yet, but sneakers indicated he’d been just about to.

“It’s cute how you still go for runs,” Hayley commented wryly as she approached. “Like you need it for fitness.”

“You give the warmest greetings.” Marcel opened his arms to make space for her to hug him on her way into the apartment. She took the chance with both hands, abandoning her suitcase to wrap both arms around his back. He returned the embrace, his laugh vibrating through her whole body. “Okay, I take back the sarcasm. You do give the warmest greetings.”

Hayley released him, but by the time she made to grab the suitcase it was gone, already hoisted up by Marcel. He shut the door and ushered her further inside the open-plan space, definitely one decorated by Rebekah. Every surface was shining white, there were useless decorative balls in a basket on the coffee table, and the light fittings were all fluorescent and made the space vaguely blue.

“I take it you chose the location and Rebekah got to decorate?” Hayley guessed.

Marcel nodded and left the suitcase by the wall. “Sometimes compromise means living somewhere ...”

“Sterile?” Hayley finished for him.

“Something like that.” Marcel gestured toward the leather sofa covered in throw pillows. “Come and have a seat. Can I get you anything to drink?”

“I’m guessing you only have bourbon and red wine.”

“We also have Riesling.”

Hayley pulled a face. “Just water is fine.”

Marcel returned from the kitchen with two glasses of water and a plate of freshly-cut fruit.

“Don’t tell me you cut all that up in two minutes.”
“Rebekah made a platter this morning.”

“That doesn’t sound like her.”

Marcel shrugged. “We were going to feed it to each other in bed—”

“Okay, that sounds like her. Is she gonna be mad that I’m eating her sex fruit?” Hayley picked up a piece of melon and bit into it. By the time she registered the juice on her chin, Marcel had run to the kitchen and returned with a plate for each of them, plus a pile of napkins.

“I think since you eating her fruit means you’re here for a visit, she’ll probably be psyched enough to forgive you.”

Hayley finished off her fruit and wiped her mouth before asking, “Where is she?”

“She’s volunteering at a day care centre. Keeps her busy, helps keep her from missing being an aunt too much. It’s pretty perfect, actually.”

It was sad, thinking of Rebekah missing Hope so much, but something about her working with kids felt right. “ Weird that it’s taken a thousand years for her to find a job that fits so well.”

“You and I both know why,” Marcel replied, piling fruit onto his plate.

Right—because Klaus never would’ve allowed it.

“So.” Marcel cleared his throat. “Is this a social call, or is something wrong?”

“What makes you think something’s wrong?” Hayley asked, wiping fruit juice from her fingers with a napkin.

“You have a face on.”

“What face? This is my normal face.”

“No, it’s something else. Not your usual ‘I’m missing Elijah’ face, or the ‘I feel guilty for parenting without Klaus’ face. Something else is going on.”

“Oh, and you know all my faces, right?”

The leather sofa creaked as Marcel leaned back into it. “I knew both the people you got your faces from.”

Her parents. She forgot about that connection sometimes.

“I … it’s mostly Rebekah stuff. You don’t want to talk about Elijah with me.”

“He ripped my heart out that one time, so not really. But is this really about Elijah?”

“After a fashion.” It wasn’t nice to admit that she’d left her post as alpha just for girl-talk with Rebekah, but that wasn’t all. Not really. It couldn’t be. “Plus, some of the things aren’t awesome in New Orleans.”

“And you wanted advice from the master.”

“I wanted … I don’t know what I want. Things are kind of complicated right now.”
“Don’t they always feel like this when Hope’s at school? You get all twisty and shit.”

“Twisty? I do not get twisty.”

“Of course not,” Marcel agreed. His face disagreed. “What isn’t awesome about New Orleans?”

“It’s …” The words stuck in Hayley’s throat. When she decided to visit, it had felt like there was too much—with the pack, with the tourism board, with Greta the catty vampire, with Declan—but now, sitting there, it felt like not enough. Like it hardly justified what was proving to be a major overreaction. “It feels kinda stupid now.”

Marcel nodded. “You’re beating yourself up, realising you could’ve called me for advice instead of coming here, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t. If you’re here, it’s because you needed a break.”

“But things aren’t even that hectic. There hasn’t even been a major death in ages.”

“So you’re self-sabotaging,” Marcel said, as if it were the simplest thing in all the world. “You’re pulling away, feeling like things are dire. You aren’t used to peacetime, so you’re looking for problems and acting like there are. Unless there is something, and you just don’t want to tell me.”

“I came all the way here to tell you.”

“Nothing’s stopping you.”

Hayley paused, taking a moment to gather herself. “I think it feels wrong that things are so easy. That we can all just be united like this. I mean, it’s not perfect, but we had a fucking supernatural mixer the other night and nothing even happened.”

“And you wish there was some kind of vampire coup you could be dealing with?”

“No. I just think it shouldn’t be this simple. After everything that’s happened, it shouldn’t be safe. We shouldn’t have peace.”

Marcel absorbed this information in silence, then said, “Do you feel anger?”

“No.”

“Do you want to start a fight?”

“Not anymore than I usually do, being a wolf. I just expect one, all the time.”

“You know why there isn’t one, right?”

“Yeah. Because Klaus and Elijah are gone.”

“And me.”

Hayley frowned. “I don’t think—”

“No, it’s me. I might not be violent by nature, but I’ve enacted enough violence that I don’t have to be. Everyone would be on edge if I was in charge, so me being here is what drains the tension out of it.”
“That doesn’t make sense. You’ve wanted to bring everyone together for longer than anyone leading now. You tried to do this with my father, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but we were young and stupid. Or, he was young, and I was stupid. It didn’t end well, as you know.”

“But this was the two of you, together. You built homes for the wolves in the Quarter, you helped set up a werewolf bar, you even paid for the houses in the bayou so the un-triggered wolves could stay there on full moons.”

“You’ve been doing your research.”

“I’ve been paying attention. All the stories about you from back then, it feels like … like you have unfinished business.”

“Hayley Marshall,” said Marcel, grin stealing over his face. “Are you here to try and get me back?”

“I’m not about to jilt Rebekah. Family or not, she would murder me.”

“Then what did you want to achieve by coming here? Other than mooning over Elijah by reminiscing with his sister.”

“I don’t know,” Hayley said. “I guess it just feels wrong to have peace without you being there. You deserve it more than any of us.”

Marcel spread his arms wide, indicating the space around him. “Does this not look like peace?”

“Someone else’s peace, maybe.”

Silence fell between them, not tense but not purely comfortable, either.

“You don’t really talk about him,” Hayley began. “My father, I mean. The peace you guys tried to create together.”

“I guess the bad memories come up first.” Marcel picked up his glass of water, swilling it as though he wished it were bourbon. He probably did. “I never really wanted to put that on you.”

“What if I want to know? I feel like I only know the version of him that he was to the wolves.”

“And you think I have a unique perspective?”

“I think he was their alpha, but you and he were equals. You probably knew him differently.”

Marcel nodded slowly, eyes far away. “To be honest, I try not to dwell.”

“Seems healthy.”

“When you’re immortal, there’s a lot you just have to try and forget.”

“Even the good times?” Hayley asked. “Because there were good times, right? You were friends. Or friendly, at least.”

“No, we were friends,” Marcel confirmed. Sighing, he turned to face Hayley better. “What do you want to know?”

Hayley hid her excitement. She’d never gotten this far in this conversation with Marcel before. “How
“I was at a bar one night, just outside the Quarter—the Quarter was wolf territory, back then, and Rousseau’s was all theirs. We were having the usual evening, mostly vampires and humans mixing, some humans there for a thrill, some vamps there for dinner. I was up on this balcony inside, overlooking the party, when I hear some of my guys bitching about a wet dog smell. They were all jonesing up to go hunt down whoever walked into our territory, but I took a moment, listened out for the heartbeat, and it was … young. Younger than I was comfortable letting be hunted by my vamps.

“So I told them to back off, that the wolf was mine, that I’d take care of it. They stay inside, like they’re told, and I head out into the alley. Follow the scent down a ways and come across this kid—maybe sixteen, maybe seventeen. He was upset about something, kicking a wall with human strength. He was untriggered, I could tell that much, but with how jittery he was I knew he was in risk of changing that if he didn’t get home.”

“So you sent him home?” Hayley asked. “From the middle of your territory.”

“We didn’t exactly have a kill on sight order out. Plus, I recognised him. Seen him once or twice years before while I was negotiating the terms of the treaties with his father. Little Theo Labonair.”

Hayley had known it was coming, but her heart still skipped a beat. “Did he leave?”

“After a while. I just thought he was being stubborn, but there was something that bothered me. He really, really didn’t want to go home, and if he went back into wolf territory and of them could have carted him back there on his father’s orders.”

Hayley snickered. “Yeah, I heard my grandfather was a real hard-ass.”

Marcel didn’t find it amusing. “The kind that rules his pack and his family the same way: with an iron fist. And he was never afraid to swing it in either case.”

Face falling, Hayley said, “But that—no, that doesn’t make sense. I’ve talked to the wolves about him.”

“And I’m sure you got only glowing reports. You would’ve back then, too. Even from your grandmother. Even when she was sporting a black eye.”

Hayley’s heart hammered in her chest. “And you sent him back to that?”

“Not knowingly. You know my number one rule. I just thought he was a teen wolf, looking to piss off some vamps as a big ‘fuck you’ to dad. You know the phase.”

“When did you know what was happening?”

“Not for a while.”

“And you stopped it when you found out?”

“I didn’t have to.” Marcel sat up a little, eyes flicking to the door just before it opened.

“I thought I smelled you,” Rebekah said, dropping her purse on the coffee table. She all but fell onto Hayley to give her a hug. “What are you doing here?” she asked, pulling back. “Is everything all right?”

“She wants to mope about Elijah,” Marcel answered for Hayley. “I thought I’d leave that for you to
“Hey!” objected Hayley. “I am not. And I don’t need ‘dealing with’.”

Rebekah eyed the platter on the table. “Since you ate all my fruit, I’d say you might. I had plans for this, you know.”

“Oh, I know all about it. It’s gross, actually.”

“Ugh, prude.”

“Now that we’ve all greeted each other,” Marcel began, voice loud enough to quell any further bickering, “how about we grab an early dinner and settle in for the night?”

“Sounds good,” said Hayley. “I just have to check into my hotel before 4.”

“A hotel?” asked Rebekah. “You wound me! We have a spare room, you know.”

“I know,” Hayley assured her. “I just really don’t want to hear what happens with the rest of the fruit.” She stood, easing out from between Rebekah and the sofa to fetch her suitcase. “I’m at the Gramercy Park Hotel. Maybe meet you guys there at 5?”

“Do you need me to bring you something to wear?”

“I can dress myself, Rebekah. I’m a big girl.”

Rebekah dragged her gaze up and down Hayley. “You’re wearing ugg boots.”

“They’re comfortable,” Hayley objected. “And I was cold.”

“Ugg is short for ‘ugly’, you know.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“Whatever.” Rebekah rolled her eyes. “Just don’t wear them to dinner.”

“Whatsoever you say.” Hayley extended the handle on her suitcase. “See you guys soon.”

They exchanged half-waves, and Hayley was out the door.

#

The hotel room was nice enough. The view wasn’t fantastic from that angle, but she hadn’t been paying that much attention when she was booking online.

She showered and changed for dinner in ten minutes, leaving her at least an hour before she was due to meet up with Marcel and Rebekah in the lobby. She’d forgotten the case of makeup she had on the shelf at home, though that was probably all expired by now. She washed her face and blow-dried her hair, calling it quits after that.

Lying spread-eagle on the bed, Hayley scrolled through the messages on her phone. There were some well-wishes from friends in New Orleans, and a question from Freya about the location of the
egg beater.

Hayley was just in the middle of drafting a text to Hope when there was a knock at the door. It wasn’t Rebekah or Marcel—she could tell by the scent. Purely human.

Wandering over to the door, Hayley unlocked it and swung it open. One of the staff members from the front desk stood there, her arms full of an enormous bouquet of red roses. “For you, Mrs. Marshall-Kenner.”

“Oh, uh, thank you.” Hayley almost took them herself, but the woman walked in and set them on a hallway table just by the door.

“Someone has an admirer,” she said, smirking at Hayley. “Let us know if you need anything.”

“I will. Thank you so much.” Hayley waved her off and closed the door, facing down the roses. She plucked a card from atop them and read the words inscribed in fancy but printed script:

Given my experiences with rough travel, I thought maybe you’d appreciate some flowers to freshen the air in your hotel room. Then I realised the address Lisina gave me of where you’re staying, and thought your accommodations might be just fine. So, no excuses here. I sent them anyway.

Have a lovely trip,

Declan

Hayley couldn’t help the smile the sprung to her lips. She didn’t particularly want to, either.

#

Dear Klaus,

So, I made a rash decision and came to New York, as you can probably tell by the stationery. I’m about to go out to dinner with Rebekah and Marcel in the next half hour, so I thought I’d use the time to write you another letter.

It’s been a while, I know. But you’re not even reading these, so I don’t think you’re waiting on them anyway. Maybe that’s why I keep writing them. I know I won’t disappoint anyone if I stop, so it’s less stressful that way. It’s not like sending formal emails to Hope’s school or dealing with the pack’s problems. You aren’t relying on this. You’ll probably never read it.

Anyway, I’m just checking in for my own benefit. There’s a lot going on that I won’t get into, but suffice to say, things in New Orleans are good. Better than I feel like they should be, which is weirding me out a bit. But I’m feeling good about things, maybe. Part of me doesn’t want to, and that part of me is scared, but I think I’ll be all right.

Hope you’re well,

Hayley
Klaus scanned the words a third time, eyes frantic as if he had to memorise them before the letter disintegrated in his hands. *You aren’t relying on this,* she’d written. *You’ll probably never read it.*

It wasn’t often that Hayley was wrong, but Klaus did so wish she was around to hear him gloat. Instead, he was holding the letters like paper lifelines, trying his best not to crease them.

Forcing himself to fold the letter and place it back into its envelope, Klaus counted the letters remaining again, just in case he’d been wrong the last time. There were two open envelopes stuffed thick with paper and four letters after that.

He was running out. He could finish them all right here, in the next hour and have nothing left of her. Nothing but their daughter.

Beside him, Hope’s eyes snapped open.
Hope’s breathing was shallow when she woke.

Klaus felt its constriction in his own chest, heart squeezing to mimic his daughter’s panicked, stuttering beat.

“Dad—”

“Shh,” he soothed, smoothing some hair back from her temple. “You’re all right. You’re all right.”

Her rabbiting heartbeat slowed as she sat up, resting her cheek on Klaus’ upper arm while he rubbed her back in slow, soothing circles. Eventually she relaxed entirely, all tension eked from her frame. Klaus released her so he could look into her eyes as he asked, “How are you feeling?”

“ Weird.” Hope drew her knees up towards her chest and tucked her hands under the comforter. She looked more like a tired, grumpy teen than the vessel for an unholy magic that threatened to crumble the city around them. “But not broken.”

“That’s always good,” Klaus said, trying to keep his tone light.

“I guess.”

“Maybe you should have a shower, freshen up. You were out in the rain for most of the night.”

“Honestly, I’m kinda worried it’ll turn to blood halfway through.”

Klaus winced. “Well—”

“I’m joking, I’m joking,” she said, tossing the comforter off and revealing the pyjamas Freya had helped her into. “Kinda.”

“Would you like beignets for breakfast?” Klaus asked, staying perched on the edge of the bed as Hope got up to rummage through her wardrobe for clothes. “You used to like them.”

“Still do.” Hope stopped flicking through her coat-hangers for a moment, hand resting on the dress she’d worn to her mother’s funeral. She kept going, faster this time, until she tugged out a shirt.
“Mom didn’t let me have them often. Said they aren’t good breakfast food unless it’s a special day.”

“Well, today feels special, doesn’t it?”

Hope eyed him curiously. “I thought you’d be madder with me.”

“I’d rather save my lectures for a time you’re not possessed with unfathomably powerful magic.”

“Lectures, plural?” Hope bundled up her clothes and held them to her belly, looking at him with those wide blue eyes that made him want to give her the world in a bowl, and a spoon to eat it with.

“I’ve been alive for over a thousand years, Hope. A thousand years of tragedy, of violence, of danger. And I have never been more terrified than I was the moment I realised what you were doing.”

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I just wanted to make it all stop.”

“I know, love.” Klaus stood both to kiss her forehead and to hide the box of letters from her line of sight. She hadn’t noticed them yet, but he wasn’t certain he wanted to risk her reading them before he was finished. He had no idea how the contents would impact her at this stage of the Hollow’s possession. Certainly not positively.

“Go shower,” he said. “I’ll have a tableful of beignets waiting for you when you’re done.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Tucking her clothes under one arm, Hope headed off to do as she was told.

Klaus turned back to the box of letters. The ones he’d read were on a pile on the floor, just by where Hope had stepped. It was a miracle she hadn’t seen them.

Stuffing them back in the box, Klaus returned to the study where he’d found them. He waited until he heard the water run in the bathroom, then retrieved the next envelope.

It was thicker than any of the others—thick with postcards, he discovered when he opened it. All were stamped with RETURN TO SENDER and bound together with a rubber band.

Easing the band off, Klaus began to read.

#

17th February, 2024

Hayley didn’t spend much time in post offices. She usually just dropped the letters for Klaus in the letter-box out front and kept on walking. She vaguely remembered picking up fancy paints imported from overseas for Hope once, but that was at least three years ago now.

Ducking in, Hayley went straight for the spinning stand of postcards. She was finding it harder to fill letters without rambling and figured postcards with pictures of New Orleans on the back might be a nudge in the right direction.
Gathering a few packs of them in her hands, Hayley found herself in a line of at least ten people. It wasn’t often that she had to wait for things, but it wasn’t particularly difficult when she did. Life happened fast in the supernatural world, so it was nice sometimes to just … be.

The man in front of her had an exciting toddler stepping on his feet, grabbing at his hands and trying to get his attention. He was occupied with the package in his arms, still scribbling an address on, but he acknowledged her once or twice with, “Yes, sweetie,” and, “I know, sweetie,” and, “We’ll be home soon, sweetie.”

Hayley hid her smile at his tired tone. She missed that, almost. By the time Hayley got Hope back as a baby, she’d been sleeping through the night. She’d thought the chance to be exhausted by her daughter was through—until she became a toddler, and a magical toddler to boot.

The customers cycled through until Hayley and the young father were standing at the dual counters beside one another. Hayley kept half an eye on the little girl, who was bouncing up and down with her hands on the edge of the counter. Hayley finished her transaction first, putting her in a much better position to catch the display the little girl almost pulled down on her head.

“Matilda!” the father shouted in alarm, pulling her out of what would’ve been the path of an entire case of sunglasses. “What did I say about grabbing things that are higher than you?” His voice was shaky with the effort to not sound angry with her.

“Not to,” Matilda replied, lower lip trembling.

“It’s all right,” said Hayley, setting the case back in place. “No harm done.”

“Thank you,” said the father. “Thank you so much.” He lifted Matilda up onto his hip as the woman at the counter handed him a receipt for the package he’d posted. He shuffled away, trying to soothe a disturbed Matilda.

The woman behind the counter peered down a little, checking that the sunglasses weren’t damaged.

“Hey,” Hayley said, getting her attention. “Maybe get that anchored to the wall before it actually crushes someone’s baby.” If she let a bit of compulsion seep into her tone, well, she figured that was probably acceptable, given the givens.

Marching out, Hayley tore the plastic wrapping off a pack of postcards with her teeth.

#

17th February, 2024

Klaus,

I’ve decided to send postcards now. They’re shorter and easier, and they make you look at pictures of the city. I know how much you love avoiding things.
Hayley kicked her feet back and took a long sip from her straw. The smoothie was on its last legs, stuttering with air as she slurped the last of it. The Mystic Grill’s smoothies weren’t fantastic, but they were the best of the drinks on offer if she didn’t want to go for something alcoholic.

“Sign where I’ve put the tabs,” Caroline said, shoving a file toward Hayley. She dropped a fountain pen on top, then grabbed her own stack of paper to look over.

DECLARATION OF NAME CHANGE.

Caroline’s neat script had filled out the form on Hayley’s behalf. She was half-convinced Caroline enjoyed the process. There was something giddy in the flicks of her pen as she signed her own forms.

Finishing first, Caroline peered over at Hayley, who was still chewing on her straw and staring at her forms carefully.

“Cold feet?” Caroline asked.

“No,” Hayley set her empty smoothie cup on the table and took the papers in both hands. “I’m sure. It’s just … so final.”

“We can always undo it later. It isn’t hard, what with the compulsion and all.”

“I know, I know. Still weird, though.”

Silence hung between them. Hayley glanced up at Caroline to find a steady gaze staring back at her, unwavering. She didn’t speak—a great feat for Caroline Forbes-Salvatore.

Or Caroline Forbes, rather.

Hayley picked up the pen as if it were a loaded weapon. She signed her name on each page where indicated, until at last she was done. No longer Hayley Marshall-Kenner. De-hyphenated.

It didn’t feel freeing. It didn’t feel like much of anything.

“You all right?” Caroline asked.

Hayley nodded. “You?”

“I’ll probably put on my wedding dress and cry tonight, but I’m fine now and I’m sure I’ll be fine tomorrow.” The tremble in her smile betrayed her assertion of her fine-ness. “If you want to join, you’re welcome to.”

“Unfortunately I didn’t have the foresight to bring my wedding dress to Mystic Falls. And I have
plans with Hope tonight.”

“Well, then.” Caroline picked up her coffee mug and tilted it forward to offer a toast. “Here’s to you, Miss Marshall.”

Hayley clinked her empty smoothie cup with the mug. “And you, Miss Forbes.”

#

15th March 2024

Klaus,

H & I doing well. Caroline & I de-hyphenated our names together, back to being single/not widows. For fun, we said, but I think it was more. Felt like a weight off my chest, and I think she was the same.

Missing you here,

Hayley

#

14th April 2024

Hayley resisted the urge to splash her face with water. It was a public restroom and she doubted it was clean. Not that the restaurant wasn’t nice, but enhanced senses made any public place a little less nice than it would’ve been otherwise.

Confronting her own reflection, Hayley bunched her hair up in her hands to try to curl the ends the way she wanted. Freya had offered a spell to make the hair sit in place, and Hayley had very intelligently assured her she didn’t care.

She did.

Checking her teeth for lipstick, Hayley pulled her roll-on deodorant from her purse and reapplied. She felt hot under the skin, like a thousand eyes were warming her. There was no one in the bathroom with her, but even there she felt observed. Was she doing this right? Dating was entirely
foreign to her, and even after hours of consulting Keelin and Josh she still felt woefully under-prepared.

“Fuck,” she hissed, giving up with her hair and tying it up instead. Holding her breath in as though it would bolster her courage, Hayley bit the bullet and left the bathroom.

It was an Italian restaurant just outside the Quarter. Hayley was almost certain Klaus had brought takeaway home from there once before declaring it an affront to his tastebuds and never returning. She hadn’t minded it, though it was harder to enjoy food with nerves twisting around her intestines like twine.

Declan looked awkward, back at the table alone. He was adjusting and readjusting his shirt sleeves. His glass of water was drained, though he still looked thirsty.

But when he caught sight of her, the anxiety melted away, replaced by that easy smile, the kind that infected her lips as well.

“Ready to order?” he asked.

Hayley nodded, sliding back into her chair. “Yeah, I am.”

#

14th April 2024

Klaus,

Went on a date. He’s nice, but you’d hate him. Probably hate him because he’s nice. Thinking of introducing him to Hope properly, and it’s weird to not have you arguing with me. Guess that makes it my fault if it goes badly.

Hayley

#

20th April, 2024

Hayley flipped her collar up against the harsh, frigid wind that whipped at her skin and stung at her eyes. Winter was ebbing into spring, but the night still brought a chill with it.
The compound was oddly quiet when Hayley returned home. She dropped her keys on the table by the front door, toeing her boots off and leaving them on the pile nearby too.

Freya and Keelin’s heartbeats were on opposite sides of the compound—Freya in one of the libraries working on a spell, and Keelin in the living room watching TV. Hayley headed upstairs, her socks slipping on the smooth, varnished wood as she headed for the living room.

“Hey,” she greeted.

Keelin sat up a little on the sofa, resting her head on an upturned palm. “Out at the bayou?”

“Yes. You been here all day?"

Keelin glanced in the direction of the hallway. “Mostly.”

“Everything okay?”

“Freya and I are just having a disagreement.”

“Oh.” Hayley had little experience with that kind of thing—all her issues were the life-or-death variety, even in her relationship with Jackson. She didn’t know much about the day-to-day negotiations. “Wanna talk about it?”

“I’d rather not put you in that position.”

Hayley wanted to push the matter—insist that she could remain impartial, that she could help. Considering Keelin’s tense body language, she decided against it.

“Okay,” Hayley said, squeezing Keelin’s shoulder. “But let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“I will,” Keelin promised.

Hayley doubted that. Maybe Freya would have answers.

#

20th April, 2024

Klaus,

Keelin is thinking abt going overseas for work. Freya’s upset, but I think she understands. Not sure what’s going on there, but I think they’ll be okay. If they aren’t, love probably isn’t real.

Hayley
13th May, 2024

Hayley grunted, arms tangled in the quilt cover she was wrangling with. The comforter wouldn’t fit inside, bunching down the bottom and refusing to budge.

She was an all-powerful vampire-werewolf hybrid. She should be able to make a fucking bed.

“Need a hand?”

Hayley pulled her upper body out of the cover to look at Declan. “I’m sure I can manage it.”

His eyes creased at the corners as he surveyed the bare mattress and clean sheets still tangled up in a basket on the floor. “Well, you’re doing so well so far.”

“Thank you,” Hayley bit back. “It’s just such a nightmare.”

“Does it have ties in the corners?” Declan asked, stepping forward to pick up the cover. He searched through the fabric with his hands. “No, but I can make do with some safety pins if you have them.”

“Freya does up in her—” spellroom, Hayley almost said. “Study. I’ll go get them.”

She had just started for the door when Declan grabbed her arm gently, stopping her. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Hayley tried to sound confident, but broke quickly. “Just nervous. I miss her, but every time she comes home I worry she’ll be distant again.”

“You said she’s been doing better,” Declan reminded her. Ever since that fateful night where Hope collapsed trying to astral project to Klaus, Declan had been very concerned about her overall health. He didn’t get any of the true explanations for events, so perhaps a part of his mind recognised he was being misled and redirected his attention to Hayley and Hope’s relationship constantly.

“She has been. I still worry.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Plus, she’ll be a teenager this year.”

Hayley groaned. “Don’t remind me. I’m not ready for that.”

Declan slipped his arms around her waist and dropped his forehead to hers. “You’re ready for anything, love.”

Tilting her head up, Hayley pressed their lips together for the briefest moment, then retreated. “I’m gonna grab those safety pins.”
13th May, 2024

Klaus,

H coming home from school soon. She’ll be a teenager this year, so we’re planning a bigger party than usual.

Wish you could be here to make it more obnoxious,

Hayley

#

30th April, 2024

“Absolutely not.”

“If you’d just consider—”

“No, Kol.” Hayley glared at his image on her phone screen. “No animals in the compound.”

“A girl only turns thirteen once. There should be at least a tiger there.”

“At least? Not at all. We’re having an intimate family celebration, not hosting a circus.”

Kol sighed. “You’re really not going to like my next suggestion.”

“I could’ve told you that.”

“Would you be more convinced if I told you I’ve already paid them for the job?”

“You’re a vampire, Kol. You have unlimited funds, so don’t try to guilt trip me with that shit. They’ve been paid for nothing.”

“You don’t even know what they do!”

“But I know what you do.” Hayley jumped up from the sofa and headed for the library, where Freya was poring over some tomes with a pen wedged between her teeth. “He’s your brother,” Hayley announced, shoving the phone in her direction. “You deal with him.”

Freya took the phone and beamed at the screen. “What are you doing to Hayley?”

“Trying to plan her daughter the perfect birthday celebration.”
“Kol, we agreed you aren’t allowed to plan anymore parties. Not after the frogs at the wedding.”

“They were fun!”

“Davina asked you to order doves to be released. That was the one part of the wedding you were actually responsible for it, and you went for frogs instead.”

“Perhaps not my finest hosting hour——”

“Don’t make me recount others. Leave Hayley alone.”

“Fine. But it’ll cost you.”

“You can just hang up on him,” Hayley advised.

Freya chuckled. “Oh, I often do,” she said, and did just that.

#

30th April, 2024

Klaus,

Kol got involved in the party planning. He can’t come, but he’s trying to make it as ridiculous as possible anyway. Pretty sure I’ll have to turn away a petting zoo and some circus performers on the big day. I’m travelling to MF to be with H on her actual birthday, then bringing her back here for the big event. We’ll see if the house is still standing.

Hayley

#

5th May, 2024

Hayley shoved her hand in the trash bag and crushed its contents down, making room for more plastic cups and paper plates to go on top. The living area was mostly clean (they hadn’t exactly had tons of people over for the party, anyway), the food all packed away in the fridge to be tomorrow’s leftovers.
“A rousing success by any measure,” Declan praised from the doorway. He was still wearing his apron, sweat dotting his brow from working in the kitchen most of the night.

“It was nice,” Hayley agreed. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to spend more time as a part of the celebrations.”

Declan opened his arms slightly, waiting for her to tuck herself into them. When she did, he pulled her tight until all the tension drained out of her frame. “No need for apologies. I’m never unhappy in a kitchen.”

“But I might prefer for you to be never unhappy with my family instead.” Hayley tilted her head up to look at him, her nose brushing against his chin. “Maybe I should hire a different caterer from now on. Have you here as a guest.”

“Blasphemy,” Declan countered in mock outrage.

Hayley laughed into his mouth before she kissed it. He tasted like the night’s meal and the glass of bourbon Marcel had offered him on his break. Though he hated it, Declan had accepted the offer gratefully. Hayley knew he didn’t have a full understanding of what Marcel meant to the Hayley (it was hard to spin the whole adoptive step-son story when he and Hayley looked the same age), but he had to have sensed that he was more than just Hope’s big brother.

Pulling back, Hayley blinked heavily at Declan and tried to get her tired thoughts in order. “You should go to bed. I just have to finish cleaning up in here and get Hope to sleep, then I’ll join you.”

“Allow me to halve your task.” Declan ducked around her and snatched the trash bag up. “You go see to the kid—I’ll manage this.”

Heart warm with appreciation, Hayley kissed her fingers and pressed them to Declan’s hand before she left.

Hope was up in Klaus’ old art room, curled up on the ancient, dusty sofa. Her breathing gave away her slumber before Hayley entered, too even and heavy to be wakeful. Her new sketchbook was clutched against her chest, rising with each inhale, falling with the exhale. She was still in her party dress, a cute green number Rebekah had sent over, but her shoes were kicked off under the coffee table.

And spread out on the coffee table was art, dozens of loose paper covered in charcoal pieces. Hayley recognised the hectic, angry strokes.

Klaus.

Not having the heart to wake her, Hayley carefully pried the sketchbook from Hope’s grip and set it on the table with Klaus’ work. She sourced a blanket from the chest by the wall and draped it over her, then switched off the lamp by her head.

She gave Hope a finger kiss, using the same movement to sweep her hair back off her forehead. “Happy birthday, sweetie.”
5th May, 2024

Klaus,

Hope is home. The party was a success, and Kol’s influence was only slightly bothersome. She knows the gifts we say are from you aren’t from you, but I think she figured that out last year. She hasn’t said anything yet. I still think she’s happy.

Hayley

#

8th May, 2024

“Hey, Mom.” Hope plopped down in the chair across from Hayley. “Sorry I’m late. Aunt Freya said to tell you it’s her fault.”

“That’s okay.” Hayley handed Hope a menu, though she was certain her daughter knew the Rousseau’s menu better than its chef. “How was your morning?”

“Good. Aunt Freya and I walked Aunt Keelin to the hospital and I painted in the park for a while on the way back. How was the bayou?”

“It was good—” Hayley broke off when she saw Poppy headed for them with the pad of paper in her hand. She didn’t need it—she could remember everyone’s order off by heart—but she at least needed to hand the ticket to Declan so he could prepare the food.

“What can I get you girls?” Poppy asked, pen poised.

“I’ll have the chicken fried steak and a Dr. Pepper, please,” said Hope.

“Uh-huh.” Poppy nodded, ponytail swinging. “And you, Hayley?”

“Just my usual, but switch the drink for soda.”

Poppy snorted. “Sure thing. I’ll be back shortly.” She gathered the menus and dashed away to seat another group.

“So the bayou was good?” Hope prompted.

“Yeah, it was great.” Except the part where Lisina pulled Hayley aside to tell her that Henry was struggling at school. She said he’d pulled away from her, stopped telling her stories about his time there. “How is school going?”
“Uh.” Hope hesitated a little. “It’s fine.”

“Do you hang out with Henry much?”

“Not really. The wolves are kind of clique-y, I guess, so I avoid them.”

“So Henry hangs out with the wolves at school?”

Hope’s eyes glazed over a little. “I’m not really sure. I spend most of my time studying, anyway. Trying to pick up my grades. Caroline said that if I keep improving like this they might have to invent supernatural AP classes just for me.”

“That’s awesome, sweetie.” Hayley meant it, despite the doubt niggling at the back of her mind. Where was Henry while Hope was holed up in her room, surrounded by books?

Her opportunity to ask was dashed by Poppy’s return with their drinks, and a single daisy in a vase. “Compliments of the chef,” she said, smirking and setting the flower down in the middle of the table.

Any embarrassment pinking Hayley’s cheeks was smothered by the sound of Hope’s laugh. “Aww,” she teased, bumping Hayley’s foot with hers. “That’s cute.”

“Shut up.”

#

8th May, 2024

Klaus,

I think one of Hope’s friends is being bullied at school. She says he’s okay, but I’m not sure she’s paying attention. Should I be encouraging her to stand up for him, or will that end badly? Unsure. I also think she’s planning a surprise birthday party for me, which is taking up plenty of her time.

Hayley

#

6th June, 2024

Hayley reclined back in her chair, letting the sun soak into her skin. She didn’t get to do this very often—just sit and enjoy the day, no worries, no meetings, no dramas with Hope. Just peace.
It really had been the perfect day.

“Mind if I join you?” asked Keelin. She was wearing a cute, strappy sundress, the same shade of pink that Freya’s cheeks had turned when she first saw her girlfriend in it.

“Of course not.” Hayley patted the chair beside her.

Keelin sat down gracefully, arranging the skirt of her dress just so. She pushed her bare feet out to the edge of the jetty as though proximity to the water’s edge would cool her down better. “You look pretty peaceful.”

“I feel it, too.”

“Yeah, it’s nice to have a day off.” Keelin adjusted the brim of her hat so it wouldn’t fall off when she tilted her head back.

“Mmm,” Hayley agreed.

They lapsed into comfortable silence, the echoing sounds of laughter emanating from the party going on behind them.

#

6th June, 2024

Klaus,

The party was sweet. We went out to the bayou for the day. Declan catered a menu she helped him pick out, and Freya and Keelin helped her decorate a picnic area with streamers. Probably the best birthday I’ve ever had.

Hayley

#

14th August, 2024

Klaus,
“Dad?” Hope called, her footsteps echoing down the hall, each closer than the last. “Have you seen my sketchbook?”

By the time she rounded the door into her room again, Klaus had tucked the postcards away. “No, sweetheart. Are you sure you didn’t leave it at school?”

“Yeah, I’ve had it since.” Hope sighed, her forehead creasing. Her hair was damp around her temples and she smelled like Hayley’s favourite body wash. “Maybe I left it in Aunt Freya’s car.”

“No need to worry,” Klaus assured her, breezing over to her and covering her shoulders with his palms. “I’ll go track it down. You see if Aunt Freya needs any help setting the table, all right?”

Hope bobbed her head, accepting the kiss her dropped on her temple. Klaus waited for her to leave before zipping back into the room and retrieving the box of letters. He hid it away in his own room, where he knew no one else would dare to venture.

Tucking a few unread postcards into his back pocket for later, Klaus headed off in search of his daughter’s sketchbook. God, he hoped that was the most difficult task of the day.

#

It wasn’t. It really, really wasn’t.

Klaus tried to steady his anxious breathing, desperate not to disturb Hope. She wasn’t quite asleep yet, but her head rested against his shoulder and her breathing was slowing by the minute.

He should tell her to brush her teeth and change into pyjamas, but he hasn’t seen her this peaceful since she was no taller than his waist, sitting on a picnic table and scribbling butterflies onto printer paper. Seeing exhaustion smooth the anger and grief from her face and leave her as what she was—a little girl in need of comfort … that wasn’t something Klaus was about to ruin.

Biting back his anguish over the day’s events, Klaus forced himself to calm, easing his daughter gently into sleep.
His daughter, a werewolf.

She’d been one all her life, Klaus reasoned. They’d known this was coming. He and Hayley had discussed it at length when Hope was young. He remembered their road trip a decade ago, meeting that young wolf Hayley had known. Klaus didn’t remember her name, but he remembered her fear. It had struck him, then, that one day Hope would feel it too. Fear of the coming pain, of the agony that the moon would bring.

How could he have chased his wolf heritage for so long, only to watch it bring his daughter pain?

“I can see the cogs grinding, brother,” said Freya, bringing his attention back into the room. “Tell us what you’re thinking.”

Us. Not me, not Freya. Freya and Elijah.

Elijah was home. What should have been a weight off his heart was significantly dampened by the circumstances.

“We need to prepare her,” Elijah said. “You can do that best of all of us, Niklaus.”

“Actually …” Freya glanced between them nervously. “Hayley and Lisina talked to Hope a while back. I think she’s prepared.”

“Perhaps Niklaus should still address it—”

Elijah broke off when Klaus shot to his feet. He left without speaking, Elijah’s reassuring, “This is to be expected,” following him out.

Shut up in his room, Klaus pulled the box of letters from beneath the bed. He’d been avoiding them for days while he dealt with Hope’s ailing health, barely resting himself. Perhaps he hadn’t wanted to see Hayley’s blocky script detailing her parenting successes when he saw only failures in his own.

Swallowing back the bitterness, Klaus began to read.

#
Hayley didn’t cook very often.

She preferred to leave that to Declan or the chef in whatever restaurant she was ordering takeout from. But every now and then she tried a recipe, usually either with Hope or with the intention of cooking it with Hope eventually. She hadn’t just fed her daughter hot pockets and mac and cheese as a child, but she figured a teenager had a more sophisticated palate than an eight-year-old.

The spaghetti was going well by the time Freya got home. Keelin was due home from work any minute, and Hayley heard Freya search for her girlfriend before finally arriving down in the kitchen.

“She’s not home yet,” Hayley said, tasting an uncooked pasta noodle. “How’s Vincent?”

“Mooning over Ivy. It’s annoying, watching him restrain himself.”

“Entertaining, though.”

“Oh, definitely.” Freya hopped up onto a spare patch of bench and let her legs swing out into the open air.

“Is, uh …” Hayley turned the stove down a little and turned to face Freya. “Is everything okay with you and Keelin? Things have been kind of frosty around here lately. I’ve been trying to give you privacy, but—”

Freya snorted. “Keelin says you put in earphones every time we start talking to each other at night.”

“Well, I don’t want to intrude. Hybrid senses are hard to turn off.”

“We appreciate the effort, but it’s fine. If we didn’t want you to know, we’d take a drive.”

“Noted.” Hayley scooped up some of the meat on a spoon and offered it to Freya.

Freya licked the spoon clean and nodded. “Needs a bit more salt, but other than that it’s good.”

Hayley fist-pumped internally, counting that as a win. “So, since you’re fine with me knowing what’s going on, does that mean you wanna talk about it?”

Freya tossed the spoon at the sink, wincing when it clattered against some dishes. “It’s … Keelin wants to go join Doctors Without Borders and save the world.”

“And you don’t want her to?” Hayley asked sceptically. She would be going to scary places, but Keelin was a scary person. A werewolf could handle a warzone.

“She wants me to go with her.”

Well, a witch could handle a warzone even better. “But you’re … afraid of flying?”

“No,” said Freya. “I’m just occupied.”

“Not to sound like a total bitch, but I think Vincent can manage without you. He won’t want to, but he’ll do it.” Hayley watched Freya shift uncomfortably. “But that’s not what you meant.”

Grimace twisting her face, Freya said, “I still haven’t found it. It’s been years of research, but I can’t see the way.”

“You’re not solely responsible for saving your family, Freya. The Hollow is unlike anything you’ve faced before. It’s okay to give yourself time, and a break if you need it. It’s not killing us.”
“But it’s hurting us, isn’t it?” asked Freya. “I’ve seen you writing those letters, Hayley. I see them come back.”

“That’s not The Hollow’s doing, Freya. That’s Klaus being an asshole.”

“Because he’s hurting. Because he misses his family and he doesn’t know how to be the dark thing he becomes alone and also love us at the same time. Without Elijah, without Hope, he’s not coping.”

“What do you know about it?” Hayley asked. “Have you heard from him?”

“Not directly, but Rebekah hears stories. It’s how she finds where he is. She can’t visit him and she insists that I shouldn’t try either, but it’s hard to hear these stories and not run to find him.”

“What stories?”

Freya met Hayley’s gaze with a steely one of her own. “I’m sure you can imagine.”

“Jesus Christ.” Hayley leaned back against the counter and rubbed her eyes. “Has Hope heard any of them?”

“Not as far as we know, but she goes to school with a lot of supernatural kids. Kids that have supernatural parents, who are privy to supernatural gossip. We can’t protect her from the rumours.”

When she spoke, Hayley’s voice was thick with unshed tears. “Does he know he’s hurting her?”

“I don’t think there’s a way to get through to him anyway. Not with what I’ve been hearing.” Freya hopped off the counter to be closer to Hayley’s eye-level. “And this is what I’m talking about. It would be one thing if we were all adults and Klaus didn’t become homicidal the moment he’s left unsupervised. But Hope’s a kid, and she’s getting tales of a monster instead of an actual father that we both know loves her more than anything in the world. I have to fix this, and I can’t do that dodging bullets and saving lives with Keelin.”

“Then what are you gonna do?”

“I told her she can go if she wants. She said she’d postpone for now, but I don’t think she’ll wait forever. And when she comes back brimming with war stories and knowing all the good she’s done …” Freya blinked back tears. “She isn’t going to want to stay here.”

Hayley threw an arm around Freya. “You don’t know that.”

“I know her.” Freya rested her head on Hayley’s shoulder. “And I know that if I don’t fix this soon, I’m going to lose her.”

Hayley bit back any retort she could think of. Freya knew Keelin better than her, and it was impossible to argue. The longer this went on, the more people got hurt. Hope, Freya, Keelin …

It had to stop.

#

Klaus,
I know I agreed to stop telling you to write back a while ago. I knew it was useless. But I need you to think about how many people you’re hurting. We know what you’ve been doing, and it’s only a matter of time until Hope does too. Please talk to me. I can help you.

Hayley

#

20th November, 2024

The Mystic Grill hadn’t changed a bit. It would be decorated for Christmas soon, but right now it was its usual bustling self with surly teenagers for waitstaff and a grouchy cook sweating in the kitchen out back. Not exactly Rousseau’s, but it had its own charm.

As always, Caroline had arrived first. She sprung up to greet Hayley, banding her arms around her so hard the breath was driven out. Nothing quite like a hug from Caroline, Hayley mused as she returned the embrace.

“How are you?” Caroline gripped Hayley’s arms and walked her backwards toward the table so they could sit down.

Hayley shrugged off her coat and hung it on the back of her chair before she sat down on it. “A little tired from the drive. Hungry. You’ve ordered?”

“I assumed you’d like the soup of the day. Clam chowder is okay, right? I think I’ve seen you eat it before.”

“Yeah, that’s great,” Hayley assured her. “And how are you?”

“Managing. Things are hectic, but when aren’t they?” Caroline ran her hand around the rim of her orange juice glass as though she wished it were a wine glass instead. She hadn’t been drinking lately, Hayley had noticed. “Do you want to look at Hope’s report before or after we eat?”

“After, probably.” Hayley was keen to see it, but she had other things to address first. “There’s something I wanted to bring up with you first.”

Caroline raised an eyebrow. “Sure.”

“It’s …” Hayley adjusted her cutlery off to one side so she could lay her hands flat on the table to stop from fidgeting. “I know you’ve offered a couple times and I’ve turned you down, but I was thinking maybe it’s time for you to try and contact Klaus.”

Eyes wide, Caroline breathed, “Oh.”

“That is, if you’re comfortable. Rebekah usually has his last address, just not a current one. He hasn’t responded to any of my letters or postcards and I just—I don’t think he’s still at the places I send them.”
Caroline folded her arms over her chest protectively, slumping a little in her chair. “What would you want me to say? I don’t know if I can make him talk to you.”

“But if anyone could, it’s you.”

They’d never openly discussed Klaus and Caroline’s connection before. Maybe Caroline thought Hayley was bothered by it.

“Are you sure that tempting him to come back is what’s best?” Caroline asked. “It’s still important that he stays away.”

“Physically, yes, but nothing’s stopping him from calling or astral projecting.”

“He’s deliberately stopping others from projecting to him,” Caroline pointed out. “That night when Hope tried … that was some violent push-back.”

“And I’m sure it was unintentional.”

“I’m not doubting that, but does he know about it? Does he know that he hurt her that night?”

Hayley paused. “Rebekah’s the only one with a chance in hell of passing on the message, and Freya and I both decided it wasn’t worth telling her and risking her going after him herself. She can be … impulsive.”

Caroline scoffed. “An understatement.”

“So … will you do it? It doesn’t have to be now, but just … soon.”

“I can try,” Caroline said carefully. “But I don’t want you to think that just because he and I have had something in the past that I can get through to him. He cares for you.”

“Not that much.”

“Yes, he does,” Caroline continued, tone doubtless. “You and Klaus have what Ric and I do. You’re parents. Partners. The only person in the whole world who loves Hope as much as the two of you is each other, and he knows that. Aunts, uncles, teachers, friends—no one will ever be as connected to that child as you and him. If he thinks it’s okay to ignore you, he’ll probably do the same to me.”

“You’re important to him.”

“I know I am, and I’m willing to bet a lot on it. He and I … we have something between us. But that something is not a living, breathing human being that relies on us for protection and love and support. Hope should be enough for him to pick up the phone. If she isn’t, then Hayley … he might be too far gone.”

Hayley stared at one of the lights set into the ceiling, hoping the brightness would burn away the gathering tears in her eyes. “I can’t give up on him.”

“Then we won’t.” Caroline brushed Hayley’s hand gently, bringing her attention back to her. “I’ll call Rebekah and ask for her advice on finding him, maybe take a week or two off after the New Year to track him down. What do you want me to tell him?”

“Tell him he’s hurting us. Tell him he’s thwarting Freya’s chance at happiness. Tell him that we need him to stay as present as he can, and that having no him doesn’t mean having no hurt.”

“Okay,” said Caroline, digesting. “I will.”
“Thank you,” Hayley breathed.

“You’re welcome.” Caroline’s soft smile morphed into a beam. “Thank god, the food’s here!”

#


Dear Klaus,

I need to talk to you. This has gone on long enough, so I’m sending reinforcements to find you. Please, please, please don’t be a dick to her.

Yours,

Hayley

#

19th December, 2024

Hayley stalked the rows of dilapidated pine trees, her boots slushing in the sodden pine needles at her feet. Most of the trees she passed were bald in places, and the ones that weren’t were half-brown.

Marcel must’ve caught the irritated look on her face, because he said, “Not to be that guy, but if we wanted a better tree…”

“We could’ve come sooner than five days before Christmas, yeah, I know.” Hayley lifted a branch on a healthy-looking tree and checked beneath it, finding a gaping hole in the trunk.

“Let me guess—you didn’t want to do it without me?” Marcel asked, smirking. He was dressed inappropriately for the occasion in nice pants, a button-down, and loafers, but he’d come to help her the moment he arrived at the compound after his journey in from New York.

“I didn’t really want to do it alone, no, and Freya and Keelin have been busy. I can lift the tree onto the truck by myself, but I’ll get weird looks doing it.”

“Why not ask them?” Marcel gestured towards the two attendants laughing with a group of customers a few feet away.

“So they can call me sweetheart and ask about my big plans for Christmas?” Hayley made a face. “No thanks. I try my best not to eat humans as a general rule.”
“Such a stickler for your rules,” Marcel teased. “So, what do you think we should do here?”

“Find the least ugly and pray.”

Marcel laughed. “Or you could let me show you something.”

“What?”

Marcel reached out to the ugliest one, all brittle and sickly, and called to the attendants. “We’ll take this one!”

One of the guys, with a faded nametag that read “Ste”, wandered over. “You sure that’s the one you want?”

Hayley raised an eyebrow at Marcel and replied, “Apparently. How much?”

Ste snorted. “Whatever loose change you’ve got in your purse and we’ll call it even.”

“I think I have like, three dollars,” Hayley said skeptically.

“I’d pay you that to take this off my hands.” Ste held his hand out, palm up, and accepted the coins. “Need any help loading it up?”

Marcel scooped the tree up onto his shoulder, a shower of dead pine needles falling behind him. “I got it.”

Ste’s eyes bugged a little. “Yes, sir. Have a nice holiday.”

“You, too!” Marcel responded cheerily, starting to march away.

Hayley jogged to keep up with him. “What are you doing?”

“Trust me.”

#

The tree was almost completely bald by the time they got back to the compound. Hayley helped Marcel guide it through the house into the living room, where Freya and Hope were curled up with hot chocolate and old Christmas movies.

“What is that thing?” Freya asked, nose wrinkling. “Were the others really all gone?”

“Nope,” Hayley grunted, helping Marcel set the tree down on the stand. “Marcel just insisted on picking up a charity case.”

“You have such little faith in your daughter,” Marcel said, beaming at Hope. “You can fix this, right?”

Hope shrugged. “Probably.”

“Is there really a pine tree-fixing spell?” Hayley asked, glancing at Freya.

“There are growth spells,” said Freya, “but I’ve never really researched them. I can find some
“No need,” said Hope, jumping up to get a better look at her patient. “We learned about it in botany class. I’m pretty good at it.”

“Pretty good.” Marcel rolled his eyes and grabbed Hope around the shoulders, squeezing tight. “I was visiting, and they let me sit in on her class. Valerie Tulle said Hope’s reanimation spell was the best she’d ever seen. She brought a cactus back to life in an hour.”

“Seriously?” Hayley’s eyes widened, taking in Hope’s pink cheeks. “Hope, that’s amazing.” And why didn’t I know about it? She’d seen Hope’s grades and heard Caroline’s glowing report during their meeting, but she hadn’t known about this.

“It’s no big deal,” Hope dismissed. “And I can probably fix this. I haven’t done reanimation since we finished learning it in class, but I have the spells recorded in my grimoire. If I can use some of Aunt Freya’s ingredients …” She trailed off, glancing at her aunt.

“Oh course,” said Freya. “If you don’t mind showing your aunt a thing or two.”

A smile split Hope’s face, lighting up her eyes from behind. “Sure.”

#

Klaus,

I know I haven’t written in a while. I’ve been mad, and I still am, but I just wanted to let you know we have a magic baby. I knew before, and I know you think you know, but if you’d seen what I just saw, I think you’d realise you never knew at all. If that makes sense.

Hayley

#

15th January, 2025

Hayley got the call at 6pm in the car.

She pulled over immediately, pressing ANSWER and lifting the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Hey,” said Caroline. “Sorry if it’s a bad time.”

“No, it’s fine.” She was on the way to a restaurant to meet Declan for date night, but he’d wait. He
was a patient guy. “Have you found him?”

“I, um …” Caroline’s voice was thick and raw, and Hayley didn’t think it was just the connection.
“I found something.”

“How bad?”

“Confirmation that the rumours are true. He’s eating hearts and stringing people up in fucked up marionette shows. People are calling him Klaus the Mad.”

“Jesus Christ.” Hayley resisted the urge to crack the steering wheel. That was hard to explain to the mechanic. “And he’s gone?”

“I think so. All the bodies are cold and his scent didn’t lead me anywhere. I can stay and keep canvassing, but—”

“No,” Hayley said. “No, I don’t want you to go after him. God knows what state he’s in, and if he hurt you—”

“I can handle him.”

“You shouldn’t have to.” Hayley balled her free hand into a fist, watching her knuckles whiten. “I never should’ve asked you to do this. Go home to your kids.”

Hayley hung up before Caroline could get another word in.

#

As predicted, Declan was waiting patiently at the restaurant. He made no comment on her tardiness, and she was far too spaced out to remember to apologise for it either.

“Are you all right?” he asked her some time later, drawing her attention back to him.

“Hmm?”

“You’ve been distant all night. Do you want me to take you home?”

“No, no.” Hayley ran a fork through her pasta, cold and uneaten. “I’m fine. I just …”

“You are a lot of things. Fine isn’t one of them.” Declan reached across the table to take Hayley’s hand in his, just like Caroline had done the last time she was dining out and holding back tears over Klaus. “You can tell me anything. You know that, right?”

“I …” Hayley forced herself to meet his gaze and not look away. “I’ve been trying to contact Hope’s dad. She’s really beaten up over him not being around, and I want him to just call or write or something, but he won’t. Every letter I send is sent right back to me. I swore I’d never give up on him but I’m just so tired.” Tears warped her voice, making it wobble.

Declan brushed his thumb over her knuckles. “Have you tried asking his siblings? Freya doesn’t know anything?”

“No, and neither do the others. I had a friend out looking for him, but it’s not fair to ask her to traipse
all over the world. She has her own life.”

“You could look for him. I could even come with you.”

The thought of Declan chasing corpses for clues about Klaus was chilling. “No, no, I don’t want to do that.” Hayley wiped away what tears had fallen. “I think I just need to work on managing my expectations better. Dealing with the disappointment is hard.”

Declan nodded understandingly. “It was the same for my mum. It’s hard having a deadbeat dad, but it’s just as hard being the single mum left behind to deal with his messes.”

Hayley drew her hand back on instinct, pulling it into her body and away from Declan’s grip. “He’s not a deadbeat dad.”

“Respectfully, love, what else could he be?”

“He—he loves Hope. He cares for her, and for me. He didn’t want to leave—”

Declan raised his hands defensively. “I didn’t mean to imply that he was glad to go. I don’t know the situation, mostly because you haven’t told me anything—”

“I don’t have to,” Hayley pointed out.

“No, but you can’t expect me to help you if I don’t have all the information.”

“I’m not asking you to help me, Declan. And Klaus is not a deadbeat dad.”

“Then where is he?” asked Declan, voice raised enough to draw attention from the diners around them. He lowered it when he continued, “Look, I don’t want to fight—”

“Me neither.” Hayley picked up her purse and stood. “I’m going home to cool off.”

Declan’s chair squealed as he pushed it back to follow her. “Love—”

“Just don’t,” said Hayley. “I’ll call you in the morning.”

She left without saying goodbye.

#

Klaus,

You’re not a deadbeat dad, but you’re starting to look like one. I don’t like having to defend you to people who don’t know you. I wish you’d give me some proof that you still care.

Hayley
Hayley had never been very good at construction. There’d been no reason to learn on the road, and since she found a home in New Orleans the Mikaelsons had been more than willing to foot the bill and compel the workers to do whatever she needed.

The wolves’ needs were slightly different, however. They weren’t flush with cash and they loathed the idea of compulsion (as they should), so any building happened at the hands of the pack as a whole. Usually during a worker bee day where everyone brought tools and platters of food and just worked until it was all done, which was quite something to see. A barn-raising, almost, but for everything.

The Cortez family were building a home on the outskirts of town. There they joined a few families who had relocated to within the city limits, part of expanding the pack’s boundaries and sharing the space with the other factions. The Cortezes were probably the most high-profile family to make the shift, buying up a vacant lot and doing most of the planning themselves. Maria Cortez was an architect that was glad for the chance to build her family something perfectly tailored to them, and the pack was happy to help.

So Hayley was stuck watching over them all, pretending she sort of knew what she was doing. They all knew she didn’t, and it had become something of a joke (“And you hold the hammer with the handle, and hit the nail on the head”). She ended up with most of the menial chores like keeping the kids in their play area in next door’s backyard, planning mealtimes, holding ladders steady, and running back and forth from trucks and toolboxes to provide people with whatever they needed to get the job done.

All told, it was a long day but an easy one. It felt like she’d hardly made a single difficult decision, just followed Maria’s directions and made sure everyone was fed and hydrated enough to do their best. It was like parenting, but with less fires to put out. Literally and figuratively.

Lisina and Hayley rode back together. Hayley had picked her up at 5am, and there they were, nearing twelve hours later and exhausted from the events between. But a good exhausted, Hayley assessed. She’d sleep well that night.

“I wanted a chance to talk to you,” Lisina began, somewhat leadingly.

“Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know. I think … I guess Henry hasn’t been talking to me as much as he usually does? And that’s fine, but every time we do talk it feels like there’s something wrong.”

“Have you emailed Caroline about it?” Hayley asked. “That’s usually my first move.”

“I don’t have her address.”

“I can give it to you. She should get back to you pretty quickly with some answers, and she and Ric are good at following these things up.”

“I don’t want to feel …” Lisina picked at the faux leather on her seat. “I don’t want them to think I’m
panicking just because he’s at boarding school. I’m sure they get all kinds of ridiculous concerns from parents. And I know I don’t know him as well as the other kids’ parents do, but I feel like something is going on that he’s not talking about and it worries me.”

“Lisina.” Hayley glanced at her, trying to keep her focus on the road but also make sure Lisina was hearing her clearly. “Even if everything’s fine, having Caroline’s email address and knowing what the process is like might help you later if there was anything wrong. You’re creating a template for worries you have later, so you know how to deal with them. Also … just because you’re not his mom doesn’t mean you don’t know him.”

“I guess.” Lisina still sounded worried, but then she continued, “If you could send me Caroline’s email address, that’d be great. I’m sure she gave me her card at some point but I must’ve lost it. Very responsible of me.”

Hayley reached across the car to pat Lisina’s arm as she turned into her driveway. “You have a lot on your plate.” Pulling up out front, Hayley put the car in park. “I hope you get some rest tonight.”

“I’m sure I will.”

Hayley watched Lisina trudge into her home with something like a stone lodged in her gut.

#

Klaus,

I think something is going on with Lisina. You’ve never really met her, and you wouldn’t like her, but I wish you were here to help me figure out how to help her. She says it’s all about Henry but I don’t think so. She uprooted her life to take care of him, and I guess focusing on him makes it easier for her to deal with things.

I think she might be lonely. I recognise the feeling.

Hayley

#

May 17th, 2026

Klaus finished the last postcard three times, reading it over and over. Perhaps it was because it was the last of the stack before Hayley switched back to letters, perhaps he was just feeling particularly
melancholy at Elijah’s return to the fold, but Klaus found himself dropping it onto the table and standing, something like purpose locking his knees and stopping him from sitting back down.

He located Elijah on his way out of the compound, jacket slung on haphazardly and keys dangling from his fingers.

“Watch Hope,” he instructed. “I’ll be back soon.”

If Elijah had any objections, he didn’t voice them.

#

Klaus had never understood the appeal of the bayou. In essence, he’d helped build the city to get away from the heat, the flies and the incessant chirping of insects. He’d kept himself and his family high up in houses and apartments, cooled by damp brick structures and advancing technology.

He loathed discomfort, and the bayou offered plenty of it.

While still unappealing, the bayou would now serve as a reminder of Hayley. Her name was carved in the tree, her ashes scattered over the lake by the werewolf encampment. She had loved the bayou best of all New Orleans. Klaus had never met her parents, but Marcel said she inherited her love of the bayou from her father. *Not just a pack thing*, he’d said when Klaus brought it up at the funeral. A *Labonair obsession. Could hardly get Theo out into the city for faction meetings.*

Perhaps he’d underestimated his son’s attachment to the Labonair bloodline. Perhaps saving Hayley as an infant was about more than just a random child in need of protection. It warranted further investigation, though Klaus was beginning to suspect he wouldn’t have the chance for it.

It had taken a phone call with Caroline to find the address. She’d been reluctant to tell him, citing a breach of something school security-related, but Klaus reminded her it was a) the private information of a now deceased student, and b) if he did anything violent to the wolves in the bayou Hope might kill him herself. She had that Labonair love for the bayou and its wolves as much as her mother or grandfather had.

His destination wasn’t far from the lake where they’d held Hayley’s funeral. The house was nice enough, if a little run down. Nothing a few hours cleaning cutters and trimming hedges couldn’t fix, though Klaus figured its occupant had more on her mind than the upkeep of her now empty home.

There was no doorbell, so Klaus knocked on the metal edge of the screen door. He heard the TV inside go mute and footsteps near the door. If she knew it was him, she didn’t reveal it, but her scent was familiar—

Keelin opened the front door with a grim expression fastened to her face. She looked tired and pale, her arm in a sling. Klaus knew there’d been an explosion the day before, but Freya had emerged fine and he’d assumed from her lack of screaming that Keelin had as well.

“I’m looking for Lisina,” Klaus said.

“She’s dead.” It wasn’t often that Keelin’s tone was so emotionless, and it was chilling to hear for the first time now. “I’m staying here for the night while I pack up her things.”
“What happened?”

“The bombing of the werewolf Mardi Gras float. She was closest.”

Klaus longed for a time when death didn’t matter to him. Now, he could only say, “She was Hayley’s friend.”

Raw emotion seeped into Keelin’s tone when she replied, “Mine, too.”

Klaus watched her carefully, the stubborn jut of her jaw, the tears shining in her eyes. “I know it doesn’t mean much, coming from me,” he said, “but I am sorry for your loss.”

Wiping a tear away quickly, Keelin composed herself. “What are you doing here, anyway? What did you want to talk to Lisina about?”

“I’ve been reading the letters Hayley sent me while I was away. There was a postcard about Lisina. It mentioned that she was concerned for Henry, and I thought I would …” He trailed off lamely, not sure how to explain his intentions.

“You thought you’d come and make things worse for her,” Keelin finished for him.

“Not intentionally, but that may have been the outcome.” It definitely would have, now that he thought of it.

“These wolves hate you, Klaus,” Keelin reminded him. “They were free of the Crescent curse until you put it back on them. You protected them when it suited you, and left them when it didn’t. You fought so hard for so long to be a wolf, and now it’s like you can’t even spare a thought for your own species. You’ve denied us, betrayed us, cursed us, left us for dead out here. The pack survived because of Hayley, despite you. Do you really think you’re welcome out here?”

Klaus bit back his anger. “I wanted to express my condolences to Lisina. She lost Henry and Hayley —”

“And now she’s gone, too. Because of the vampires that came to town to fight your family.” Keelin blinked back tears and raised her left hand, the engagement ring catching the light. “Our family, I know. But I’m trying to make a point here. You might think you’re redeemed, and you may be a hero in Hope’s eyes, but that doesn’t mean that everyone’s gotten the memo. A decade ago you were an enemy to everyone in this bayou. You can’t just claim all these years of apathy from the other side of the world as proof that you won’t hurt them again. And I can’t let you hurt them again, Klaus.”

“Tell me how to fix it.”

“That’s not my job, Klaus!” she snapped. “I’m not Elijah, or Hope. I want you to be safe and happy because that’s what Freya wants, but I’m not going to save you from your own history. If you want to make inroads at fixing this, call a meeting of the pack, get on your knees, and ask them how. I am not holding your hand.”

The fury dissolved in his veins like powdered sugar on the tongue. She was right. It was awful, but she was right.

“Why are you out here?” Klaus asked. “You can pack in the morning. You should be home with us where it’s safer.”

“Hope killed all the Nazi vamps,” Keelin countered. “It’s better for me here.”
“The gutters will only take one more bad storm before they give out.”

“Hayley always cleaned them in the summer, and just after fall. Lisina would find some way to make her do it.”

“Why her?”

“Lisina’s was terrified of heights, but she didn’t want to ask the other wolves to do it. They all respected her a lot, and I don’t think she wanted to look weak.” Keelin smiled sadly. “Before that, Christopher would come and clean them for her.”

“Henry’s father?”

“Yeah. He did a lot of that kind of stuff for everyone. Losing him was hard on Lisina, even years later. Hayley would always pretend it was such a bother to clean the gutters, if only to rile Lisina up, stop her from dwelling on why she needed someone else to help her. They were close, Hayley and Lisina. They had … a rhythm, I guess. It probably makes sense that neither lives without the other to riff off of.” This time, the tears didn’t respond to Keelin’s attempts to ward them off.

“Should you be alone here tonight?” Klaus asked. “I can call Freya and have her come to join you.”

“She already offered,” Keelin replied. She leaned against the doorjamb. “It’s a sad house, but it’ll be good for me to say goodbye to it.” She gave him a watery smile. “I’ll be fine here. And I can’t wallow for too long. I’m getting married.”

Klaus forced a smile onto his face. “Looking forward to it.” Shoving his hands deep in his pockets, he rocked on his heels and said, “Well, I’d best be going. I left Elijah in charge of Hope, and if she wakes I may return to my brother’s corpse in the living room.”

“Perish the thought.”

Klaus smirked. “Take care of yourself, Keelin.”

She nodded but didn’t return the sentiment.

He returned to the car, reversing out of the driveway and one smooth press of the pedal. Keelin was still in the doorway as he drove off, watching him as though making certain he did leave after all.

Internally, Klaus made a note to enquire about Lisina’s friends and relatives. He had to make sure someone carved her name by the lake.
Klaus cracked his eyes open to take in the dawn.

 Barely 6am, according to the grandfather clock in the corner. He’d slept for maybe four hours, likely less. By the time he returned from visiting Keelin in the bayou he’d been exhausted, hardly able to check on Hope before he collapsed into bed.

 He still felt exhausted. He just had other things to do instead.

 But first, the allure of the remaining letters cornered him.

 There were six left, and each filled Klaus with a greater sense of urgency. Hayley had been running out time. She hadn’t known it, but she was.

 Unable to stop himself, Klaus selected the next letter and cracked the seal.

 #

 10th April, 2025

 The stack of bags in the entry hall seemed to have their own atmosphere. No one touched them but Keelin, as if acknowledging them would set off a bomb and level the block. One by one, Keelin added her bags to the pile. Hayley side-stepped them, giving them a wider and wider berth as the mass accumulated. Eventually she had to hug the wall to get around them.

 “Can she, like, take this much?” Josh asked as he stepped into the compound. “Isn’t there a limit?”

 “I think some of it’s going into storage.”

 “It’s not …” Josh glanced upstairs, checking for eavesdroppers. Keelin was out, and Freya couldn’t
hear them from her spellroom. “She can’t just leave it here?”

“Nope. There are issues.” Hayley left it at that, not one for gossip. Josh wasn’t either, so he didn’t pry further.

“Will this impact the farewell party?”

“Not in any way we should comment on.”

Josh nodded. “Got it. Ready to help me decorate?”

“Lead the way.”

#

11th April, 2025

“SURPRISE!”

Keelin made a good show of acting shocked, though she had to have scented them all before she walked in. She was dressed in scrubs, done with her last shift at the hospital, and was doing her best to perk up and look more awake as she faced all the people populating their living room.

“Wow,” she said, tearing up a little. The banner above them all read BON VOYAGE in curly red letters that Hayley eyed carefully. She’d been in charge of sticking them onto the banner, but there’d been some issues with keeping them in place.

“Come eat!” Josh said, wrapping an arm around Keelin’s shoulders. “It’s not Declan’s food, but we figured you’d prefer him as a guest, not a caterer.”

“Good guess.” Keelin waved at Declan and Hayley before succumbing to Josh’s tugs on her hand and letting him pull her into the fray of people ready to wish her well.

“Oh, dear,” Declan said. “She looks exhausted.”

“We’ll rescue her in an hour or so. She shouldn’t be sleeping much tonight anyway, just to minimise the jet lag once she gets there.”

The woman in question took a plate from Josh, then tried using tongs to put some mini pastries onto her plate. Her hand-eye coordination wasn’t exactly the best.

Declan winced. “I don’t think I can stomach watching her falling asleep into the appetisers.”

“Because you care about her, or because she’d ruin the food?”

“You can care about more than one thing at once.” Declan kissed Hayley’s temple. “I’m going to go help her.”

Hayley chuckled as she watched him go. He took the plate from Keelin, deftly picking up the food she was after.
Satisfied that she was in good hands, Hayley sidled over to Freya, who watched on with pinched lips hovering over her champagne glass.

“You look cheery,” Hayley appraised sarcastically. “Maybe you should go help her.”

“Declan’s got it.”

Hayley eyed Freya, considering. “Look, it might not be my place, but I just want to say that maybe … maybe you don’t want to leave things like this. There’s still time to resolve things.”

“She’s going to warzones to fix broken children. I don’t think I can convince her to change her mind.”

“That’s not what I meant by ‘resolve’. I know Mikaelsons aren’t familiar with compromise, but they aren’t familiar with long-term relationships either. There might be a correlation.”

“Kol and Rebekah are happy.”

“Kol is whipped. He doesn’t need to compromise—he’ll follow Davina off a cliff. He’d probably toss her off it if she asked. I’m not saying it’s healthy, but it works for him. And we both know Rebekah’s just holding her breath with Marcel. Do you really want a relationship like either of theirs?”

Freya shrugged, but Hayley could tell she was affected. “We’ve talked the issue to death.”

“And you’ve been trying to convince her to stay every time. Don’t. Accept that she’s leaving, and tell her how it makes you feel. She wants to love you more than you’re letting her, and the best way to facilitate that is to let her know you. If she knows how much you love her, she won’t just go. She’ll come back.”

“And what makes you so sure?” Freya asked.

Hayley smiled. “I’m actually pretty good at relationships. They just tend to end in death or amnesia.” She caught sight of Declan with Keelin, now seated at a table with a plate of his own. “But not this time.” Turning back to Freya, she said, “So you’ll do it?”

“I’ll see,” Freya hedged, careful not to give too much away.

“Please do.” Hayley squeezed Freya’s shoulder. “Do you want anything to eat? I’m famished.”

“I’m fine with this.” Freya lifted her glass, the bubbles catching the light like sparkles.

“Suit yourself,” Hayley said, already making a beeline for the snack table.

#

12th April, 2025

Hayley didn’t hear the conversation between Freya and Keelin, but she knew it had happened when she arrived home the next afternoon to find Freya lugging the extra bags back up the stairs to store
them in their bedroom.

“These aren’t going into storage anymore?” Hayley asked, tone carefully neutral.

Freya shook her head. “She’s coming back in August.”

Unable to stop herself, a beam broke out on Hayley’s face.

“And then she’s going back,” Freya followed up quickly. “But I’ve figured out a way to astral project to her so we can still have sort-of date nights without relying on shitty Skype calls.”

“That’s awesome.”

Freya tugged a case up the last few stairs and dropped it onto the ground, breathing heavy. “Yeah, I guess,” she replied, smile slipping through for a second. “Would you mind grabbing the other bags? I’m beat.”

“Sure.” Hayley headed back to the entry hall to grab the remaining bags, doing her best to smother the spring in her step as she did.

#

14th April, 2025

Hayley cursed at her smudged eyeliner, grabbing for one of the sodden makeup pads strewn over the bathroom counter. She wiped the offending smudge away from the outer corner of her eye, then dried the area with a towel.

“You sound like you’re having a great time,” Josh intoned from the doorway.

Hayley glared at his reflection in the mirror. “I’m busy, so unless you’re going to do my makeup for me I suggest you leave.”

“Not that kind of gay best friend. And if you don’t want these”—he held a box of chocolates aloft —“I’m sure Freya will share them with me. She’s mopey enough to even eat the gross ones.”

“Leave her alone,” Hayley said, tone stern. “She had trouble calibrating the spell to astral project to Keelin last night, so she’s upset.”

“I know. Hence why I gave her the red wine I was going to add to your gift.” Josh tossed the box of chocolates at through the doorway at the bed, then stepped closer to look at Hayley. She was in a slip Rebekah had bought for her, something she’d never bothered with before she had fancy rich family members to insist she wear tiny thin dresses under her actual dresses. It made little sense, but it made her feel like a 60s film star getting ready for the stage.

That feeling did not translate to actual skill in her preparation, however.

“Do you want me to ask Freya to come do your makeup?”

Hayley capped the eyeliner and threw it in the general direction of the trash can. “It’s a lost cause
anyway. Pretty sure that stuff’s as old as Hope is.” She leaned in close to the mirror and used another makeup pad to sponge away the grey tint over her skin from the botched liner.

“She might have some,” Josh suggested.

“I don’t want to bother her. I’ll just go minimal. It’s nothing he hasn’t seen before, anyway.”

Josh snorted. “I knew a girl once who woke at like 5am in the mornings to put makeup on before her boyfriend could wake up and see her bare-faced.”

“A steady hand at 5am?” Hayley asked skeptically. “Everything else about that sounds terrifying, but the steady hand—that I’d kill for.” Exhaling heavily, Hayley spun around to face Josh properly. “Do I look swollen and blotchy?”

“Not in any way that your healing factor won’t fix in ten minutes, tops.”

Hayley nodded. “Good enough.” Her hair was easy now that it was shorter—she’d showered and brushed it out, and it had dried in nice, casual waves.

“You’re really nervous about tonight, huh,” Josh observed.

“I haven’t had an anniversary before. I don’t know if there’s etiquette for me to be observing or whatever.”

Josh shrugged. “Well, don’t ask me. Aiden died before we could ever have one, and that’s the longest relationship I’ve ever had.”

“We’re sad people.”

“We are. But Declan will cheer you up.”

“He will,” Hayley confirmed, certain of it herself. “Thanks for stopping by to calm me down. And thanks for the chocolates. I’ll pass them along to Declan, along with your well wishes.”

“I already left flowers at Rousseau’s for him.” Josh stepped in close to drop a kiss on her cheek. “You have a good night, okay?”

“If you say so,” Hayley replied with what she hoped was a coy manner. She was bad at it, still. Watching Josh make his way out through her bedroom, she called after him, “I don’t suppose you want to help me pick out something to wear?”

“Not that kind of gay best friend!”

#

Declan had a bouquet of flowers waiting for her when she came downstairs. It may be more accurate to say the bouquet of flowers had Declan waiting for her, given their comparative sizes.

Hayley’s eyes widened as she tried to take in the mass of the thing that rested on the entry hall table. “That’s … something.”

Wincing, Declan stepped forward to kiss her lightly. “Sorry,” he murmured against her lips, then
withdrew. “I told the florist to prepare their most expensive arrangement.”

“And you didn’t think that would translate to massive?” Hayley asked, lifting a hand to trace the silken petal of what must have been one of dozens of lilies.

“I didn’t think very much. Was mostly just overeager. I can take it back if you want—”

“No, I’m keeping it forever.” Hayley didn’t need to move closer to inhale the scent, but she did it anyway. It was almost overpowering, but it would be lovely from up in her room. Far away. “I’ll—” She cut herself off just in time. I’ll turn it into a vampire bouquet so it never fades. A joke, but not one she could make to her human boyfriend

“You’ll what?” Declan prompted.

“Never mind. What time’s our reservation again?”

“Soon enough. Will you let me drive?”

Hayley smirked. “I figured it could be your anniversary gift. Speaking of which, Josh brought some chocolates over for us. I figured we could enjoy them when we get back here.” She infused her tone with a suggestive quality that brought the twinkle out in Declan’s eyes.

“I look forward to it,” he replied in kind, voice warm. “But before dessert, Miss Marshall, comes dinner.” He extended a hand to her.

Hayley took Declan’s hand let him lead her out of the compound and into the cool night.

#

Their surprise destination wasn’t a restaurant, as Hayley had guessed. Declan swung by a tiny Chinese restaurant on their way, instructing Hayley to stay in the car. She waited patiently until he returned with two bags of takeaway containers that he secured in the back seat. Glancing back there for the first time, Hayley caught sight of a six-pack of beer and some plastic plates and cutlery. A grin overtook her face as she realised, but she smothered it when Declan returned to the driver’s seat, maintaining the illusion of her ignorance.

He was recreating their first date. Not the first official one at the Italian restaurant, but the one at the park with takeaway and beer in near darkness.

“Welcome to your evening, madame,” Declan said as he pulled up to the street across from the park. “I hope it’s to your liking. I know it’s not overly fancy—”

Hayley closed the distance between them, planting a kiss on Declan’s lips to shut him up. She withdrew only slightly, their noses still sliding alongside one another. “It’s perfect.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said, twining her fingers in his hair and pulling him back for more.
Freya was waiting for Hayley when she returned. Declan was still with her, buzzing with energy after their night of feeding one another food on plastic forks and making out like teenagers at the picnic table.

“I’m just going to say goodnight to Freya,” Hayley said, detaching herself from where she’d been kissing Declan’s neck. “Meet me upstairs?”

Declan drew her in for another breath-stealing kiss that left her cold once he disengaged. “Don’t take too long.”

Watching him go, Hayley pressed fingers to her blood-hot lips just to make sure they weren’t actually humming. It felt like they might be.

Freya raised an eyebrow from where she laid on a chaise in the courtyard, glass of wine in hand. “That went well?”

“It’s still going well.” Hayley tried to calm her heartbeat, hoping it might draw the blood away from her flushed cheeks.

“You don’t have to hide how happy you are,” Freya said.

“I’m not—”

“You have your hot boyfriend in your bed with a box of chocolates but you’re here watching me drink lonely people wine.”

Hayley eyed the bottle. “That’s Bordeaux.”

“I’m a lonely person. It’s my wine. Josh bought it for you and Declan but gave it to me when he realised I’d be alone here all night. Everyone’s tip-toeing around me lately.”

“We’re just trying to be considerate.”

“And I appreciate that.” Freya stood with minimal swaying. She downed the rest of her glass and picked up the bottle, but didn’t refill it. “I’m not made of glass, though. So here.” She thrust the bottle into Hayley’s hands, giving her no choice but to take it. “I assume there are glasses on the drinks cart in the hall outside your room. Enjoy your night.”

“Thank you, Freya,” Hayley said, touched.

“Don’t thank me for giving you what you deserve.” Freya’s eyes softened, the harsher lines of her face relaxing into a smirk. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to go listen to something through my new noise-cancelling headphones.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I was going to buy them for you as your gift, but I figured it’d be more of a gift to be able to have loud, gross sex without fearing my judgment. So I’ll be listening to rock music for the next three or so hours.”

“Only three?” Hayley quipped.
Freya snorted. “Declan will be fast asleep in one, one-and-a-half tops.”

“Rude.” Hayley swatted Freya’s shoulder on her way past.

“Have fun!” Freya called up after her, chuckling.

Hayley flipped her off, not breaking her stride.

#

Contrary to Freya’s assertion, one-and-a-half hours later Declan was still awake. They were both freshly-showered and flushed from the hot water (and other activities), lying bed with towels over the pillows to protect the silk pillow slips as their hair dried.

Not something Hayley would’ve considered a decade ago, but something Elijah had taught her about proper housekeeping. He was a stickler for that kind of thing.

Feeling guilty for letting her mind wander to Elijah, Hayley brought her attention back to Declan by turning into him more, slinging a leg over his. His eyes had a glazed, half-sleeping looking about them, but they were still open.

“Love you,” he said, voice raw.

“I love you, too.”

“We should do this every night.”

“The romantic dinner in the park or the shower sex?”

“This.” Declan started stroking Hayley’s hair lightly, sweeping it away from her face and rubbing the drying strands between his fingers. “Falling asleep together.”

“It is nice,” Hayley agreed, letting her eyes fall closed as she breathed him in.

It was at least a minute later when the chest beneath her cheek rumbled as Declan said, “We should move in together.”

In what was perhaps not the proudest moment of Hayley’s thirty-four years of life, she deepened her breathing, pretending to be asleep.

#

“And that concludes today’s meeting,” Josh announced, bouncing a fork onto a napkin as though it was a gavel. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a long drive ahead of me.”

“Be careful,” Hayley warned. “Take breaks if you need to.”

Josh’s chair scraped on the floor as he stood. “I think I can drive myself to New York without
incident.”
“‘You can’t drive home without incident,’” Freya contributed, earning a glare from Josh.


“I’m literally six months younger than her,” Josh argued, pointing at Hayley.

Hayley shrugged. “Being a parent ages you by at least a decade.”

“Whatever. See you guys in a week.”

“Say hi to Marcel for us!” Hayley called after him as he huffed away.

“We should feel bad,” Freya said, amusement dancing in her eyes, “but he does make it easy.”

“He loves it.” Vincent sipped at his pint. “Makes him feel like he’s part of a family.”

“Has he told you that?” Hayley asked.

Vincent shook his head. “No, but I am a registered psychologist.”

“Right, sorry,” Hayley deadpanned. “Dr. Griffith.”

Freya snorted. “Sounds weird.”

“Because neither of you like to show me any respect, that’s why.” Vincent’s words were curt, but there was an undercurrent of warmth to his tone.

“Are you sure you don’t want to join Josh on his road trip?” Freya suggested for the dozenth time.

“I’m sure he’d be glad to have you.”

“I’d rather ride a faulty rollercoaster than sit in a passenger seat in his car.”

“He’s not that bad,” Freya said.

“Oh, but he is,” Hayley countered. “Ask him why he doesn’t have a garage door anymore.”

“Isn’t Declan giving Hope driving lessons this summer?” Vincent asked. “Maybe we can convince him to teach Josh, too.”

“That’d be something.” Hayley tried to process the image of Josh behind the wheel while Declan told him to break for a stop sign, but something about it just wouldn’t compute. “But I’d never do that to Declan.”

Vincent tossed his head back and laughed. “Poor guy.”

“But seriously, Vin,” Freya pressed. “You should go visit Marcel.”

“If you keep nagging me about that, I might wonder about what you intend to do with my witches while I’m gone.” Vincent was half-joking, though certain past betrayals could never fully leave their collective memory.

“Don’t be an ass,” said Freya. “I just think you’d benefit from the break. Consider me your psychologist.”

“First of all, you’re not even close to qualified. Second, I’m sure Marcel has enough going on in
New York without me showing up.”

“He didn’t just make his guest room for Josh and Hope,” Hayley said. “There’s bourbon in the drinks cart in there, and Josh hates that.”

“And you’ve never considered it’s for Hope?” Vincent quipped.

Hayley kicked him lightly under the table. “What are you waiting for? You know things would be fine without you.”

“I know, I know. I just … like the rhythm of things here. I appreciate what you’re trying to say, but I prefer this.”

“If you’re sure,” Freya said, though she didn’t sound it.

“I’m sure.” Vincent grabbed his phone and wallet, making to stand. “It’s my turn to grab the check.”

Freya and Hayley watched him go without complaint, only passing a single, knowing look between them.

#

Dear Klaus,

I don’t know how much moving on is too much moving on. I’m determined to live happily, if only to set an example for Hope, but some things feel like too much, too soon. I don’t know if I’m making excuses for myself or if it’s actually something important.

I could use your bad advice right now.

Freya is moping. She doesn’t think she is, but she is. Keelin’s been overseas for a while now and it’s taking some time for her to convince herself not to feel abandoned. We’re all trying to be considerate, but she’s unfortunately perceptive and doesn’t like being babied. Reminds me of you that way.

Also, I don’t know if you’ve heard from your son lately, but you should tell him to come around here more often. He’s missed just as much as you are. Dare I say even more? Maybe he’d listen to you.

Hayley

#

May 18th, 2026
Klaus hadn’t thought to ask why Marcel wasn’t staying at the compound with them.

He knew the loft he’d once occupied was now infested with Greta’s vampires, and the warehouse he’d transformed into a liveable space was now empty. It took a phone call to a reluctant Vincent Griffith to obtain Marcel’s current location—a home out in Treme. An odd locale. Not exactly close to the action.

The front door was unlocked, and no invitation was necessary. Klaus stepped lightly over the threshold, clearing his throat. “Marcel?” he called, more as a courtesy than an announcement. He could hear Marcel upstairs, and knew Marcel had heard him approach as well.

The house was run-down, all sagging floors and rotting wood. The entryway was a mess, one wall lined with new paint tins, another stacked with sections of wood seemingly intended for a banister. The one attached to the staircase was on its way out, half the poles missing. The floor was littered with leaves mud, the house lashed by storms without no occupants to board the windows or clean it up afterwards.

Marcel appeared at the top of the stairs. Each step downward was accompanied by a groan as the wood protested his weight, until finally he arrived in front of Klaus. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same,” Klaus returned, eyeing a graffiti-laden wall with disdain. “You are aware you have a perfectly fine bed available for you at home.”

“That hasn’t been my home in over a decade. Besides, I thought Rebekah might be using it.”

“She left after Hope took the power.” Klaus tried to keep his own hurt from infiltrating his tone. “I assume she’ll return for Freya’s wedding.”

Marcel nodded wordlessly. “What did you come here for?”

Klaus briefly scented the air, testing for alcohol. There was none. Marcellus never drank when he was upset. It was likely he’d seen Klaus himself rely upon that vice during his rages in days gone past, and anything he could do to distance himself from Klaus was Marcel’s top priority.

Not that Klaus could blame him.

“I wanted to see if you’re all right.” Josh had been buried in the cemetery earlier, just within walking distance of Camille. Klaus wondered if that’s what she would’ve wanted. She’d probably prefer he wasn’t buried at all.


The one-word answers were a give away. As a boy, Marcellus had hardly shut up—always talking about his plays, his lessons, his thoughts, his dreams. A thousand questions a day, all directed at Klaus. He hadn’t answered half as many as he wished he did.

But when he was upset, Marcellus hardly spoke at all.

“I am sorry,” said Klaus. “I wish I’d known. I could’ve helped.”

“Wouldn’t have changed anything.” Marcel turned away sharply. “Hope needs you.”

“She was still asleep when I left. The power leaves her so exhausted, I sometimes worry she’ll never
“Wake up.”

“Then go wake her.” Marcel walked back into the rest of the house, wandering into a kitchen with a patchy linoleum floor and bare counters. The bowels of the sink were exposed, the doors beneath pulled off their hinges to facilitate work on the plumbing. Several towels were laid out to protect the floor from damage (a lost cause, in Klaus’s opinion) and a tool box hung agape on the left side.

“Freya is doing what she can,” Klaus replied. “May I ask why you’ve become a renovator?”

“Keeps me busy.” Marcel laid down on the towel, his arms disappearing into space under the sink.

“I can think of a dozen better uses of your time.”

“Good for you.”

It took Klaus conscious effort to wrestle back his anger. “Will you face me and respond properly?”

“No.”

Klaus balled his hands into fists, arms straight down his sides like iron bars. “Can I help with anything?”

“Not really your thing.”

“I can’t help you if you push me out, Marcellus.”

No response. Not even the standard objection to the use of his full name.

“I’ll see myself out, then,” Klaus said. “Please come by home later, if only to visit Hope. She’ll appreciate it.”

Marcel made a noise of agreement, not turning away from his tinkering.

Stepping back, Klaus carefully picked his way out of the house. Just as he was about to exit, a splash of blue caught his eye. In the center of what must have been the living room was a cot, freshly painted with an egg shell blue. Checking to ensure that Marcel was still occupied in the kitchen, Klaus headed over to the cot, his shoes creaking against the plastic spread out over the floor.

It was a sturdy thing, built to last. There was no mattress or blanket draped inside, though that was to be expected while the paint was still drying. At the head of it, a crescent moon and stars were cut from the wood, each carefully painted around.

The entire house was in disrepair, yet Marcellus fixed up the cot first of all.

Raising a hand to it, Klaus thought he felt something slip over his skin, fizzing at the hair on the back of his wrist until it stood up. Frowning, he touched a finger to the paint. It came away with a touch of blue, nothing out of the ordinary.

In his pocket, Klaus’ phone buzzed.

A message from Freya.

She’s awake. Eating breakfast now.

Tucking the phone away, Klaus shook off the feeling and headed for the exit.
May 18th, 2026

Breakfast was almost over by the time Klaus returned. Hope, Keelin, and Freya sat amidst the scattered crumbs of beignets and the pits and carcasses of a fruit platter.

“We saved you a plate,” Freya said. “It’s in the fridge.”

“Thank you.” Klaus watched Hope carefully, taking note of her rigid posture and the way she prodded at the remains of her food with a fork. “Would you like to do some painting today, Hope? We could set up our easels in the park, take advantage of the weather.”

“Don’t really feel like making it rain blood on my art.”

“I thought the side effects had stopped.” Klaus glanced at Freya, who looked just as confused as he felt.

“They have,” Hope said quickly. “I just don’t really feel like painting today, Dad.” She stood, not quite as steady on her feet as Klaus would’ve liked. “I’m gonna go lie down.”

“You’ve only been up for an hour,” Keelin commented.

“I’m not gonna sleep,” Hope said defensively. “There are new Cutthroat Kitchen episodes to catch up on.”

“All right,” said Klaus. “Let us know if you need anything.”

Hope left without reply.

Freya stood and stepped toward Klaus. “Do you want me to get your food for you?”

“No, thank you,” he said, trying to keep his tone polite. Things between him and Freya were still terse after her duplicity with Hope and the Hollow. “I’m going to take some time to myself.”

Freya and Keelin remained silent and unmoving as he left, and he didn’t hear movement from them until he’d shut his door behind him upstairs. He tried to ignore the sounds, pulling out the box of letters to find the next.

What Klaus couldn’t ignore was the tang of salt on the air, the low sniffs, the sound of Keelin’s hand
smoothing Freya’s hair back. His sister was crying, and he sat upstairs, letter in hand, ready to hide in the past.

#

*May 28th, 2025*

Hayley dropped the candy and soda cans on the gas station counter. “We’re at pump number five.”

The attendant took a moment to ring up their purchases and said, “Thirty-four ninety-five.”

Hayley tapped her card to the reader and tucked it back into her jeans pocket with her phone, gathering her items in her arms. She declined the receipt, wished the attendant a nice day, and headed for the car.

Hope had earphones in and mustn’t have noticed Hayley approaching. It was a struggle, but Hayley managed to get the door open without dropping any of their items. “Hope!” she called out to get her daughter’s attention.

Startling, Hope tore the earphone from one ear and barked, “What?”

Hayley raised an eyebrow at the attitude. “Mind taking your things?”

Leaning across the car, Hope grabbed the drinks and put them in the cupholders. Hayley tossed the candy bars onto Hope’s lap and hopped in, finally closing the door against the blistering heat.

“You don’t have to use the earphones, you know,” Hayley told Hope. “The car has bluetooth.”

“You don’t like my music.”

“And you don’t like mine, so let’s just take it in turns to listen through the stereo.”

“Or we could both be listening to the music we want to the whole way.”

“Or you could not treat your mom like a taxi driver and actually have a conversation with her,” Hayley returned sharply. “Put your earphones away. You can make a playlist for the next few hours.”

Sighing, Hope yanked her earphones out of the jack in her phone and stuffed them into her bag. Hayley had a suspicion Hope picked the most irritating pop music on purpose, but she didn’t let her irritation show as she put the car into reverse and backed out of the parking space.

#

“Welcome home, birthday girl!” Freya exclaimed the moment Hope stepped inside. She banded her arms around Hope’s waist and buried her face in her niece’s hair.
It really was a miracle, how the rest of the family could pull the joy out of a previously grouchy Hope. After hours of silence in the car, Hope blossomed instantly into the life of the party, embracing her family and friends one by one.

Marcel approached Hayley, taking some of the bags at her feet. “You look tired.”

“Quite the journey,” Hayley replied.

“Quite the night ahead, still. Maybe you should lie down for half an hour or so.” Marcel shoved the bags into a closet to be retrieved later.

“I’m okay,” Hayley assured him. “Might just splash some water on my face.”

“I’ll have a bloody bourbon waiting for you, then.”

“Thanks.” Hayley glanced at Hope. “Keep an eye on her. She’s been in a mood.”

Marcel smirked. “She’s not the only one.”

“Yeah, well, it rubs off on you after a while.” Sighing, Hayley patted him on the back before skirting the edge of the crowd to head upstairs.

#

Henry and Lisina were the last ones to arrive. A fresh-faced Hayley ushered them in, taking Lisina’s coat from her as Henry headed inside to look for Hope.

“You look nice,” Hayley said, gesturing to the bright orange wrap-around dress Lisina was sporting.

“Likewise.” Lisina led the way towards the dining room, which was packed with Henry, Hope, Freya, Marcel, Davina, Vincent, and Vincent’s friend, Ivy.

“No Declan?” Lisina inquired.

“Rebekah and Kol are astral projecting in later.”

“And we’re still keeping him in the dark.” Lisina’s tone was non-judgmental, but Hayley still felt the sting of something there.

“It’s for the best.”

Lisina made no further comments, seating herself between Freya and Vincent. Hayley found a spare chair beside Marcel, the perfect place to keep an eye on Hope.

“All right,” Hayley said, a hush falling over the room. “Let’s get started.”

#

Dinner was successful. Hope remained merry throughout, opening gifts and eating cake under
everyone’s watchful eye. She pretended to choke on her second piece, just for the amusement she gained from watching every adult in the room lurch forward.

She knew she was loved, and that was a good thing, Hayley reasoned. It’d just be nice if she wasn’t such an asshole about it sometimes.

Oh, well. Her father’s daughter, after all.

#

May 30th, 2025

Hayley didn’t like phone calls at 3am. Not because they woke her, but because in order for someone with access to her phone number to consider waking her, something always had to be wrong.

This was no exception.

“Lisina?” Hayley asked, rubbing her eyes as though sleepiness could be so easily removed.

On the other end of the line, Lisina sniffed heavily.

“What’s going on?” Hayley demanded.

“It’s Henry,” said Lisina.

“Is he hurt?”

“He’s…” Lisina’s breathing was heavy, weighted with restrained sobs. “He triggered his curse.”

#

Hayley didn’t have to knock on Lisina’s front door. It opened for her, a wild-eyed Lisina on the other side.

“Thank you for coming.”

“Of course.” Hayley initiated the hug—a rarity from her—and didn’t stop until she felt Lisina relax in her arms. “You said you don’t know what caused it?” Translation: *You don’t know who he killed?*

“He says he doesn’t know—that he just woke up in pain. I got there just in time to see his eyes turn yellow.” Lisina blinked back a fresh wave of tears. “I don’t want to call him a liar.”

“If he says he doesn’t know, we have to believe him.”

Lisina nodded. “He’s in the living room. I tried to talk to him but he’s …”

“Of course he is.” Triggering the curse was hard for adults, let alone children. “Can I see him?”
“Yeah, sure.” Lisina led the way into the living room. “Hayley’s here.”

Henry didn’t look up from his place on the sofa. His knees were pressed into his chest hard enough to bruise it, his knuckles white with tension. A full cup of tea sat on the coffee table in front of him. Hayley didn’t have to touch it to know it had gone cold.

“How are you?”

Henry gave her a glare like he never had before, one that said, How do you think I am?

“Sorry.” Hayley sank down beside him, barely slotting in between his feet and the arm of the sofa. “Stupid question, I know.”

“I didn’t kill anyone.”

“I believe you, Henry. We both do.” Hayley glanced up at Lisina, who hovered in the doorway anxiously. “Can you maybe tell me what you did yesterday?”

“Nothing.” He sniffed lightly. His nose looked red-raw and painful. “I hung out with the Warrens.”

“What did you do with them?”

“We went bike riding in some of the parks.” Henry’s eyes snapped up to meet Hayley’s. “Ella came off her bike pretty bad, but she said she was fine—”

“I called the Warrens,” said Lisina. “Marsha said they’re all okay.”

“What else did you do with the Warrens?” Hayley prompted gently.

“We went to a soup kitchen to help out. I was just gonna meet Lisina there, but she was late and they needed help so I pitched in.”

“And that’s all?” asked Hayley.

“Yeah, that’s all.” Henry balled himself up even tighter, if such a thing were possible. “I didn’t want to hurt anyone. I don’t understand—”

“It’s all right,” Lisina soothed. She navigated her way around the coffee table and stroked Henry’s hair with her hand. “Everything will be okay, Henry.” He sobbed into her, making her double over to fold around him and hold him close.

Recognising an intimate moment when she saw one, Hayley quietly excused herself to make some calls.

#

Oliver Price was a homeless man that frequented the soup kitchen Henry had volunteered at. He had been found dead under a bridge at dawn. The official report cited heart failure as the cause, like brought on by a bout of food poisoning that had infected both him and several other patrons of the kitchen. No others were deceased. A freak accident.

Lisina showed Henry a picture to confirm he was one of the people Henry had served in the scant
ten minutes he’d been behind the counter. Not Henry’s fault in any rational way, but the wolf gene
needed only the flimsiest excuse to manifest itself.

Hayley returned home at midday. Marcel and Davina had left already, their short stay already
concluded, leaving Hayley with only Freya as backup when she told Hope.

It was an inevitable conversation. Hayley just hadn’t thought she’d need to have it so soon.

“She’s painting upstairs,” Freya told Hayley. “Has been ever since breakfast. I think she knows
something’s up.”

Hayley nodded, biting back the emotion that welled up in her throat.

“Are you okay?” Freya asked.

“Fine.” Hayley blinked rapidly to discourage the tears. “Just caught by surprise by the whole thing.”

“Do you want me to be there when you tell her?”

“No. But I’m sure she’d benefit from some distraction afterwards.”

“I’ll find a hard spell for her to master.”

Hayley pulled Freya in for a hug. “Thank you.”

Freya rubbed Hayley’s back. “You’re very welcome. Always.” She pulled back. “Now go talk to
your girl.”

#

Hope was painting, just as Freya had said. It was a nice, snowy landscape full of soft lavenders and
warm whites. Her easel caught the midday sun from the window while also giving her decent access
to a corkboard covered in pictures of snow from all angles, slushing on the ground, falling in
blankets, icing over branches and leaves. There were even some close-ups of icicles and snowflakes.

“This looks intricate,” Hayley noted.

“I can’t get the texture right.”

“It looks fine to me, and I have super-wolf sight.”

Hope didn’t respond to the compliment. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

Hayley pulled up a chair to sit on, finding herself at eye-level with Hope’s knees, given she was up
on a high stool. Hope pivoted to face Hayley, paintbrush and mixing palette still in either hand.

“What’s wrong?”

Finding no better option, Hayley opted to just come out with it. “Henry has triggered his curse.”

Hope blinked—once, twice. “Oh.”

“It was an accident, of course,” Hayley continued. “He served an elderly man at a soup kitchen and
gave him food poisoning. He died of heart failure during the night.”

“Is he … is he okay?”

“Henry is doing as well as can be expected. He feels guilty and nervous and all sorts of things, and he’s going to need our support until the full moon next week, and probably after, too.”

“But he only has to turn one time,” said Hope. “He’s a Crescent wolf—”

“And he and his dad were out of town when Jackson and I got married. The unification ceremony didn’t give him control of his wolf side. He’s going to need to turn every full moon.”

Hope’s face remained impassive as she digested it. “Okay,” she said, voice trembling. Other than that, nothing gave away her true feelings. “Just tell me what you need me to do.”

“I appreciate you being willing to help. It’s important to do these things as a pack.”

Hope nodded sharply. “I understand.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Hope motioned toward her painting. “Can I get back to this?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll give you some privacy.” Hayley pressed a firm kiss to Hope’s cheek on her way out.

#

5th June, 2025

Hayley thudded her fist against Hope’s bedroom door. “Hope! I know you’re still lying in bed.”

A muffled “fuck” reached Hayley’s ears, prompting her to growl. “Language.”

Hope stomped over to the door and opened it, her eyes glazed over and her hair mussed from lying in bed. She’d been binge-watching something on Netflix all morning despite multiple reminders to get ready.

“Why aren’t you dressed? He’s going to be here in five minutes.”

“I told you,” said Hope, shrugging. “I don’t want to go.”

“And I told you it’s not up for discussion. You need to learn to drive, and the bayou is a great place to start.”

“Does it have to be him?” Hope scrunched her nose.

“Declan is nice, and he wants to help you.”

“It’s illegal for me to drive! I’m not fifteen yet.”
“It’s not illegal to learn on dirt tracks in the bayou.”

“Why does a man have to teach me? You can drive just fine.”

Because you won’t spend any time with him otherwise. “Yeah, it’s a huge step back for our entire gender that you spend two hours being taught to drive by a man. Now get dressed, and put on shoes that lace up. I don’t want flip-flops getting caught under the pedals.”

Hope made a noise somewhere between a groan and a scream, slamming the door. Hayley lingered a moment to make sure Hope was doing as she was told.

“I’ll be waiting for you downstairs!” Hayley chirped at Hope.

#

It took Hope the whole five minutes and more to get ready. Declan arrived while she was still wrestling with her laces upstairs, so Hayley invited him into the foyer.

“She’ll just be another few minutes,” Hayley told him, forcing a smile.

“Still not happy about this?”

“She’s not happy about a lot lately. I guess I finally have a teenager.” Hayley winced slightly. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Declan chuckled. “It’ll be good for us to get to know each other better.”

“If you survive it.”

“Stop fretting.” Declan pressed a kiss into her hair.

Upstairs, Hope’s door banged open and closed. Her footsteps were too far away for Declan to hear, but Hayley could sense the grumpiness that weighed them down.

“Hi there, kid,” Declan greeted when she came into view. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah, I guess.” She didn’t sound quite so awful when she spoke to him, which gave Hayley some hope. The glare Hope shot her way dispelled that theory.

“Well, have fun, you two!” Hayley said cheerily, clapping Hope on the back and guiding her toward the front door.

“We will,” Declan promised.

Unsure, Hayley gave him an encouraging smile regardless.

#

They were due to be gone for three hours at least, between the travel out to the bayou and the lesson.
Declan had designs on stopping for ice cream on the way home, so they may even be longer. If they were, it was a good sign.

Ready to spend her afternoon on some ‘me time’, Hayley drew a bath and dropped in some fancy salts Rebekah had brought her from Europe. She laid out a fluffy bathrobe, fetched the Stephen King novel she’d been meaning to read for months (or years, even), and slipped into the bath with a sigh.

She only made it through a few pages of the book before she set it aside and let her eyes slide shut. The peace of the house, the water that lapped so slightly at the edges of the tub, disturbed by her chest as it rose and fell—it all drew her deeper into a peaceful mind. Not quite asleep, but not busy with thought either. Was this meditating? If you could wonder if you were meditating, were you actually meditating?

Hayley didn’t know how long she was maybe-meditating for, but it wasn’t nearly long enough.

She snapped back into herself at the sound of the front door slamming open. It didn’t take more than a sniff of the air to tell her it was Hope, with Declan hot on her heels.

Drying off her hands, Hayley reached for her phone and checked the time. They’d only been gone for just over half an hour.

So no ice cream, then.

Hayley dried herself quickly, slipping on the bathrobe and soft slippers and ducking out into the hall just in time to hear Hope’s bedroom door slam shut. A wild-eyed Declan was in the hall, puffed from running after her.

“What happened?” Hayley asked.

“I don’t--she didn’t even drive. She just freaked out and started yelling at me to come home.”

“Were you guys talking about something?”

“No. I got her to sit behind the wheel but she panicked.”

“Panicked?” Hayley echoed. That didn’t make sense. What did Hope think was going to happen? She was immortal, and driving on a backroad was safe even for kids that weren’t.

“I don’t think this is about me,” said Declan. “Something else is going on.”

“I’ll talk to her. Just—” Hayley rested a hand against his shoulder. “Stick around, okay?”

“I’ll go see if I can fix something up for lunch. Maybe she’d like fettuccine once she’s calmed down?”

“She’d love it, and so would I.” Hayley drew Declan in for a kiss. “Thank you for trying today.”

“I’d try every day, if you let me.”

Hayley saw where this was going—perhaps not to the point where Declan would say it outright, especially not with Hope upset, but he was building to it again. The question Hayley had once feigned sleep to avoid.

“Right, well,” she stepped away and started walking backwards toward Hope’s bedroom. “I’ll just take care of this.”
Declan’s gaze was warm and steady on her, forcing her to be the one to turn away.

#

There was no working lock on Hope’s door. It had rusted a while back, soon after they moved back in post-Hollow, and Hayley had never bothered fixing it. She respected Hope’s privacy enough that she wouldn’t need it.

So one could imagine Hayley’s surprise when the doorknob shuddered and stopped in her hand. “Hope?” she asked, knocking on the door again. “Hope, if you’re spelling this door shut I will call Aunt Freya to undo it!”

Hope didn’t reply. Just when Hayley was considering gaining access via the window, she felt the door tremble slightly. The doorknob turned as it was supposed to this time, and the door yielded to her shove.

Curling up on her bed, Hope looked much smaller than she actually was. She faced away from Hayley, not moving or at all acknowledging Hayley’s presence.

“Hey, kid,” Hayley greeted. She shut the door behind her to give Hope some semblance of privacy. “Declan’s worried about you.”

“I don’t want to do it again.” Hope’s voice was thick with tears.

“If you’re this upset, I won’t force you,” Hayley said, part of her wondering if that was shit parenting. Whatever—it was true. “I just need you to talk to me about what’s going on.”

Slowly, Hope rotated herself so she lay facing Hayley. Taking the movement as a good sign, Hayley tied her bathrobe tighter and slipped in bed beside her daughter.

Hayley traced Hope’s cheek with one finger, gathering the tears there. “This is about more than you not liking Declan, isn’t it?”

Hope nodded against her pillow and squeezed her eyes shut. More tears leaked out, splotching the pillowcase under her head.

“You can tell me anything. Always.”

“I just …” Hope glanced up at Hayley. “People get in accidents all the time.”

“You know you’d be fine no matter what happens. You’ll heal from anything, and it barely hurts.” It was true. Hope didn’t even have painful periods—something Hayley was sure her younger self would’ve been envious of.

“I’m not worried about me.” Hope winced. “Or I guess I am, but not like that.”

It took Hayley embarrassingly long to connect the dots. Duh. If Hope hadn’t been watching, she might’ve facepalmed. Instead, she kept her tone even as she said, “You’re worried that if you get in a car accident, you’ll trigger your curse?”

Fresh tears welled in Hope’s eyes. “I know it’s stupid to be worried about me and not the person that would get hurt—”
“No, no, no.” Hayley tucked Hope into her chest. “Everyone worries about getting into accidents. Everyone does. And it’s never that you don’t care about the person who would hypothetically get hurt in this situation. But you and I both know there are consequences beyond guilt, right?”

Hope nodded against Hayley. Her arms were tucked in between them, clutched together and shaking slightly. “I never used to think about it happening anytime soon,” she began, voice muffled by Hayley’s robe, “but then Henry accidentally killed someone working at the soup kitchen of all things and I just—I’m scared, Mom.”

Hayley’s least favourite three words in the world. “Unless you use your powers a lot, you’re not more likely to kill than any human is,” Hayley reminded Hope. “If you live a dangerous life, you might be more likely to be tied to a human death, and if you decide you want to exercise your powers as you grow up then that’s a risk you have to accept. But right now, Hope, you’re surrounded by supernaturals. You have time to figure out what kind of risk you’re comfortable with.”

Hope resurfaced, her reddened eyes catching Hayley with a gaze then went straight to her heart and squeezed. “Declan’s human.”

“Right,” Hayley responded dumbly, playing for time. It was true. “So you don’t want him around because you’re scared you’ll hurt him?”

Hope’s face crumpled like wet paper in a closed fist. “I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I know how much you care about him and I don’t want to stop you or get in the way—”

“You could never get in the way,” Hayley promised. “Whatever you need is always more important to me.”

“I don’t want to be. It’s not fair that I get to ruin everyone’s lives over and over again.”

Hayley’s heart lodged in her throat, shoving a forceful, “Hey,” right out of her mouth. “Why would you think that?” she demanded.

“The family is scattered because of me. You have problems with Declan because of me. Aunt Freya is staying here instead of going with Aunt Keelin because of me. This is all my fault and I don’t—I can’t let you all just do this for me. It’s not right.”

“It’s not—”

“It is!” Hope insisted. “Every holiday, Marcel and Davina come here. That means they’re not with Aunt Rebekah and Uncle Kol. Ever since this started, they spend every holiday apart because of me.”

Hayley felt her chest cave in, like her heart had shriveled and all air had fled her lungs. It was true. And it had been honorable, once, to do all this for Hope. But what did that mean now that Hope was being hurt even these things?

“We love you, Hope. You’re not the center of the world, but you’re the center of ours. That’s been true since you were a tiny baby, since before you were even born.” Hayley cupped Hope’s cheek. “The first time your dad ever smiled at me, and I mean really smiled like he cared about me, it was because his hand was on my belly and you were kicking up at him. And I thought to myself, I hated this man, but I would die for him to be my daughter’s father. Because no one could do that better. And the same was true of everyone else in his family. Elijah, Rebekah, Freya, Kol, Marcel—and everyone they love. They’re the best for you, better than I ever could have asked my daughter to
have, and I can’t feel sorry that they’re willing to do whatever it takes to surround you with as much love as possible. Not when that’s all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

“It’s not fair to them.”

“But it’s their choice,” Hayley reminded Hope. “They choose you. Do you know how many people chose me when I was your age?”

Hope shook her head.

“Two people. My foster parents. And then the moment I turned into a wolf, they called me a monster. You have a family that will never do that. It’s frustrating to be babied and to feel like everyone is shielding you, but that’s how it is. I know it doesn’t feel this way right now, Hope, but you’re the luckiest girl in the world.” Hayley cleared her throat and blinked away her tears. “And I want to help you with Declan, but I won’t let you being afraid of hurting him stop me from being with him. I care about him, and it’s good for you to see me fight for that. We’ll figure out some ways to get through your worries now, and then we’ll figure things out after that, okay?”

Hope nodded and slipped her arms around Hayley’s waist. “I’m sorry I’m such a mess.”

“You get it from me,” Hayley said into her daughter’s hair. “You don’t have to apologise for it.” Pulling back a little, she smoothed hair away from Hope’s splotchy red face. “Now—would you like to talk about what it will be like to trigger your curse?”

“Maybe later.” Hope sat up a little and reached for the tissue box on her nightstand. “I can smell what Declan’s cooking and I don’t want to still be crying when I eat it.”

“Smart,” Hayley praised. “Besides, I’ll be there for your first full moon anyway, in case you’re worried.”

“Yeah, obviously,” Hope said, some of that teen snark seeping back in now that her cheeks were dry. “I just really don’t want to get naked in the woods. It’s gross.”

Hayley laughed. “You get used to it, kid.”

#

Dear Klaus,

Hope’s worried about her first transformation. I think she’s worried about a lot of things, really, but that’s what surfaced the most today. Henry Benoit triggered her curse, which I guess demonstrated to her that she’s old enough to start worrying about it. She’s almost as old as I was my first transformation, which hurts me to think about.

It would be nice if you could talk to her. I want her to feel like a wolf, like the rest of us, but being a tribrid makes her a bit of an outsider in a way that my hybrid status doesn’t even do to me. She doesn’t fit with the pack at school, and she doesn’t always integrate perfectly with the one here,
either. I’ve always been so pack-focused, I think I missed that she was so lonely without one. I think you understand that better than me.

At least she has Freya and Keelin. Freya promised to spell her a clearing all of her own that won’t let her hurt anyone while she’s in wolf form (at least until she has some control back), and Keelin said she’ll turn too, the first time. I think this comforted Hope a little, but she’s still anxious about a whole host of things.

The part of you you chased for so long is that part of her that she’s most afraid of. If you were here, you’d appreciate the irony.

Hayley

#

May 18th, 2026

A knock at the door roused Klaus from his post-letter trance. He’d thought he was re-reading Hayley’s blocky script, but he’d just been staring it down with his mind somewhere else entirely.

“Come in,” he called to Freya, whose perfume and nervous heartbeat gave her away easily.

“Hey,” Freya greeted. She shut the door behind her as though that could provide them with privacy from the supernatural ears in the rest of the house. “You’re still working through those?”

Klaus glanced down at the letter in his hands, folding it quickly. “Not many left.”

A pinch of sympathy drifted over Freya’s face, there and then gone. “I wanted to talk to about something,” she began. Her hands toyed with the hem of her shirt, pulling it down until the seams strained around her shoulders.

Klaus gestured for her to sit beside him on the bed, and she did so gratefully. Kicking off her shoes, she tucked her socked feet underneath her and forced her furtive gaze to his.

“I know you’re mad at me right now,” she said. “And it’s not that I expect you to forgive me for helping Hope take the power, but … I guess I just thought we should talk about it.”

“I was under the impression we’d already discussed it.”

“We yelled a lot, and you’ve been freezing me out ever since. That’s not a discussion.”

“It is between Mikaelsons.”

“Well, I’m not like that.” The strength Freya injected into her tone made her voice waver slightly, as
though it wasn’t used to carrying that much emotion. “Hayley hated all the yelling, and so did I. We’ve gone without it for a long time, and trust me, we’ve had our disagreements. You don’t have to be so awfully all the time.”

“I’m awful?” Klaus raised an eyebrow. “You sided with my teenaged daughter to help her kill herself.”

“That’s not how it happened—I”

“You may as well have dropped a loaded gun in her hand,” Klaus barrelled on, voice rough and harsh. “Except that a gun, even when loaded, doesn’t have to fire. This magic does have to consume, and it will consume her. You knew what it was when you gave it to her.”

“She was going to take it with or without me,” Freya argued. “I know you don’t agree with the decision I made, but you can’t blame me for all of this. She chose, and no one could’ve stopped her. I just wanted to make sure she had the best chance possible of making it through.”

Klaus stared off at the wall, biting back his fury as best he could.

“I don’t want to get married with this between us,” said Freya. “What will it take for you to forgive me?”

Klaus didn’t have to take a moment to think of something. He wasn’t sure he hadn’t forgiven Freya, even—she was right, however much he wanted to hold onto his anger.

But he knew what he wanted, so he said it: “A promise.”

“What promise?”

Pausing, Klaus listened to the rest of the house to ascertain everyone’s location. Hope was lying in bed and listening to music, making it unlikely she could hear them. Keelin was obviously listening in from the next room, but Klaus didn’t doubt Freya would tell her later anyway.

Satisfied, he said, “I need you to promise that if we confirm we cannot reverse the Hollow’s effects on Hope, you’ll transfer the magic back to me.”

“And then what?” Freya asked. “We play hot potato with an ancient spirit? Elijah will have it next, then Kol, then Rebekah—”

“No one else will take it,” Klaus said with certainty. “Because once I take the power, I am going to die. And it will die with me.”

Freya’s rabbiting heartbeat said what the blank look on her face did not. “No,” she breathed.

“It’s the only way—”

“There’s always another way!”

“Yes, but it costs. I am not willing to have my family pay for it anymore.”

“And you dying, that’s not a cost? What happens to Hope without you? You can’t orphan her, Klaus. You can’t leave her.” Tears welled up in Freya’s eyes, refusing to fall.

“I can’t watch her die, either,” Klaus replied. “This has to end, and it will end with me. So promise you’ll help me do it.”
“How will you even die? There’s no white oak—”

“You just let me take care of that.” Klaus put a hand on top of Freya’s, stopping its nervous fluttering. “I’ll take care of everything. You just have to put the power in me.”

“I …” Freya’s breathing was heavy, laboured. Panicked. “I don’t even know if I can. The magic is where it belongs, and it won’t want to leave. It was hard enough for Vincent to get it out of her when she was younger, but she’s stronger now. The magic won’t want to let her go.”

“So you can’t transfer it out?”

“I can try, but we’ll only have one shot. If she knows what you’re trying to do, she’ll stop you.”

“Is there anyone that can definitely do it?”

“Not a witch.” Freya blinked slowly. “But maybe …”

“What?”

“A siphon could.”

The breath caught in Klaus’ throat. He’d been hoping to avoid seeing Caroline before he saw this through, certain she’d find a way to stop him or ruin his plans like he was the big bad wolf of Mystic Falls all over again. But if he needed her children …

“I suppose I’ll have to take a trip to Mystic Falls.”

“And bring Hope? I doubt she wants to go back to school at this point.”

“She can go for her first transformation.”

“You don’t think she’ll want to be with the Crescents? All the newly-triggered wolves her mom helped turned there. Shouldn’t she be with them? With Keelin?”

“I’ll tell her it’s better to turn near the other wolves at the school, since she’ll likely turn there after this when she goes back.”

“You think she’ll go back to school after you’re gone?” The tears returned with a vengeance. “I can’t imagine her wanting to get out of bed, let alone go to class.”

“You’ll have to find a way to convince her it’s for the best. She needs to be there, with others like her.”

“There’s no one like her,” Freya reminded him.

“Never let her behave like it.” Klaus tried to smile. “That was my mistake.”

Freya squeezed her eyes shut, forcing the tears out as she did. “So you don’t need me after all.” Beneath his grip, her hands trembled.

“Perhaps not in this,” Klaus admitted. “But Hope will need you.”

“She needs you.”

“She’ll be all right.” Klaus rested an arm across his sister’s shoulders. “We all will be.”
Klaus reversed the car into the parking space haphazardly and shut the vehicle off. New Orleans was
gripped by a sweltering heat, but he’d cope with a few minutes in the car. Leaving it running would
just do further to kill the planet he was leaving his daughter in.

He’d left early for this particular appointment and brought a letter along. It was becoming harder to
find time to read them at the compound. Even if no one interrupted him deliberately, the pall of
Hope’s misery hung over the place like the heat, dragging everyone’s mood down.

The letter was shorter than most of the others, Klaus noted. It consisted of one page, single-sided.
Hayley hadn’t had much to say.

But then, looking at the date, he knew exactly what had been about to happen.

#

15th June, 2025

Father’s Day was probably Hayley’s least favourite day of the year.

Hope was always in a foul mood. It was understandable, and Hayley braced herself for it every year.
She never took anything personally on Father’s Day.

That year, she’d prepared for a particularly heinous one. Her conversation with Hope about learning
to drive had been a breakthrough, but it hadn’t been a cure-all. Hayley suspected that nothing could
cure Hope’s anxieties, and they were the primary fuel for her bad behaviour.

So Hayley battened down the metaphorical hatches and prepared herself for the coming storm.

Instead, she was greeted by silence.
“Have you seen Hope out of her room this morning?” Hayley asked Freya.

Freya paused with a spoonful of yoghurt half-way between the bowl and her mouth. “I think I heard the toilet flush earlier, but I haven’t seen her go past here.”

The living room where Freya had been watching TV all morning was between Hope’s room and the kitchen, which meant she hadn’t eaten.

“Can you hear her moving around?” Freya asked.

“Occasionally. I think she’s watching something on her laptop, but then her heartbeat slows and I think she’s sleeping.”

“She shouldn’t be.”

“Yeah, I know.” Hayley sighed. “I just think maybe I should let her. Today of all days, maybe it’s best not to push her.

“Up to you,” Freya said, words muffled through the mouthful of yoghurt. “Let me know if you need backup.”

Hayley was about to reply when the doorbell rang. “I’ll get it.” She could already tell who it was, and she hadn’t had plans with him today.

Sure enough, opening the front door revealed Declan’s smiling face. He was dressed nicer than usual — almost date-worthy clothes, but not quite—and there was a bouquet of flowers in his hand.

“Hey,” Hayley greeted, pulling up what enthusiasm she could. “I didn’t know we had plans today.”

“We don’t. I wanted to surprise you.” He stepped over the threshold to kiss her soundly, pressing the flowers into her hands. “Happy Single Mother’s Day.”

Hayley froze, pulling back a fraction. “What?” she asked, hating how breathy her tone was.

“It’s Father’s Day but for single women,” he informed her jovially. “You get Mother’s Day, with everyone else, and you also get Single Mother’s Day.”

Hayley’s smile slipped, and the flower stems in her hands creaked as she tightened her grip. “I’m not a single mother.”

“For all intents and purposes, you are. And you’re a great one.”

“No, I’m not. She has a father.”

Some of Declan’s good cheer faded, leaving behind confusion. “I know that it’s complicated,” he said slowly. “I was just trying to do something nice for you.”

Hayley bit her cheek so hard she tasted blood. “I appreciate the thought, and the flowers. But I’m not a single parent, and you probably shouldn’t be here today. Hope’s fragile.”

“She’s not the only one.”

Hayley seared Declan with a glare. “Please leave.”

“Fine.” Declan rubbed the back of his neck like he always did when he was agitated. “Call me when you’ve accepted my apology,” he said, then turned on his heel and left her.
Happy father’s day. What a freaking joke.

#

18th August, 2025

“That’s the last of it,” Hayley said, dropping Hope’s bag onto her dorm room floor. “Ritual time?”

“I don’t really feel like it this year,” Hope replied. “I’m kinda tired, actually.”

Hayley smothered the way her heart sank at that. “That’s understandable,” she said, immediately empathising. “We’ve been driving for ages. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Maybe.” Hope’s maybe sounded a lot like a no.

“Well, I’m gonna say hi to Ric and Caroline before I leave for the motel.” Hayley squeezed Hope’s shoulder and kissed her temple. “You take care of yourself. Please eat dinner before you go to bed, no matter how tired you are.”

“I promise,” Hope replied.

Hayley wanted desperately to linger, but she knew Hope would just become more difficult the longer she overstayed her welcome. Tamping down the instinct, she made her way out.

#

Ric wasn’t in his office. That was understandable—orientation day took him all over the campus, guiding the new students around, making sure everyone was getting along. There were a few new wolves this year, and that always made things extra tense. Would they get along with the pack here? What would happen if they didn’t?

Hayley had offered ages ago to assume alpha duties for the school. It didn’t make a whole lot of sense to let a teenager do it, and yet that was what kept happening. There weren’t any other packs in the area, so Ric didn’t have much of a choice. He’d warmed to Hayley’s suggestion until he shared it with the parents of some of the other kids, many of whom weren’t big fans of hybrids in general.

Klaus had kind of fucked that potential relationship over.

She found Ric down in the kitchens, making last minute adjustments to some of the students’ allergen information and confirming that with the staff. He was having a particularly tense conversation about the presence of peanuts on the dessert menu when he caught Hayley’s eye and extricated himself with a few stern words and a comment about calling Caroline in.

“You use her as a threat often?” Hayley asked in lieu of a hello.

“Only when things get extra tricky.” He smirked. “So, a lot.”
Hayley laughed. “And does she ever use you as a threat?”

“Somehow, the vampire incites more fear than the human. Go figure.” Ric led Hayley out of the kitchens and into one of the back halls. It was undecorated, probably because the students never went down there. It was staff access only, several placards indicated.

“Don’t you and Hope have a ritual to follow?” he asked, referring to the procedure Hayley often used to get Hope to settle in.

“She apparently doesn’t need it this year.” Hayley tried to keep the hurt out of her voice. “Teenagers, you know.”

“Can’t wait to have two of my own,” Alaric commiserated sarcastically. “Just a couple months left.”

“You and Caroline still haven’t made headway on those anti-ageing spells?” Hayley joked.

Alaric shook his head ruefully. “Short of turning our twelve-year-olds into vampires, unfortunately it looks like we’re going to have to let them become adolescents. Even more than they already are.”

“Terrifying,” Hayley said, bumping Alaric’s shoulder with hers. “Well, I’m gonna head out. I just wanted to say hi before I did.”

“You staying nearby for a few days?”

“Yeah, my usual spot. Just in case she needs me. Not that she does lately.”

Alaric smiled. “She’ll always need you.”

“Yeah,” Hayley said noncommittally. “I keep telling myself that.”

#

Caroline was harder to find. Her scent was everywhere thanks to all her zipping about at vamp speed, and she was hard to pin down amongst all the rushing, hormonal heartbeats of the students on their first day. So much gossip and squealing had Hayley’s ears ringing. If she’d made it through high school, would she have been like this?

She kind of wished Hope was one of the squealers instead of shut up in her room. Not because she wanted her daughter to be a different person, but because that would give her a chance to see some joy in her.

Hayley ended up finding Caroline taking a breather up by the fenceline. She was walking along it, surveying the outside world as though she anticipated danger. But she always looked like that, courtesy of growing up in Mystic Falls.

Hayley hesitated before she approached, not sure she wanted to interrupt Caroline’s moment alone. She’d had a busy day, after all.

But Caroline scented her and said, without turning around, “You can come over.”

Hayley was by her side in a split second, falling into step and gazing out through the fence. “Just wanted to stop by and say goodbye.”
“I heard Hope blow you off for your ritual. Sorry about that.”

“I’m telling myself it’s teenager stuff. No big deal.”

“And you believe what you tell yourself?”

Hayley grimaced. “Not really.”

Caroline must have noted Hayley’s sullen attitude, because she changed topics. “Have you heard anything from Declan about moving in together?”

“No. I can tell he wants to talk about it, but he avoids it.”

“Have you figured out what you’d say if he did bring it up again?”

“Probably something unintentionally awful.” At Caroline’s questioning look, Hayley continued, “He said some things on Father’s Day. Nice things about me being a single parent. He bought me a gift to celebrate my commitment to my daughter after her father bailed on me.”

As probably one of the only people Hayley knew who could understand this, Caroline looked horrified. “Oh, no.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t very graceful about telling him that was a bad idea. I guess he was trying to make me feel empowered and appreciated, but Klaus is her dad. And he can’t be around for reasons beyond his control.”

“But you have to remember that Declan doesn’t know that,” Caroline said. “And I’d say if it was a normal single mom situation, he totally would’ve gotten points for this move. He doesn’t know how abnormal it is. Plus, Hayley, Klaus is a dick for not talking to you guys. He can’t be there physically, but it doesn’t have to be like this.” Caroline was clearly frustrated with him. Her search throughout Europe had proven futile, though Hayley wondered if Rebekah had given her false leads. She wasn’t sure how to follow up that line of inquiry, given that she couldn’t even be in the same state as Rebekah if Hope was with her.

And lately, she always wanted Hope to be with her.

“But you’re right to be upset,” Caroline continued. “You still feel loyal to Klaus. It’s a wolf thing, and a Mikaelson thing. You guys bond weirdly.”

Hayley snorted. “You’re telling me.” She squeezed Caroline’s arm once, then stepped away. “I’m gonna get going. Meet up for coffee before I leave?”

“Of course. Drive safe.” Caroline glanced towards the school. “I’ll keep an eye on her and call you if she needs anything.”

“I know you will. Enjoy the first night.” It was always the worst, and Hayley loved hearing Caroline’s resulting stories about mischievous kids sneaking around after dark. Hard to do when there was a vampire headmistress in residence.

Hayley admired their tenacity.

#
Hayley stared at the motel room’s ceiling all night, finding shapes and faces in the water damage stains like she was gazing at clouds from an open field. Sleep didn’t come easily when she knew Hope was upset.

Nothing came easily when she knew Hope was upset.

#

19th August, 2025

Caroline messaged at 5.30am with an offer of a super early breakfast at the Mystic Grill. Hayley was still awake by then, so she replied with a quick confirmation and went to shower off the sleepless night.

The Grill was pretty empty at six in the morning. There was an older couple sitting at an outside table, squinting at the menu, and what looked like a construction worker drinking coffee at the counter.

Caroline was already there, bright-eyed and perky. “I didn’t expect you to be up this early.”

“Didn’t really sleep.”

A sympathetic frown took up residence on Caroline’s face. “I ordered coffee. Want me to make yours a double shot?”

Hayley shook her head as she took her seat. “I’ll just drink two.”

“Good plan. How are you feeling?”

“ Weird. Not sure how to reconnect with Hope. One minute she’s telling me everything that’s going wrong, and the next she’s so far away I can’t reach her.”

“You just have to give her time,” Caroline advised. “She’s been through a lot, and she doesn’t have the perspective to see what you’ve been through so she’s kind of leaving you in the cold. That will resolve itself in time.”

“I don’t need her to take care of me. I just need her to let me take care of her.”

It was obvious that Caroline didn’t agree, but she communicated it diplomatically. “In my experience, with my mom, I pulled away from her when things got tough because I thought she didn’t understand. Being a teenager tends to wrap us up in our own thoughts and make us forget that other people have equally complex internal lives, so we don’t see our parents struggle, too. We empathise with peers, maybe, but rarely parents. But she’ll figure it out, and then you’ll communicate better. At least, that’s what happened with Mom and I.”

“You might be right.” Hayley didn’t like the whole waiting part, though. She wanted this fixed yesterday. But she didn’t know much about mother-daughter relationships; certainly not as much as Caroline. “How are you and the twins?”

“We’re good. I wanted to talk to you, actually.” Caroline glanced over her shoulder as the waitress
approached with their coffees. “Thank you so much.”

“Let me know if you need anything else,” the waitress said, then flounced off.

“You were saying?” Hayley prompted. Caroline didn’t often ask her for advice (or share anything personal, really), so it had to be big if she was bringing it up this way.

“I…” Caroline cupped her mug in both hands. “I know I said I’d look for Klaus some more, but I’m not sure I’ll have the time.”

“That’s fine,” Hayley assured her. Had she really just let Caroline think she was obligated to look for Klaus? “He doesn’t want to be found, and it was a long shot anyway. I appreciate you trying.”

“Thanks. It’s just that I kind of have to follow up a few leads of my own, and between that and the school—”

“What kind of leads?” Since they weren’t included in running the school, Hayley had to assume they were more of a personal nature.

“Some Gemini coven stuff.” Caroline’s attempts to keep her tone light were not working; instead, they made her voice scratchy and uneven. “Ric and I were hoping Valerie could figure some stuff out, but it looks like she hasn’t turned up anything, so I’m gonna help her out.”

“Is it serious?”

The look on Caroline’s face answered the question.

“Are the girls in danger?” Hayley asked.

“Not from anything external,” Caroline replied. “But there are certain qualities present in Gemini twins that we’re going to have to tackle sooner rather than later.”

“Can Freya help?”

“Maybe.” The maybe was definitely an unlikely. “I’ll bring it up with her if I have to, but … all due respect to Freya, if Valerie doesn’t know, she probably won’t, either.”

Hayley tried to digest the information. “So does this mean you’ll be away from the school a lot?”

“Hopefully not too much.” Caroline looked guilty. “Ric will watch out for Hope, I swear—”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.” Hope would be physically fine and emotionally grouchy for as long as she wanted. Caroline wasn’t really a factor in that. “How do you think the girls will handle you being away?”

“We plan to tell them I’m on recruiting missions. I’ll call a lot, and I’m gonna try not to be away too much early on. Kind of ease them into it.”

“Where are you going to start?”

“Romania, I think. That’s where Valerie’s leads went cold. I might meet up with Bonnie in Vienna on the way. I’m trying not to get her involved, but I’m worried I won’t have enough minds on it. We’re kind of working to a clock, so …”

“What’s the time frame?”
Caroline blinked back tears. “Their twenty-second birthday.”

“Fuck.” Hayley said it without even thinking, like a verbal flinch. “It’s that specific?”

“Yeah. Not sure if knowing down to the date is a blessing or a curse.”

“And you’re sure I can’t help?”

“Pretty sure. But if that changes, I’ll let you know.”

“Please do.” Hayley reached across the table and covered Caroline’s hand with her own. “After everything you and Ric have done for Hope, I owe you just as much for your kids.”

Caroline smiled sadly. “We’ve never seen it as a debt.”

“I know you haven’t. And I appreciate that.”

Sniffing quickly, Caroline wiped away a tear and cleared her face of any discomfort. “So,” she said, recovered from the vulnerable interlude, “how are you feeling about Declan trying to move in? Any more thoughts?”

“Well, I don’t know if he wants to move in with me or if I’m supposed to pack up and move in with him yet. He hasn’t broached the topic verbally.”

“What are your thoughts?” Caroline enquired. They’d had this conversation previously, but not face-to-face, and not at length.

“I don’t think Hope would cope with it.”

“You could stay with him when she’s at school,” Caroline suggested. “Would you want to do that?”

The answer was no. Hayley wasn’t sure why. “I don’t know.”

“It’s okay if you’re not ready.” Caroline sipped her coffee and briefly closed her eyes in ecstasy. She refocused them on Hayley. “It doesn’t mean something’s wrong with your relationship. It just means that the right moment hasn’t come yet.”

“I don’t think he realises that I haven’t really done this kind of relationship before. Which is kind of embarrassing at my age—”

“Embarrassing?” Caroline asked incredulously. “You’ve been busy raising a magic baby and saving an entire wolf pack from extinction. I’m failing to see where embarrassment enters into that.”

“He doesn’t know any of those things,” Hayley reminded her. “And it’s weird for a single mother of a teenager to never have had a serious relationship. Things with Klaus were always temporary in that respect, and with Elijah … I don’t know. We never had a first date, officially. The first time we slept together was after I told him I was marrying Jackson. The next time we got together was after he ripped Marcel’s heart out, and then he was comatose for years. And then he was back, but he had to go away again, and now he has no idea who I am.”

“It sounds like you don’t have closure,” Caroline guessed.

“Not even a little.”

“So how can you start something serious with Declan if you haven’t let go of Klaus and Elijah?”
“I’ve let go fo Klaus,” Hayley objected. “I only write him letters for Hope’s sake.”

Caroline gave her a look like *you know I know better than that*. Was she right?

“Klaus is a hard man to shake,” Caroline said. “And I imagine things are even harder with Elijah. Maybe you have to find a way to say goodbye for good?”

“How? I can’t see them.”

“Not if Hope is with you. But maybe you’d have more luck than me with tracking Klaus down.”

Like, maybe Rebekah would give Hayley his actual location. She could ask for an address for another letter and just go there instead, maybe get there before he moved on …

“And what am I supposed to do about Elijah?”

Caroline shrugged. “This might be the worst advice on the planet, but maybe you should see him. He won’t remember you, which will hurt, but seeing him in a new life might help you give yourself permission to make one for yourself.”

Well, when she put it like that.

“I’ll think about it,” Hayley said, mind whirring.

“Good. Let me know if I can help out.”

They both knew she couldn’t. Hayley appreciated the offer regardless.

#

Hayley was glad to reach Freya’s voicemail. It was easier to say this to a machine than a person.

“Hey, Freya. I’ve decided to postpone my return and go for a quick trip overseas. I’ve talked to Lisina and she’s agreed to give me some wiggle room with the wolves, but I thought I should let you know so you don’t worry or anything. I’ll miss you while I’m gone, but I’ll bring you back a souvenir. Don’t trash the place while I’m gone!”

She hit the hang up button as quickly as she could and dropped her phone like it was on fire.

So, that was done. She was really doing this, after all.

First, she had a letter to write.

#

*19th August, 2025*
Dear Klaus,

Another Father’s Day has come and gone. They’re getting harder every year, I think. Hope was withdrawn this time around. I think that’s worse than when she’s lashing out.

I took her back to school. She didn’t want to do our ritual—leaving on an adventure all day to avoid orientation, then sneaking her back in later. I stayed a few days to see if she’d change her mind, but she didn’t.

Caroline and Ric think it’s just a teenaged phase. I guess I’ll just have to try for next year.

Hope to see you soon,

Hayley

#

19th May, 2026

The paper creased under Klaus’s grip.

Hayley wouldn’t have a next year. But she would see him soon.

He hated knowing the ending, and lately it felt like that was all he could see.

#

The time finally came for Klaus to meet Vincent inside. He heard the witch enter through a back service passage and made certain he entered at the same time, meeting Vincent by the altar.

The alter Hope was born on. The altar Hayley died for the first time on.

“This better be important,” Vincent cautioned. A shimmer was around him, most likely a protection spell.

Klaus wasn’t insulted at the suggestion that he might hurt Vincent. If it proved useful to his plan, he definitely would. Damn the consequences.
“Not only is it important,” Klaus replied, “but you’ll likely be pleased by it.”

Vincent folded his arms over his chest, unimpressed. “Go on.”

“I’d like you to do a spell and retrieve Marcel’s spilled venom from the floorboards over there. I know it was cleaned, but I’m certain enough remains in the fibers.”

“Enough for what?” Vincent asked. “The only people that venom will kill are your siblings, your daughter, and—”

“Me,” Klaus finished for him. “Enough to kill me.”

A beat passed.

Then, Vincent started laughing. Bitterly, but laughing nonetheless.

“You think I’m gonna believe that?” He wiped at his teary eyes with the back of one wrist. “No way, man. I’m not helping you enact whatever bullshit plan you’ve got cooking. Not happening.”

“I’m telling the truth,” Klaus insisted. “Davina is coming tomorrow. She will determine if the Hollow’s effects are going to be fatal for Hope. If they are, I will take the power into myself so it can die with me. But to do that, I need Marcel’s venom.”

Vincent remained nonplussed. “There’s none here. I already drew it all up and burned it.”

Klaus frowned. “Why?” The only possible motivation could be to protect his family, and would Vincent really do that?

“It was supposed to be used to kill Hope. I thought I might prevent anyone else from picking up that particular torch.”

Surprise lit inside Klaus like a hearth. “I didn’t think you’d care.”

“Because she’s yours?” Vincent scoffed. “She’s a child, and she’s a New Orleans witch. And she’s just as much Hayley’s as she ever will be yours.”

Klaus realised that his surprise was an insult and backpedalled slightly. “I appreciate you doing that for Hope, but I need some venom at the earliest opportunity.”

“Then you’re gonna have to go straight to the source.” Vincent’s smile slithered back onto his face. “Kind of ironic, you asking for Marcel’s permission to die. Tell me—if you’d gotten the venom here, would you even have told him what you planned to do? Or would you have just left him out of it like you people do with everything else?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Klaus demanded, anger flaring behind his eyes. He was certain they flashed gold, but Vincent didn’t back down.

“Well, where is he?” Vincent spread his arms wide. “‘Cause he’s not sleeping in your house with the rest of your family.”

“He’s renovating some house in the suburbs.”

“Some house?” Vincent’s eyebrows hit his hairline. “Man, get out of here. If you want to see your plan come to fruition, ask him. And tell him he has my complete blessing to end you for good.”

Klaus considered apologising. Making amends. It seemed the time for it, and certainly the place as
well, but he’d done enough.

“Thank you for meeting with me,” Klaus bit out through gritted teeth. He eased off a bit, trying to soften his features when he added, “And I am sorry for your loss,” thinking of Ivy. She’d been kinder than she had to be on the day of Hayley’s funeral, when she sent him to his daughter and warned him of the danger posed to her by his proximity.

He should have listened to her warning. If he had left, would she still have died? Likely, given Greta’s followers’ obsession with Hope and New Orleans.

Vincent’s only acknowledgment of Klaus’ sentiment was a curt nod. He knew he hadn’t earned more.

Chapter End Notes

so you may have noticed i broke my "no fiddling with canon" rule and plan to replace the white oak stake klaus pulled out of his ass to stab in his heart and use marcel's venom instead. this way makes it natural to have klaus and marcel confront some stuff that they didn't in season 5, plus fixes the white oak stake situation that pisses me off (he's literally been trying to destroy these for almost two decades. WHY would he keep one). ALSO gives weight to josh's death bc that demonstrates that venom to the heart kills really quickly and dramatically so klaus would be able to plan to do that easily, meaning josh didn't die for literally no plot relevant reason whatsoever (like most people in the last season).

hope you all like that change! if not sorry but i'm a whore for klaus' farewell tour being him getting roasted in various new orleans locations and him needing marcel's permission to die is just *chef's kiss* so look forward to that.

thank you all for the reviews! see you next time xx
May 20th, 2026

The first time Klaus saw Hope, she was screaming.

He preferred to think it didn’t count as the first time. He’d been magically bound to the wall in the church, spread out like Christ on a cross (an unflattering comparison for Christ, surely). Hayley was begging to hold their screaming daughter, only to choke on her own blood moments later. Klaus had screamed, too, and it felt like he made the sound Hope’s mother could not.

(When she died the second time, he hadn’t been screaming.)

The first time Klaus held Hope, she’d been sleeping so peacefully, it was like holding the eye of a storm in his arms—everything around her was whirling, a downpour of grief and blood. Marcel’s men had littered the courtyard of the abattoir, Klaus, Marcel, and the baby the only living beings in residence. Marcel had pressed Hope into Klaus’ arms and it was like peace for the first time in a thousand years.

She hadn’t been sleeping that way recently, but that night, she did.

Klaus stayed until her breathing evened out, and then even a little past that. Her joy at Freya and Keelin’s wedding still stained her lips with champagne and a small smile, one that didn’t leave despite her sleep. She was still in her dress—one that was a bit macabre for the occasion, but she’d chosen it herself and had been happy in it.

She’d been happy.

Maybe she would be all right, after all.

The veins creeping up her neck dispelled that hopeful theory.

Scarcely able to watch the spread of darkness on Hope’s skin, Klaus turned on his heel and departed —

Only to find Marcel right outside in the hall.

“Are you Edward Cullen-ing your own daughter?” Marcel asked, tone pitched low so as not to wake
Hope.

Klaus shut the door softly with both hands. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It’s Twilight,” Marcel said conversationally. “Davina made me watch it with her when she was still stuck in the church attic. Not as bad as people say, actually.”

“I’ll have to add it to my bucket list.” Klaus turned and began walking down the hall, headed for the study. “Perhaps Hope will introduce me to it.”

“I’m guessing she still has to pretend she hates it for street cred. Just ask Kol. He has them on BluRay.”

Klaus entered the study, finding the hearth already blazing. It wasn’t really the weather for it, but it was certainly atmospheric.

“Bourbon?” he offered, indicating the drinks tray on the desk.

“I’m good, thanks.” Marcel lowered himself into an armchair, shucking off his suit jacket. “How is she?”

Klaus filled a glass halfway for himself. “Tired, but happy. The exhaustion will last, but the happiness …”

“Davina’s verdict wasn’t good?”

Klaus shook his head. “She’ll be dead by the full moon.”

“That’s … soon.” The pain in Marcel’s eyes didn’t leak into his tone. “There has to be something we can do.”

“There is.” Klaus sat in the chair beside Marcel’s, resting his glass on the arm of it. “I intend to take Hope to Mystic Falls for her first transformation. The Saltzman twins can siphon the magic from her under the full moon, before she can stop them.”

“And do what with it? They’re kids, Klaus. You can’t hand them that kind of power.”

“I don’t intend to,” Klaus defended. “I’m taking the power into myself.”

“And running off to France?” Marcel guessed. “Becoming Klaus the Mad again? Give me a break. You can’t leave Hope like this.”

“Actually …” If Marcel didn’t like the idea of Klaus leaving Hope for France, he’d hate the idea of Klaus leaving Hope for hell. “I intend to die.”

Marcel grit his teeth so hard Klaus could hear the creaking. “How?”

“I need your venom.”

Marcel shot to his feet. “Jesus fucking Christ.” He started pacing, a habit he’d picked up from Klaus as a boy. “That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard. And I’ve known you for over a hundred years.”

“It’s the best idea we have.” Klaus looked up at Marcel, watching the way indignation filled out his shoulders, laboured his breathing. “If I take the magic and run, Hope will find me and take it back. We’re all martyrs for one another, so I must be the last. This gives her her life back.”
“As an orphan? Absolutely not.” Marcel’s eyes caught the light from the fireplace and blazed a furious molten gold. “Why do you think Hayley let herself burn? She looked at you and she looked at Hope and she knew you’d be there. She died because Hope still had a father to take care of her. She died knowing Hope would be safe. And you’re going to undo all that?”

“This makes her safe from an evil that has been after her since she was a little girl,” Klaus argued. “Hayley would understand. If she were here, she’d do the same thing.”

“Give it to one of your siblings, then. Try Elijah. He’s broken up enough over Hayley that he’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“I won’t have my brother die for this,” said Klaus. “I won’t allow it. *Always and forever* won’t allow it.”

Marcel threw his hands in the air. “Then *me*. Give it to me and I’ll find some fucking *deus ex machina* to take me out in a blaze of glory.”

Fury propelled Klaus from his chair, knocking his full glass to the carpet. “You think,” he seethed, “that I would give my life for one of my children, only to shuttle the responsibility along to another? I will not damn my son to save my daughter.”

“Is that what I am?” Marcel asked bitterly. “Was I your son when you came back to town and turned my men against me? Was I your son when you challenged me for leadership? When you took everything I’d built in my town?” Marcel made no effort to hide the tears. “Was I your son when I asked you to let me love the love of my life, and you put her in a box for it?”

“You were my son, always.” Though I don’t know how to make you believe it. “I was the one made undeserving by those moments. I did not deserve to be anyone’s father, let alone yours. But you could do anything—be anything—and you would still be my son.”

“Don’t you see that terrifies me?” Marcel asked it as though he were begging on his knees, but he stayed standing tall. “I’m your son. *Your* son. I never dared call you Father, but everyone knew. And it followed me after you were gone. It was expected of me that I take up where you and your family left off. Those first few years, whenever I tried to do things differently, to stop the bloodshed, my men—your men—would revolt. It took decades to root out the last of the radicals you left behind. You named me after war, and you made sure to give me one.

“And now look at this city!” Marcel staggered back, arm gesturing to the closed window. The nightlife beyond. “It’s still happening. Fucking Nazis flood the streets, they burn Hayley alive, blow up the wolves, kill Josh, and everybody knows that this city is ripe for their bullshit. Emmett knew this city was his for the taking because Greta told him the stories about *me*. About how I had the wolves cursed, about how I had the witches cowering. The city slips into fear because I carried on your legacy like a good little soldier. Hell, I even took a kid to make them my own little prize. I deserve to be your son, Klaus. But that’s not a compliment.”

“You did not carry on my legacy,” Klaus growled. “It was why I hated you, the first time I saw you after all those years. You were better than me. You had the loyalty of your people, the respect of your city. They loved you.”

“But the wolves and the witches—”

“Even when I found out the witches were in your thrall, I knew there had to be a reason. I knew they had to have done something to draw your ire, and when we found out about Davina, I knew I’d been right. You would never leave a child to die at their hands. You killed them in the streets for your
daughter. The only difference between you and me and you and Davina is that saving Davina wasn’t about her use to you. No matter what anyone says, you didn’t know she could control the witches when you saved her. How long before you figured it out? How far had you decided to go for her before she told you she could stop any witch, any time, anywhere?”

Marcel’s jaw worked, mouth opening. No words came out.

“You didn’t use her,” Klaus pressed on. “You protected her. I used you—to make me feel important, to convince my brother I was good for another few years. You were entertaining. I didn’t love you until later. You loved Davina covered in blood at that cemetery. Those are not my actions. That is not me living through you.

“And as for the wolves …” Klaus broke away from the staring contest and dodged the lake of bourbon soaking the carpet. He reached the desk and opened the top drawer, retrieving what he was looking for. “Something Vincent said had me wondering. I told him you were renovating some house and he laughed at me. So I looked it up, and he was right. It’s not just some house. It’s Theodore and Justine Labonair’s house.” Klaus slammed the drawer shut and stalked back to the fireplace to show Marcel the old newspaper clipping in his hand.

Marcel winced, not touching the offered paper.

TRAGEDY STRIKES—Community mourns great loss as Theodore Labonair (29 years) and wife, Justine (28 years) found dead in home with daughter, Andrea (10 months). Police say home invasion gone wrong to blame for tragic deaths.

“I couldn’t find a police report,” Klaus said. “But I did speak to an officer that worked the case at the time. You found them in their home. You took Andrea out—you took Hayley out, and let everyone believe she was dead.”

Marcel didn’t meet Klaus’ gaze. “It seemed like the best idea at the time.”

“You loved them. You loved Justine and Theodore, you loved Andrea, and Richard Dumas took them away. Cursing the wolves was vengeance, not prejudice. It’s not chaos. It’s wrong, but it’s not the same as Greta and Emmett. It’s not the same as me.”

Marcel lumbered into a chair, wiping under his nose defiantly. Like he had as a boy whenever he was upset and didn’t want Klaus to see. “I was there,” he said, voice raw.

“When they died?” Klaus guessed, but he knew he had to be wrong. Marcel would never just let that happen.

Marcel shook his head. “When Justine gave birth to Andrea.”

Klaus sat down beside Marcel, not touching, just listening.

“Theo wasn’t there, but I was. It all happened so fast, she was so afraid. I promised nothing bad would happen. That I would let anything bad happen to her or the baby.

“And then she was there. Andrea. Screaming like a banshee, and ugly as fuck. But Justine called her beautiful, and she hit me when I laughed. I was holding Andrea when Theo finally arrived to take her from me.”
“I assume he disagreed with your assertion that the baby was ugly.”

“He was crying too much to see her properly. Justine had to wipe his face for him every time he held her that first week, because he just kept bawling. I had to promise him, too.” Whatever joy had lit behind Marcel’s eyes guttered out. “I guess I broke my promise.”

“We all broke your promise. You did everything you could. Everything Justine could’ve expected of you.”

“I came after all of you,” Marcel reminded him. “Even when I knew it hurt her …”

“But you never hurt her. Or Hope.” Klaus remembered a mad dash covered in blood. Finding his seven-year-old daughter on the street, sitting with Marcel. He’s my friend, she’d said. “The gift you brought for Justine—it was the crib, wasn’t it? The one at the house?”

Marcel nodded. “I made it. A friend put a protection spell on it.”

“You found Andrea in that crib.”

“I did.”

Klaus let the implications sink in. “Which is why Richard Dumas killed Justine and Theo, but not Andrea. The spell wouldn’t let him get to her.”

Marcel’s jaw clenched. “I should’ve had the whole house spelled.”

“He would’ve just waited to catch them outdoors. If they brought Andrea, she wouldn’t have been protected.”

Whether Marcel believed him or not wasn’t apparent. Klaus put a hand on his shoulder, thinking back to days when his grip would’ve dwarfed the joint. Marcellus had been a gangly lad once upon a time, all angles and limbs. But he’d always had this invisible weight resting right there, between his shoulder blades.

“You weren’t perfect,” Klaus told him, “but you weren’t malicious. Hindsight is … a harsh and unforgiving light to view your actions in. You knew what you knew when you knew it, and not a moment before. Don’t use what you know now to critique the actions of a younger man, one grieving, one alone. You kept Hayley alive, and you had nothing to do with her death whatsoever.”

“But you want me to have something to do with yours.”

“I want you to protect your sister like you did her mother. I want her to have you the way Hayley never got to. She was grown before she came back to you, making choices you couldn’t prevent. Her being pregnant with my child when you saw her again … I imagine that wasn’t easy to swallow.”

“I tried to make her leave,” Marcel confessed. “She was eight months pregnant. I told her I knew her dad, that she acted like him. Told her I’d get her out if I could.”

This wasn’t surprising. “I would’ve killed you for it.”

Marcel gave him a look that says well, obviously. “I would’ve made sure you never knew where that baby was.”

“Part of me wishes she’d gone when you offered.”
“Most of me has wished that for years,” Marcel replied.

Understanding passed between them like a drink from one hand to another: If Hayley had run when Marcel told her to, she would still be alive.

“You have always had a miraculous heart, Marcel,” Klaus said. “In your youth, I used it against you. I now find myself in need of your understanding. I failed you, though you succeeded regardless. But I see your sister fading away and I … I know I cannot fail her. Not as selfishly as I did you. Your pain is the lesson that made a better father for her. I cannot pretend that is fair to you, but you have never resented her for benefiting from my growth.”

“Doesn’t mean I didn’t hold anger for you when I saw how selflessly you loved her.”

“Of course not,” said Klaus. “You’ve always loved her unselfishly. Offering to take the magic and die yourself … I appreciate that, but it will never work. There is nothing capable of killing you anyway.”

“I’m sure someone can cook something up.”

Klaus smiled thinly. “I’ve made sure that can never happen.”

“How?”

“Just … trust me, Marcellus.”

Marcel made no objection to the name. “If you’re sure about this …” He sighed, flicking the tears away. “I’ll do it. I’ll give you my venom.”

Klaus slid his hand from his son’s shoulder to the back of his neck and pulled him into an embrace. “I know nothing about this is easy. It certainly isn’t for me. But I am proud of you, despite having no right to be.”

Marcel exhaled a few close breaths that may have been chuckles. “Sometimes, I’m even proud of myself. I doubt the moment Hope realises I’ve given you my venom will be one of those times.”

“We don’t have to tell her you did it voluntarily. Just that Vincent found enough spilled in the church and he provided it to me.”

“I’d rather not lie to her.”

“If that’s what she needs to trust you, to rely on you, then it’s what you have to do. She’ll understand, in time.”

“How many times did you tell yourself that before you daggered Rebekah and put her in a box?” Marcel asked. “I am not doing to my sister what you did to yours. She gets the truth, and she gets to feel however she wants about it.”

“A lie isn’t the same as a dagger. I’ll take care of the heavy lifting before I go.”

“No,” Marcel said emphatically. “We’ve established that I know how to learn from your mistakes. Trust me on this one.”

“She’ll be furious with you. And her anger is quite breathtaking. You’ve never been on the receiving end of it.”

“If it’s anything like yours, I’ll make it through just fine,” Marcel dismissed. He patted his knees
twice and stood, stretching a little. “I’m going to get going. I’ll bring a big breakfast back in the morning so Hope feels like the party’s kept going. Best to take advantage while we’re all in town. Good luck telling the others what you plan to do.”

And as Marcel breezed out of the room, Klaus realised he still had to tell Rebekah, Elijah, and Kol. Fuck.

#

Because his night was going wonderfully (more of a mixed bag), Klaus pulled out the next letter to a rude shock that, really, he should’ve been expecting.

He knew this date. He didn’t know what Hayley would have to say about it, but he knew what had happened. And he had a feeling it was about to happen all over again, this time in black and white.

#

*September 10th, 2025*

Klaus tipped his head back, soaking in the sun that beat down from the sky. A French autumn was a beauty to behold, and he considered himself lucky to have seen so many.

Pool-side wasn’t his usual preference, but Klaus couldn’t complain. The drinks were wonderful, especially paired with O-negative, and the scene was picturesque. The hotel was fancy enough that few people brought their children, and so the pool remained undisturbed by any but the few visitors sunning themselves or doing laps.

Klaus wouldn’t have minded some children running around, come to think of it.

“Contemplating world domination?”

The voice had his blood stuttering in his veins. How in the *fuck*—

“Oh, you don’t have to have a heart attack,” Hayley informed him. She dropped into the seat beside him, reclining gracefully. He wondered how she’d booked a room here wearing jeans, a t-shirt, and combat boots. There’d probably been compulsion involved.

“What are you doing here?” was what he meant to ask. Instead, the words “Your hair is different” tumbled from his mouth.

“I’ve had it short for a few years now. Started bleaching the ends a little for variety.” She tucked a chunk behind one ear.

A waitress approached, eyeing Hayley’s attire with disdain. Klaus considered ripping her throat out for the slight.
“Can I get you a refill, sir?” she asked of Klaus.

“Another of these for me,” he said, lifting the bourbon he’d compelled them to add blood to. He raised an eyebrow at Hayley.

“Just water for me,” she said.

“Make that a beer,” Klaus corrected. He gave the waitress a winsome smile. “Thanks, love.”

“I guess I can drink,” Hayley mused as she watched the waitress go. “I usually abstain. Mom duties and all.”

“I assume the lack of a dark magic doomsday means you didn’t bring your motherly duties here?” Klaus asked. Translation: Please, please tell me you didn’t bring Hope.

“She’s at school being far too independent for my taste,” was all Hayley said on the topic.

“How did you find me?”

“Tricked the answer out of Rebekah.” Hayley rested her chin in her palm, tapping her fingers on her chin. “With some help from Marcel.”

Of course Marcel would help Hayley. She was one of his many weak points.

Klaus surveyed her relaxed posture. “I would’ve thought you’d be angrier with me.”

“I was going to be. I’ve found I don’t quite have the energy.”

“Then what did you come here for?”

Hayley chewed her lip thoughtfully. “When I heard you were here, I remembered how much you loved it. Thought maybe you’d want to give me a tour.”

“Simple as that?”

“Of course,” Hayley said. Obviously lying. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“Not at all.”

The waitress returned, setting the drinks on the table between them. Hayley’s beer was still in the bottle, but a glass half-filled with ice rested beside it. “Let me know if you need anything else,” the waitress said.

“Oh, we will,” Klaus promised. He watched her go, using the excuse to dodge Hayley’s watchful eye.

“You feeding on the staff?” Hayley asked.

“Trying to avoid it. But then, I am a bit of a disaster.” Klaus smiled self-deprecatingly. Tell me I’m a monster. I dare you.

“You have a nickname, you know.” Hayley tasted her beer and made a face. Evidently, it was not to her liking.

“Klaus the Mad.” Klaus would be lying if he said he didn’t feel some pride in the title. It paired nicely with the eccentric theatricality that came with being a Mikaelson.
“How long do you think that will last before word reaches our daughter of what you’ve become here?”

Klaus winced internally. “I thought you didn’t have the energy to be angry with me.”

“I’m not angry,” Hayley argued. She spread her free hand out, palm-up, as if to say, _Look, see? Unarmed._ “Just curious.”

Klaus stared at her open hand. The deception. She didn’t need a knife, and she knew that.

“Forget I mentioned it.” Hayley took another swig of her beer. “Are you going to show me a good time?”

“I think your idea of a good time differs from mine.”

“Fine. A good time that doesn’t involve blood.”

Klaus looked at her skeptically. “You’re limiting my options.”

“Yes. On purpose.” Hayley smirked. “Come on, Klaus. Show me what you plan to show Caroline when she finally succumbs to your charms and lets you whisk her away to the far corners of the earth.”

Klaus hadn’t realised Hayley knew about that particular promise. “You want me to give you the good time I have planned for another woman?”

“You can do it twice. Come on—if I was Caroline, what would you be dying to show me?”

Klaus considered Hayley carefully. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to investigate for a time. Accompany me?”

Hayley’s broad smile was dazzling in its rarity. “My schedule just cleared.”

#

“Okay, I think my schedule just un-cleared.”

Klaus grinned into the darkness. “A bit late for that, love.” Rocks or bones skittered underfoot, he wasn’t sure which. The air was heavy, like the catacomb were a beast with its breath held in its lungs, frozen, waiting. Like any moment it would exhale.

“I think I remember where we parked the car.”

Klaus reached back to grab Hayley’s hand and stop her from leaving. “It’s too easy to get lost down here. We should stick together.”

“I can take care of myself.”

Klaus wished he could make her see his rolling eyes. “You came all this way around the world just to strand me in the catacombs?”

A huff was Hayley’s only reply, but she didn’t leave him. Their hands broke free of one another’s
after a while, but he could always feel her at his back.

After a while, she asked, “So why are we even down here? And why aren’t we using torches?”

“We’re down here because you let me set the itinerary. Your first mistake. And we don’t have torches because we can see just fine in the dark. Vampires, remember?”

“Hard to forget. You don’t think some light would make it less creepy?”

Klaus turned back to grin at her, hoping she could see his teeth. “Why would we want it less creepy?”

They kept going, winding through the passages while Hayley muttered their route to herself to ensure she didn’t forget. Right, left, three rights, one left …

It was unnecessary. Klaus had memorised this route an age ago, so he knew it well.

“So you still haven’t told me why you wanted to come here,” Hayley said. “You just like darkness? A fondness for tunnels? A creepy landmark fetish I don’t know about?”

“I’m here looking for someone.”

“People live down here?” Hayley asked incredulously.

Klaus snorted and slowed his walking. “They most certainly do not.”

“Then wha—” Hayley froze as she joined him, taking in their current location. It was a moderately-sized room made to feel claustrophobic by the piles of bones that reached up toward the ceiling. “Please tell me this wasn’t you.”

“This wasn’t me,” Klaus said easily. On second thought, “Though I may have killed some of them, actually. My time in Paris has always been wild.”

“What are they all doing here?”

“Remnants from the cemeteries that were relocated down here to make room for fresher remains. I’ve probably killed a good dozen of them, but there are thousands down here. More rooms like this one.”

“And this is where you would’ve brought Caroline?” Doubt coloured Hayley’s voice as she stepped closer to one of the piles, hands clutching her sides like she was afraid she’d touch something accidentally. “Would you have warned her to take off her Chanel boots first?”

“Where would the fun be in that?” Klaus joked as he stared down a pair of empty eye sockets. “And no, I probably wouldn’t have brought her here.”

“So why’d you bring me? Don’t tell me it’s because I’m special, because this is not the kind of special I want to be.”

“It’s not,” Klaus confirmed. He tore his eyes away from the skull staring at him—it wasn’t the right one, anyway. “If you must know, there’s someone down here that I once knew quite well. I often return to look for them.”

“Like, a friend?”

“Something like that.”
“What was their name?”

“Magnus.”

“Is that … French?”

“Not likely. It’s also unlikely to have been his name originally. He was a powerful witch that lived here some time ago. I believe he was interred in a mass grave in Les Innocents, but I’ve not been able to locate his remains.”

“Did you kill him?”

Klaus ignored the flare of hurt in his gut at her question. It was a reasonable one, surely. “No. As I said, he was my friend.”

“Has that really stopped you before?”

Klaus could only admit the truth. “Not until the last decade or so.” Probably not until Stefan Salvatore, truth be told. He’d left that man alive far longer than he would have many others.

“So you come down here and look for him sometimes,” Hayley said. “Were there no records kept when all the bones were moved?”

“It was most likely a mass grave. He died and was presumed a commoner, from what I’ve managed to uncover. All his wealth and fine things and grand standing in the community, and he ended up dumped in a mass grave after a boat capsized in the Seine with him and some others aboard. No idea what he was doing there dressed in common clothes.”

The catch of Hayley’s breath indicated she’d tried to say something and found herself unable. “I’m sorry you lost him.”

“Likewise. He was … an interesting man.”

“And you think you’ll be able to find him down here?”

“In time, most certainly,” Klaus said. “A good thing I have so much of it.”

“What’s the plan? Are you searching it all methodically or …”

“I tried to initially. Now I know the space well enough to know if I’ve seen a room before or not. This is a new one—quite a few new … faces.” He indicated a pile of skulls in the corner.

“You can tell the difference between them?”

“Can’t you?” Klaus picked up a skull in his hands, tender with it where he would not have been with its owner once upon a time. The bone was fragile, browned by years interred. It was also young, smaller in his palm than he was comfortable with. “You can see the shape—it differs in each of them. Broader noses, higher cheeks, longer foreheads. It’s not a stretch to see a face overlaid.”

“Maybe not for you.” Hayley joined him at his side. While she didn’t touch the bones, she didn’t shy away from them either. “Do you think you’ll recognise him?”

“Of course.”

“Have you considered employing magical assistance?” Hayley asked.
“I consulted with a few witches after I learned he had been moved here. His belongings didn’t work to track his remains with—he spelled himself against that and it must have somehow lasted after he passed. Only the blood of a relative would work, and since he had no family …”

“You’re the only one that can find him,” Hayley concluded. “A tall task.”

“Oh, well. I suppose he’ll still be waiting here for me, however long it takes.”

“He must’ve been special, to benefit from always and forever like this.”

Klaus snorted. “This is not always and forever.”

“Then what is it?”

“I …” Klaus frowned at the skull in his hands, at the face its contours conjured up in his mind. “I was his friend. If I had not left for New Orleans, he may still be alive.”

As always, Hayley understood in a way that could almost be heard. Like the moment she found clarity was a key finding a lock, scraping the tongue free and springing the door open. “You think he’s dead because you wanted New Orleans.”

“He’s dead because my father came to Paris and we had to flee. Magnus refused to come with us.”

“Doesn’t really sound like your fault.”

“Not my fault. Still unfortunate.”

“And what will you do with him if you find him?”

“Bury him properly, I suppose.”

Hayley hesitated. “Don’t they all deserve to be buried properly?”

“The ground of this earth could not hold all our dead within it. It is best that so many are dust, but that process takes too long. I am only here for Magnus.”

“Maybe we should burn him,” Hayley suggested. “Like the wolves do out in the bayou. He won’t be dust, but he will be ashes. You can buy him a dignified urn. Seems more respectful that way.”

“Perhaps.” It was a reasonable idea.

Hayley nudged his shoulder with hers. “So how do we do this? I’ll find all the skulls in the room and have you look at them?”

“That’s the general gist of it. Nothing too complex.”

“Then let’s get started.”

#

Klaus sacrificed his luxurious bath for a shower, dressing in loose cotton pants and a tight t-shirt. He could hear Hayley in the room, tapping at her phone rapidly. Texting, most likely.
“If you need to use the bathroom, it’s all yours,” Klaus told her as he padded back into the main room. Hayley was curled up on the sofa, shoes kicked off, hair messy from the wind outside. She’d showered first, dressing in what was essentially the same outfit but clean.

“I’m good, thanks.” She finished with her phone and dropped it into her lap.

“Have you booked a room?” Klaus asked.

“Yeah, at a motel the other side of the city. Not as nice as this place, but it’ll do.”

“It will not. Find somewhere here.”

“The rooms are all booked.”

“Then have the staff remove someone,” Klaus instructed. “How do you think I got this room?”

Hayley made a face. “Not really interested in ruining someone’s trip by turning them out onto the street at—” She checked the time on her phone. “Almost midnight.”

God, he forgot how infuriating her scruples were. “Then stay here. Take the bed, I’ll take the sofa.”

Hayley laughed. “You? Sleeping on the sofa?”

“Now you have to agree to the arrangement for the entertainment value inherent in my suffering.”

“Oh? Do you have a hidden anti-hybrid dagger somewhere?” Hayley joked. “I’m so terrified.”

“Perhaps you should be more concerned,” Klaus suggested. He was still standing, which meant he literally looked down his nose at Hayley.

“You won’t hurt me,” she said, unbothered. “And if you do, Hope will kill you. Father or not.” She snorted. “Can you imagine us having one of our domestic disputes with her at this age? She’d knock us both on our asses.”

Klaus flinched. “Me, more like.” It wasn’t a secret between them that he’d been the aggressor of those altercations. Or if he hadn’t been, then he deserved her ire. The time he had her cursed and taken from their child sprung to mind.

God, she’d been murderous, painted in his blood, weeping at the sight of Hope on two feet. He didn’t think he’d ever forget that particular tableau.

“She could knock you on your ass just by breathing. Quite something to behold, these days …” Hayley trailed off, as if aware that they were treading in dangerous territory. “Do you remember when you choked me?”

Where had that come from? And though he hated it, Klaus had to ask, “Which time?”

“When I was still just a wolf. Not a hybrid. I was considering aborting Hope.”

Yes, he remembered that. Remembered Rebekah’s shrill voice cutting through his fury like a knife. She is pregnant, for God’s sake!
“I recall. Not my finest hour.”

“Understatement. But, embarrassingly, it probably wasn’t your worst.”

Klaus just nodded. She was right. “I know the way I treated you back then was … unacceptable. If you’d like an apology, I can provide one.”

“ Doesn’t seem like much use now. Not sure I’d want to forgive you, anyway.”

The reminder of lingering hurt stung Klaus more than he wanted to admit. He had hoped they were past it, but that was a foolish notion. He had treated her like a thing, then. Like an incubator that he’d soon be done with.

“You are more, now,” he said instead of an apology. “You always were, but you’re more to me than just her mother. I find it difficult to suggest that I would turn back the clock and give you the chance to abort Hope, since I don’t know what other atrocities I would commit to ensure her life and safety. But you didn’t deserve to be treated as if that was all you were. To have your choices taken away.”

Hayley hugged her knees to her chest. “I had decided to keep her by then.”

“I didn’t know that when I attacked you over it.”

“No, you didn’t,” Hayley agreed. “Thank god Rebekah was there for me.”

“Thank god you were there for Rebekah,” Klaus added. At the confused look in Hayley’s eyes, he explained, “I know you gave her the daggers you found in the basement. Trying to free her from me.”

“Well, only one of us had to be stuck with you. And that wasn’t her. Plus, I didn’t want her going the same way Elijah did. I knew if you snapped, she’d be the only one capable of intervening. The only one strong enough. The only one that would.” Hayley paused. “Except maybe Marcel, eventually. Did you know he offered to help me run away?”

Klaus was sure that from the slack, shocked look on his face Hayley could tell that he had not.

“Yeah.” She nodded, smile playing over her lips. “I was … eight months pregnant? Maybe? I went to ask him about the explosives used in the bayou, I think. He told me he knew my dad. Offered to help me escape.”

“I would’ve killed him for that.”

“I think he knew that. I guess he always had a soft spot for Hope, even back then.”

_I don’t think that was just for Hope._ “He does have many more scruples than me.”

“Oh, definitely. If people didn’t already know he was adopted, it’d be obvious the second he opened his mouth.”

Rude, but true. Klaus had spent a long time coming to terms with Marcel’s growth. Even longer acknowledging how he’d coveted it, hindered it.

“Why didn’t you accept his offer?” Klaus asked.

“I guess … it felt like going backwards. I was sent away from the violence as a baby. I didn’t want to run away from it again. Though I guess we ended up sending Hope away anyway. That suggestion was definitely Marcel-inspired.”
“I didn’t realise.” It made sense, though. Hayley knowing Marcel had sent her away to keep her safe would, of course, suggest doing the same if their daughter was in danger. “I don’t think he does, either.”

“Well, he wasn’t supposed to remember she was alive. You compelled him, remember?” Hayley paused. “Though I guess he remembers now, even the stuff he was compelled to forget. When he came back enhanced with Lucien’s serum, any compulsion would’ve broken. Must’ve been a trip.”

“If you could go back, would you accept Marcel’s offer?”

Hayley tilted her head consideringly. “I guess I wouldn’t have cared so much about him risking himself back then. He was the enemy, according to you. God, you really thought he was going to hurt Hope, didn’t you?”

“I … knew that I would do the same, in his place. I convinced myself he’d changed so much that he could do anything to hurt me.”

Hayley snorted. “Idiot. And to answer your question … I think I would still turn it down. For one, the Hollow would still find us. We wouldn’t have Mikaelsons to save us. I wouldn’t have been able to save the wolves in the bayou. I wouldn’t be alpha. Hope wouldn’t have the same protections she has. She wouldn’t be at the school with kids just like her. It’s imperfect, but we fought for it. I kind of feel like we deserve it.”

Klaus gestured around himself and said, “Oh, I think I deserve what I have. I’m just not certain I mean that positively.” Sure, he was in the nicest hotel in the country and had blood, sex, and fun on tap. But he was also miles from his daughter with no end to that separation in sight.

“You know you’re choosing every part of this that isn’t physical separation from Hope,” Hayley said.

“And here I thought you weren’t going to mention it.”

“Look, I don’t know what happened to make you stop calling—”

“She didn’t tell you?” Klaus had been certain Hope would.

“Hope doesn’t tell me much anymore. Not until it’s all bubbling over and she doesn’t really have a choice.” Hayley patted the sofa beside her. “Come and tell me what happened.”

“If she didn’t share, she probably doesn’t want you to know.” Telling Hayley something Hope kept private could open a whole can of worms. There was no script for this part of parenting.

“I’m her mother,” Hayley said, tone chilly. “I get to know why my kid can’t call her dad. And I can keep our conversation private. Not really planning on telling her about this anyway, not if it makes things worse.” She hit the sofa again, this time more aggressively. “Spill.”

The truth was that Klaus didn’t want to dig his heels in on this. He’d missed being able to parent with Hayley. She was always so good at it, had been from the beginning. Not a natural born mother, because she’d scream every time she’d heard the phrase, but she worked hard to be good. That was what made her good.

Klaus hadn’t worked hard at being a good parent in a long time, but he still knew what it looked like on Hayley.

Sitting beside her, Klaus was closer than he’d been to Hayley in a long time. Even during their day
out, she’d maintained her distance in more than just the physical sense. With the exception of their trek through the tunnels, she’d kept her hands stuffed in her pockets, her smile curling but never showing her teeth. He got the feeling she was dazed, almost uncertain of how she’d ended up there.

“It was soon before her tenth birthday,” Klaus began. “She astral projected to me while I was … in the middle of something.”

Hayley’s face turned to stone. “Sex or murder?”

“The latter.”

“Fuck. What were you doing, Klaus?”

“There were these … acolytes of an old religion. Awfully prejudiced against me—”

“Because you’re sunshine and there’s no reason anyone should want to hurt you. Right?”

“Point taken. But their issue was always about my existence, not my actions.”

Hayley raised an eyebrow as if to say Are you sure about that? “What were you doing to them?”

“The usual. Nothing particularly imaginative, and they were all dead by the time she zapped me into her room. I think she saw a few bodies. I was … bloodied, of course.”

Hayley closed her eyes and cringed like she’d seen the grisly tableau herself. “This is bad.”

“I know.”

“You should’ve told me when it happened instead of running away.”

“Cutting off contact seemed best for her.”

Hayley opened her eyes, clarity shining in them. “And then you had a witch spell you so Hope couldn’t use astral projection again.”

“Yes,” Klaus said. That had been a wise move on his part, he felt. Especially if Hayley guessed it was.

Suddenly, she didn’t seem so pleased. She was the one standing, pacing, looking down at him as he sat on the sofa. “And I assume,” she said, “that you asked this witch what the spell would do to anyone who did try to establish a connection?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be a harmful spell,” Klaus defended, heart sinking. “Did something happen to her?”

“Nothing permanent, but she was in the hospital.”

Klaus shot to his feet as well. “How? Her healing factor—”

“Doesn’t protect her from burning out her magic and collapsing. I got a call from the school just before Kol and Davina’s wedding. Had to miss it to sit with her in the hospital.”

Klaus speared his hands through his hair and pulled. “I didn’t know that was going to happen, Hayley. I swear—”

“But you could’ve found out if you just talked to me! It was a fucking dumb decision to cut her off,
but you didn’t have to do it to me too. I got one call at her birthday party and that was it. You wanted nothing to do with me—”

“It wasn’t about you.” Klaus found his palms gravitating together, like he was begging her. Please believe me. Please forgive me.

“Oh, like hell it wasn’t about me,” Hayley growled, stepping right up to him. “We’re partners. The Hollow wasn’t supposed to take that from us—and honestly, she didn’t. You took that from me. We’re supposed to be a team!” Tears brightened her eyes.

Klaus was practically gasping for words. “I’m—”

“If you say you’re sorry I will throw you out the fucking window.”

“Then what am I supposed to say, Hayley?” he demanded. “What would make you happy? Just tell me what stops the tears and I’ll say it.”

“Nothing can fix this!” Hayley exploded. “The second I leave here, you’re going to ignore me again. If I take your number, you’ll change it. If I ask your siblings, they’ll give me the fucking run around. If I write you a letter—” She choked up, every tendon in her neck drawing taut like rope under a filmy sail. Like any moment, the skin would split open under the pressure.

“I can’t talk to you,” said Klaus. “I can’t hear about her and stay away.”

“Then I won’t talk about her.”

“You can’t.”

“How do you know?” Hayley jabbed her index finger at him. “How do you know what I can and can’t do? You don’t fucking know me! Even when I was sleeping down the hall, even when you were fucking me in Mystic Falls, you didn’t know me. You didn’t know what I was capable of.”

“I didn’t,” Klaus agreed. “But I knew you when Hope was gone. I knew when we sent our child away with Rebekah and you barely ate, barely slept, just slaughtered witches and bathed off the blood and slaughtered more witches again. I always know you more when you’re broken than when you’re whole, and you’re whole when you’re with our daughter. So be whole with our daughter. It’s best to leave me out of that equation.”

Hayley shook her head, tears finally spilling. “I need you.”

“You think you do because I worked so hard to make sure you did. I was terrified you’d take her and go if you didn’t think I was essential. But I’m not, Hayley. I’m not.”

“Hope needs you.”

“She needs you. Tell me—if our roles had been reversed, would Hope ever have found you neck-deep in blood like that? Or would you have assimilated somewhere, started a life, built a community?”

“If I had to leave Hope, she wouldn’t need to astral project to me at random hours. I’d actually call her.”

“Exactly!” Klaus exclaimed. “You’re better at this.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to leave me!” Hayley was as close to sobbing as Klaus had ever seen
her. “I always thought I was more than just a collateral of always and forever. I thought I was a part of it, but I was just … Hope-adjacent. I’m just the mother of your child.”

“That’s a gross oversimplification.”

“Then what am I, that it was so easy to leave me?”

Klaus’ blood boiled. “What are you to me? Did you stop to think what I was to you when you tried to steal away with our child?”

“Oh, that was years ago—”

“It happened,” Klaus snapped. “You don’t get to sweep it under the rug with Jackson’s ashes. You were going to make him my child’s father. Raise her as his.”

“So you understand me wanting to leave when I was pregnant and Marcel offered, but if there’s another man involved you flip your shit?” Hayley asked.

“She’s my child. I didn’t just father her—I fought for her. You think I’d just let someone else be that for her?”

“Jackson was my husband. Your fucking family was going to get our kid turned into a slave for Dahlia, so forgive me for asking him to help save my kid.” The finger Hayley stabbed in his direction was trembling. “And I would never have made him her father. He has always been Jackson to her, every time I mention him. Your insecurity is yours.”

“So it’s insecurity when it’s me, but when you’re having a breakdown over me leaving—”

“This isn’t for Hope!”

“Everything is for Hope!”

“Maybe not everything has to be!”

Klaus had to clench his teeth to hold back his snarl. “She’s our child.”

Guilt flooded Hayley’s features. “I know that. I didn’t mean that we should neglect her, or …” Hayley dropped her finger to raise her hands and gesture around. “She knows this, Klaus. She knows everyone is suffering for her. We have to live for ourselves sometimes. We can’t teach her that this is love. Dying over and over, daggering, betrayal, screaming. I can’t love anyone else because I’m stuck in the fucking Mikaelson emotional mud, and she knows that. What if we’re doing this to her? What if we’re teaching her that love and pain are the same thing?”

Klaus motioned between them as he laughed sardonically. “Aren’t they?”

“No,” Hayley spat the word out like it was poison. “And I’ll die before I let my daughter inherit that belief from you.”

“Then I suppose we’re agreed,” Klaus said, the triumph in his voice entirely false. “I should stay away from Hope.”

“You really don’t get it.” Hayley shook her head as she wiped her tears with her sleeves. “Staying away is what causes the most pain.”

“Then you’ve forgotten what it felt like to have my hand around your neck.”
Klaus saw a dozen different attacks coming—a shove, a slap, a kick, a bite. None of them came.

No. In an ironic twist, Hayley chose the most painful option:

She left.

#

10th September, 2025

Dear Klaus,

I’ve decided to stop posting letters to you. I’ll probably still write them, but it’s clear that even if they did get through you wouldn’t care.

Hayley

#

Just Hayley. Not Missing you, Hayley or even Regards, Hayley.

Klaus had certainly never hated her name until that moment. Where was the rest of it? Where was the part where she called him a cruel bastard? Where she screamed and yelled at him?

It had all the feeling of a royal decree.

Klaus hoped desperately that the same wasn’t true of the remaining letters. He couldn’t have cheated himself out of these last pieces of her. This was all he had left.

Desperate not to squander it and terrified he’d find more blunt missives in the remaining lot, Klaus hid the box in the wardrobe and prepared to get what little sleep he would that night.

#

True to his word, Marcel brought a mountain of breakfast supplies back with him in the morning. He smelled of the musty Labonair house and hotel shampoo, and he looked like he’d slept about as much as Klaus had.

Which is, to say, he hadn’t.
“Thanks for this,” Hope said as she tucked into a plate of bacon. Still in her dress from the wedding, she hadn’t un-squinted her eyes since she woke up.

“Hung over?” Marcel asked.

Hope shook her head slowly. “Not the champagne.”

The Hollow. She’d slept all right—at least a solid seven hours, no nightmares that Klaus had detected. Just peace.

He should’ve guessed that would be a lie.

Currently it was just Klaus, Marcel, and Hope at the dining table. Kol and Davina had opted to stay in a hotel, and Klaus had gifted Freya and Keelin a room at a bed and breakfast for their wedding night. That made this the optimal moment to bring up their upcoming trip.

“I’m going to help you pack your things after this,” Klaus announced. “It’s best you turn at the school for your first time.”

Hope froze. “I thought I was going to turn out in the bayou with the Crescents.”

“The Crescents don’t turn on a full moon,” Klaus reminded her. “And it’s better you get used to where to turn at school.”

“But I don’t have to turn after the first time.”

“You may want to.”

Hope reared back a bit, eyes wide.

“It’s good to get used to it,” Marcel advised her. “Your dad is right.”

“Oh, well as long as you two agree, that’s fine,” Hope said sarcastically. “All due respect, Marcel, but you’re not a wolf. This has nothing to do with you.”

“There’s no reason to be rude to Marcel.” Now or once I’m gone. “Apologise to him.”

“But it’s true!”

“He’s your brother and he loves you. This is his business because it’s your business, and you’d best get used to that. Apologise immediately.”

Hope groaned. “Sorry, Marcel,” she said in a way that was hardly contrite. Marcel acknowledged the apology with a nod that Hope didn’t see, given that her glare remained on Klaus. She also didn’t see the brief flicker of amusement in Marcel’s eyes as her teenaged tendencies made themselves known.

“Now.” Klaus infused the word with as much authority as possible. “The school is best. You’ll turn with other wolves that you may turn with later, on other full moons. You don’t have to do all of this alone just because you can control your form. Follow your mother’s example, not mine.”

The mention of Hayley had Hope’s hard exterior cracking. “But Mom always said we’d do it together in the bayou.”

“That was with her. And Hope, honestly, I’m not welcome in the bayou.”

If it weren’t for the tears lining Hope’s eyes, nothing about her would’ve betrayed her distress. “They
could make an exception.”

“Not for me. You can turn in the bayou after you’ve got the hang of it, but I should really be there the first go around. The school is best.”

“Are you even allowed there? They have a book in the library that calls you the great evil.”

Klaus was torn on how to feel about that. It was nice to have a legacy, and once upon a time he would’ve enjoyed that one. Not so much now that his own daughter attended that school, saw it on the shelves. What had Hope read about him while he wasn’t there to contradict it? To take responsibility? To prove he’d changed?

“I am sure Caroline will make an exception for your first full moon.”

“Will Doctor Saltzman?”

Ah, so Alaric had a doctorate now. Good for him. “Caroline will talk him around. And if that book about me bothers you, I can ask them to remove it.”

“Pretty sure that’s a censorship issue.” Hope picked at her bacon. “Besides, it’s the Stefan Salvatore Memorial Library. Makes sense that you’re not a superhero in there.”

“Where is he a superhero?” Marcel asked.

“This is off topic,” Klaus interjected, glad to steer the conversation back on course. “We’re going to the school. All right?”

“Okay, fine. Who’s coming?”

“You and I. Possibly Elijah.”

“Aunt Keelin?”

“She has a lot to do in the bayou while they choose a new alpha. But I can ask her if you want her to.”

“She and Aunt Freya are spending time together.” Hope pushed her empty plate away from herself. “Don’t call her. She should be honeymooning, and the only reason she isn’t in Barbados is because Aunt Freya wants to be here with me. I’d rather not ruin something else of theirs.”

“It’s not ruining—”

“Yeah, whatever.” Hope stood, her chair legs squealing as she pushed it backwards. “I’ll go pack my stuff, I guess.”

Marcel and Klaus both watched her go, listened to her heavy footsteps up the stairs and thundering toward her bedroom.

Klaus sighed. “I have to go tell Elijah.”

“I’ll take care of it. You should keep an eye on that.” Marcel glanced upward.

“Are you certain you don’t want to come?”

“Have to keep an eye on things here. The vamps aren’t too comfortable, and the last thing I need is Greta’s residual bullshit flaring up and them attacking the wolves while they’re still vulnerable.”
Marcel reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a box. It was roughly the dimensions of a decent pen box, but when he opened it he revealed a vial of venom and long, thick syringe. “You’ll need it to reach your heart. Anything other than that and it won’t be quick.”

Klaus took the box. It was too light, considering what it was. What it was going to do.

“Thank you, Marcel,” he said. The gravity of what Marcel had done for him took a moment to settle over him, to sink into his bones. “I appreciate your blessing in this.”

“Yeah.” Marcel’s whole face tightened the way it did when he was trying not to cry. “Let’s hope giving you my blessing doesn’t lose me my sister.”

Chapter End Notes

being on this particular home stretch is fun but like, in an emotionally devastating way
May 20th, 2026

Klaus winced at the sound of Hope slamming drawers in her room. He wasn’t sure it was on purpose—and none of her temper could be extricated from the Hollow now, so it wasn’t worth scolding her for. It still made him cringe as he heard the ancient mahogany splintering while she whipped through her room and packed for their trip to Mystic Falls.

Not much longer, now.

He had two letters left. Hayley’s last had been furious and curt, and with good reason, but if these last messages were … if he’d cheated himself out of these last pieces of her by being such an obstinate fool in France, he didn’t know what he’d do. It wouldn’t be pretty.

Hands shaking, Klaus sliced through the top of the envelope with a letter opener. Relief bled through him as he pulled free a letter covered with words that even spilled over to the reverse of it.

He began to read before he had the chance to weep.

#

9th December, 2025

Hayley loathed waking early, but she loved driving to get her daughter, so it wasn’t as torturous as it could’ve been.

She’d packed her bags the night before, just two—one with two changes of clothes and some toiletries, the other with her purse, car keys, phone charger, and an ungodly amount of chocolate Josh had foisted on her so he could go on a cleanse. Maybe Hope would eat it for her.

The smell of fresh coffee tugged Hayley down to the kitchen. It was only five am, and already Freya was up and brewing. She woke early every morning, probably to commune with nature or some witch shit. It was ungodly, if you asked Hayley.
“Here,” Freya said, pressing a thermos into Hayley’s hand. “It’s how you like it.”

Okay, maybe not entirely ungodly. “Life saver.” Hayley unscrewed the top and inhaled the scent. “Thanks, Freya.”

“It’s apology coffee,” Freya admitted reluctantly.

“Apology for what?”

“For … possibly missing Christmas here.”

Hayley smothered her first reaction: disappointment. “You and Keelin meeting up?” God knows they deserved it.

“We were thinking of visiting Kol and Davina, actually. Keelin has the time off work and she never gets this much, so we figured we’d take advantage.” It had been particularly brutal on Freya, what with Keelin away with Doctors Without Borders.

“That’s wonderful!” Hayley exclaimed, even as she began anticipating Hope’s displeasure. She hoped that didn’t put an uncomfortable edge to her joy. “You guys never get a break.”

“Are you sure it’s okay? Hope—”

“Hope needs to see us pursuing our own happiness.” Hayley screwed the lid back on her thermos and tucked it into the center of her chest to warm her core. It was chilly down here, and she was dressed for a day spent in a heated vehicle. “Seriously, Freya. I’m happy for you both.”

“We’ll FaceTime or something on Christmas Day. Make sure she knows we’re still carving out time for her. And her gifts are under the tree—”

“Yeah, I’ve seen them.” Hayley sighed heavily, putting on an air of annoyance. The sheer number of gifts was a point of mock contention between Hayley and Hope’s various and sundry relatives. She complained about her daughter being spoiled, but she always gave the largest share of them anyway.

“Well, have a safe trip and enjoy your coffee.” Freya bussed a kiss onto Hayley’s cheek and squeezed her shoulders. “I guess I’ll see you in the new year.”

“Give Keelin my love.”

Freya flicked Hayley’s shoulder on her way past. “I always do.”

#

Hayley had been driving for two hours when the call came in. She hit ANSWER on the car’s display and was rewarded with Marcel’s voice coming through the speakers, replacing the Creedence Clearwater Revival’s Greatest Hits she’d had playing.

“You better not have answered your phone while driving.”

“Bluetooth is a thing, Grandpa.”

It was weird to have Marcel’s chuckle fill her car but not see him there. “Okay, I have some news.”
“Good or bad?”

“Bad in the short term, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Hayley’s heart lurched. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t make it to Christmas this year.”

She waited for her heart to settle out of its anxious holding pattern in her chest, but it didn’t. It was telling that the terror that her brain had conjured when she imagined Marcel in trouble matched the terror she felt at hearing he was bailing on Christmas.

“Rebekah and I need the time, I think,” Marcel was explaining. “I know I promised I’d come and I hate to break that, but we don’t spend holidays together and it’s just … I need to commit.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself or apologise,” Hayley tried to assure him.

“You sound like I ran over your puppy.”

Lying to Marcel was … hard. “Hope won’t be great about it, but it can be a period of growth for her. She’s been making a lot of noise about not wanting people to give things up for her, so maybe a quieter Christmas while you guys focus on each other is a good idea.”

“Is Keelin still coming back?”

“She and Freya are spending the holidays with Davina and Kol. She didn’t tell you?” Hayley hoped Freya hadn’t been trying to keep that trip secret from Marcel and Rebekah. There shouldn’t be any reason to, but who the fuck knows with Mikaelsons.

“Shit. So it’ll just be you and Hope?”

“Yes, which is fine.” Hopefully. “You just do what works for you and Rebekah. I will handle Hope.”

“It’s not okay for her to feel abandoned.”

“We all feel abandoned sometimes. You get ignored at a party or someone doesn’t pick up your phone calls and your brain decides to tell you everyone hates you. Hope will be upset, but she will course correct. It’s good for her to remember that people can love her and not be with her all the time. This is growth for the family.”

“When did you get wise?” Marcel asked, and coming from him …

Hayley was glad he couldn’t see her blush. “I listen to a lot of parenting podcasts.”

“That’s adorable.”

“Shut up.”

“You should come and visit after the New Year.”

“If I can get away, sure.” It’d be nice to have a break, but she didn’t like taking off on the pack so much. “Maybe just for a weekend?”

“Sure. Give Rebekah enough notice so she can buy weather-appropriate outfits for you.”
Hayley had long since given up on arguing with Rebekah about the clothes she bought her. Sighing, she said, “Will do.”

The Mystic Grill’s Christmas decorations that year were ugly. Everything was plastic and the whole place smelled like gross “Christmas scented” candles that sat on each table. Were they hurting for money? Why the switch to plastic?

As always, Caroline was waiting. Her curled hair bounced as she shot to her feet, vibrating in place as Hayley walked over.

“Hey, hi, hello.” Caroline squeezed Hayley around the waist. “I think the candles are worse for us because of our senses.”

So she’d noticed too. As Hayley sat, she saw that their table was clear of anything scented. “You ordered?”

“Yes.” Caroline shuffled her chair in until her chest was flush with the table and her elbows could rest on the wood comfortably. “Hopefully the smell of coffee will chase away any other scents.”

“Maybe if we pray. How are you?”

“Exhausted.” Caroline didn’t look exhausted in the way humans would—no bags under eyes or messy makeup or haggard pallor. Instead, she wore her exhaustion behind her eyes. “How are you?”

Hayley realised she was subconsciously mimicking Caroline’s posture and didn’t bother to correct it. “I’m okay. Still … readjusting.” Everything had changed after the visit to Elijah in Manosque, then to Klaus in Paris. Hayley and Caroline had several hours of phone time talking about it. Hayley hadn’t asked for it, but Caroline wheedled details from her that she didn’t know she needed to discuss until she already was.

“Did you write them letters?” Caroline asked. She’d suggested it for closure purposes, but Hayley hadn’t been so certain.

“I wrote Elijah,” she confessed. “As Andrea, I mean. He still doesn’t know who I am.” Or who he is. Seeing his face so blank had been painful. Hearing him talk about his girlfriend was torturous, but she was happy he was happy. Well, she was trying to be.

“Has he responded?”

“I didn’t leave a return address.”

Caroline twisted her lips into a grimace-smile. “Probably smart.”

“I guess I’m destined to never receive a letter.” Hayley tried to play this statement lightly but it still sounded pitiful.

“I’d write you, but I’m much better when I can utilise emojis. Maybe they sell stickers or something.”

Hayley snorted at the image of opening a letter from Caroline, likely scrawled on Salvatore school stationery and laden with emoji stickers. “Since we’re not twelve, perhaps not.”
“Mm. Good call.”

The waiter arrived with their drinks. Caroline thanked him by name and asked him questions about his parents that he stuttered out the answers to until he finally excused himself. Hayley had to disguise her amusement by taking several long sips of coffee.

“What?” Caroline asked her when they were alone.

“You do realise half the staff here is in love with you, right?”

“Oh, please. I’m way too old for them.” It was true; most of the workers on shift was early twenties, max.

“You don’t look it.”

“Well, thanks.” Caroline twirled a curl around one finger. “I exfoliate.”

“And then there’s the immortality.”

“That, too.”

They talked until their third coffees were being cleared off by the staff, then started donning their coats. It certainly didn’t feel like they’d exhausted all the conversational topics available, but Caroline had a meeting to get to with the parents of a prospective student.

“I guess I’ll see you next year?” Hayley asked as they ducked under the faux mistletoe to step outside. The frigid air gusted down the collar of Hayley’s coat, so she tucked her chin down the front of it to keep the edges tight to her skin and warm herself with her breath.

“Actually …” Caroline hesitated, car keys resting in a gloved hand. “I’ll probably be travelling most of next year. Ric and I agreed that after Christmas it’s time to step things up with the Gemini Merge situation.”

Right. Guilt twisted Hayley’s stomach into knots. They’d been talking for hours and she’d completely forgotten about that. What must Caroline have thought, listening to Hayley ramble about Hope’s tantrums while knowing her children were in that kind of danger?

“Fuck, Caroline,” Hayley said eloquently. “You’ll tell me if I can help?”

“I wouldn’t hesitate,” Caroline promised. She hugged her hands to herself, and when that wasn’t good enough she shoved her hands into her armpits and started stomping on the icy sidewalk to keep warm. “Unfortunately, I don’t think there’s much you can do.”

“Well, even if you just need company——”

“You have a pack to take care of.”

“And you have a school full of kids. If you can find time, I can find time.”

Caroline’s eyes glassed over a little. “I really appreciate the offer. And it’d be nice not to be alone, since I’m pretty sure flying solo will deprive me of distractions from the fact that my kids are——” She broke away, her breath misting out into the air instead of the end of her sentence. “I think it’d be better if we talked on the phone. If you can distract me when I need to recenter myself. I’m kind of worried I’ll be … too much.”

“Well, I’m sure I’ll always have some boring drama to rope you into.”
“If it was boring, it wouldn’t be so distracting. I can’t wait to hear about how things pan out with Dashing Declan.”

“I fucking hate that nickname.” Hayley’s poorly hidden laughter showed she was lying.

“Is it better or worse than Enigmatic Elijah?”

“Please never speak to me again.”

Caroline but the inside of her cheek. “Kingly Klaus.”

“Under no circumstances can he hear you say that.”

“Oh, God, no.” Caroline untucking her hands from her armpits was the only warning Hayley had before she was being pulled against the other woman’s chest. “Merry Christmas, Hayley.”

Hayley returned the embrace ten-fold until she could hear bones start to creak. “Merry Christmas, Caroline.”

#

As a peace offering, Hayley subjected herself to Hope’s musical tastes for the entire trip home. Hope wasn’t unhappy, per se, but she did spend most of the first half of the journey with her nose buried in her grimoire.

“What if I promised there was no risk?” she asked for the eighth time.


Hope huffed and slammed the grimoire shut. “I’m supposed to be practicing.”

“You can practice when we get home, but only the non-offensive spells.”

“They don’t teach us offensive spells. Which is stupid, actually, since most of us will need them eventually.”

Hayley winced, fingers flexing on the steering wheel. “Let’s not jinx ourselves with that.”

Hope perked up a little. “What if Aunt Freya teaches me offensive spells?”

“I … I’m okay with you practicing with Aunt Freya, as long you promise me you won’t do them without her.”

“Cool. I’ll ask her when we get home.”

This was the perfect segue, but it took a silent pep talk for Hayley to grow the courage to take advantage of it. “Actually,” she began leadingly, “Aunt Freya won’t be there when we get home. She and Aunt Keelin are spending Christmas with Kol and Davina.”

The hurt radiated from Hope like heat from a flame, but all she said was, “Okay, I guess.”

“And Marcel is spending Christmas with Rebekah, too. So it’ll be just us! Which can be fun.”
Hope showed no emotion on her face. “Right. Fun.”

“You’ll see them soon enough,” Hayley assured her. “And they’ll all FaceTime in on Christmas Day. Maybe we can even ask Aunt Freya about astral projecting some of them?”

“Cool.” Hope opened the grimoire again. Her fingertips were white where they gripped the binding.

“You okay, kid?” Hayley asked. She anticipated the shrug-off, but she had to at least try to give Hope a chance to express herself.

Her first instinct was correct.

#

23rd December, 2025

Under no circumstances was Hayley inviting Declan to Christmas festivities for her and Hope, but she tried to make some room for him. She especially tried to involve Hope in the process of making room for him.

Hope wasn’t too awful about the others’ absence, but Hayley knew she found the silence difficult. Josh and Vincent came over a lot, and Ivy had brunch with them a few times, but it was an otherwise silent house.

So dinner with Declan on Christmas Eve Eve seemed like a good idea.

Hope was reasonably polite. Still moody, but she didn’t snap at Declan and she kept her snark to a minimum in his presence. No eye-rolling or pouting in sight. Hayley was actually impressed.

“It’s not quite a Christmas dinner,” Declan said humbly as he indicated to the spread he’d provided. Large dishware full of mashed potatoes, roast chicken, lamb, a vegetarian lasagne, a garden salad, and three different kinds of gravy. “But it’ll do.”

“It looks amazing,” Hayley assured him. She dropped more lasagne onto her plate. “You spoil us.”

A flush stained Declan’s neck red. “I try my best.” He squeezed Hayley’s knee under the table.

“How’s the lamb?” Hayley asked Hope, whose plate was fairly barren of vegetables but had plenty of meat and lakes of gravy.

“It’s good,” Hope said. The way she was eating indicated it was a bit more than good. “Thanks, Declan.”

It was like Hope’s gratitude was the highest compliment Declan had ever received. “No problem, kid,” he squeaked out, glowing. “Uh, how have you been at school? Your mum tells me your grades are good.”

“They’re not awful. I don’t apply myself enough, apparently.” Hope shot Hayley a look.

“I was the same at your age. I guess the next few years are about finding your passion, right?
Applying yourself gets easier after that. Or that’s how it worked with cooking for me. You’re an artist, yeah?”

Hope spooned some mashed potatoes into a lake of gravy, turning it into a moat. “I hope I can be, someday.”

“You don’t think you are now?”

“Well, I don’t really sell anything. And I can’t paint from my imagination. I have to look at photos all the time.”

“I don’t see as how that makes you not an artist. You paint what you love, and you use recipes.”

Hope raised an eyebrow. “Recipes?”

“Yeah, recipes. You think I learned to cook by making it all up? Well, there was some of that. But you’ve got to start somewhere.”

“But what if I don’t grow beyond that?” Hope’s face was too deliberately neutral for her not to be having an emotion. Was she insecure about this? Hayley had never wondered how Hope felt about her art. It all seemed so wonderful to her it hadn’t occurred to her that Hope didn’t see it that way.

“Practice will prove you can. And if you can’t, portrait work is still a thing, right? You can paint scenery, too.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Hope sounded non-committal, but Hayley could tell Declan had made an impact.

“Plus, you can paint for yourself. It’s still art.”

“It seems kind of self-indulgent.”

“So?” Declan shrugged. “I started cooking because my mother got too sick to do it. Breast cancer. I realised I loved it, and when she was in remission I signed up for culinary school. Thought that would make me a real cook, but you know what? I’ve never felt more of a cook than I did carrying watercress soup to Mum in bed. It made me calm, made me happy to be helping. It was for Mum, but it was for me. I’m best at my job when I’m doing it for people I care about. That’s when good food happens.”

Hayley’s heart clenched as she watched Hope look down at her plate of very good food, then back up at Declan. “So you’re saying I should be happy to do this forever?”

“I’m saying it’s not the wrong way to do this if it feels good. You’re an artist, Hope. What makes you feel good about it?”

Hope chased some wisps of potato through the gravy, watching them mix. “I like painting people in my life. I’m good at faces and I can get all the shadows and contours right pretty easily now. I couldn’t do that last year, so I like doing it now. And I like knowing that the painting looks exactly like a picture would, more or less. That it’s real and I captured it right.”

“Do you paint your mum a lot?”

“Yeah. Took me ages to get the hair right after she cut it.”

Hayley laughed. “Well, I’ll consult you next time. Or should I get something harder so you can develop your skills?”
Mischief danced in Hope’s eyes. “I’ve never painted a mullet.”

Hayley tossed a napkin at Hope. It sailed through the air, bouncing off Hope’s chin and landing in a pool of gravy on her plate.

“Gross, Mom!” Hope made a face as she picked up the napkin, watching it drip goops of gravy back onto her plate. “I was still eating that.”

“Drinking it, more like. Maybe Declan can put some gravy in a to-go cup for you?”

“Shut up, Mom,” Hope said, no bite in her tone at all. She grabbed the empty dish that had contained green beans and slopped the napkin in there. “Pass the chicken, please?”

“Can you eat a vegetable?”

“My plate is covered in potato. That’s a vegetable. Ask Declan.”

Declan raised his hands innocently. It didn’t work well since his knife dripped gravy onto his pants, but he ignored it and said, “I’m not getting involved.”

“Smart,” Hayley mused. She grabbed the chicken dish and set it in front of Hope. “You’re getting away with this because of the holiday season.”

“I’m getting away with this because Declan’s here,” Hope corrected as she cut away the chicken she wanted and set it on her plate. “So I guess it’s okay if he comes over and cooks again.”

Hayley mock groaned, but nothing could stop the smile from taking over her face. She didn’t have to glance at Declan to know his face looked much the same.

#

25th December, 2025

Hayley surveyed the clean living room with something like regret burning in her belly. It was usually still messy at this point on Christmas Day. Gift opening took hours when they were all there, everyone still eating and drinking and not bothering to clean it up. Hayley and Hope had spent maybe twenty minutes opening gifts and chatting before Hope helped clean up and then shut herself in her room to test her new paints.

Hayley waited an hour or so to give Hope space before heading up with a mug of hot cocoa in either hand. A candy cane stuck out of Hope’s, its stick already starting to dissolve where it touched the hot drink.

With no hands free to knock, Hayley kicked the bottom of the door lightly a few times until Hope said, “Come in.”

Hayley managed to turn the doorknob with her wrists and shove the door open with her hip, which was a fun experiment. She only spilled a bit of hot cocoa on her hand, but the burn healed just as fast as it formed.
Hope was sitting in front of an easel by the window. She usually painted up in the attic, but her room got the best light this time of day. The easel was angled away from Hayley, showing only the back of the canvas.

“Here you go.” Hayley stepped around some of the gift-related detritus on the floor and set Hope’s mug on the windowsill. Then she peeked at the painting, still in-progress but of an unmistakable subject.

Hope shifted on her stool a little. “I thought I should make him something for Christmas.”

“That’s a great idea,” Hayley said, gaze fixed on Declan’s face. It wasn’t perfectly rendered yet, still needing shadows added to give depth and shape, but it was definitely him. “It’s incredible.”

“It’s getting there,” Hope said humbly.

Hayley took a swig of her cocoa and elbowed Hope teasingly. “Feel like a real artist?”

“I guess.” Hope leaned into Hayley’s touch. “The new paints are good.”

“Thank Aunt Davina when she calls. She picked them up in Italy, I think.”

“I think they’re better than the ones Dad used to use.”

“She will definitely want to hear that.” Davina didn’t antagonise Klaus as much as she used to (likely given the distance separating them), but knowing she’d one-upped him would give her some satisfaction. “And you can tell her when they FaceTime in an hour or so.”

“Cool.” Hope eyed the painting and her palette of drying paint.

“I’ll get out of your hair,” Hayley said. “But please be available in an hour for the FaceTime and then lunch, okay?”

“I will,” Hope promised. “Thanks for the cocoa.”

“You’re very welcome.” Hayley raised her own mug at Hope and made her way out.

#

The FaceTiming lasted through lunch and well into the afternoon. At one point, Kol stole the phone from Freya and legged it across some field. Hope and Hayley got a very pixellated view of the sky as Freya used magic to yank the phone back into her hand from thirty feet away.

It came to end, as things do, and Hope was … okay about it. She was pretty quiet as they cleaned up the lunch leftovers, just following directions easily and thinking her own thoughts.

“I know today wasn’t hugely exciting,” began Hayley, “but maybe for New Year’s—”

“Today was fine, Mom.” Hope shut the dishwasher with her hip and turned it on without looking. “I really enjoyed the quiet.”

“Don’t just say that, sweetie—”
“I mean it,” Hope promised. “I love everyone else, but I don’t struggle with spending time with you. It’s not awful or anything.”

Hayley tried to see the humour in it. “Not awful is pretty much what I aim for.”

“You know what I mean. You don’t have to make things super special for me to be happy. I like being here with you again.” Hope’s smile was lopsided, the left corner of her mouth tucked deeply into the apple of her cheek. “I miss you when I’m at school.”

Hayley didn’t fight the welling emotion in her throat. “I miss you too, all the time. If you don’t want to go back, we can try to figure something out.”

“No, it’s right for me. It just sucks to be away sometimes. But it won’t be forever, right?”

“Just for now,” Hayley confirmed. “You think you’ll come back here for college?”

“Depends what options there are at Tulane. I have time to figure it out, though.”

“Plenty of time.” Part of Hayley thrilled at the idea of Hope graduating to move in here year-round, go to school nearby. The rest of her wondered if Hope felt bound to this place, if it wouldn’t be better for her to set her sights elsewhere.

Setting a smile on her mouth, Hayley wrapped an arm around Hope’s waist and said, “We have all the time in the world to figure it out.”

#

25th December, 2025

Dear Klaus,

We never really talked about colleges for Hope. I realised today that I hadn’t really thought beyond that, hadn’t really imagined what that would look like.

Of course we want to give her all the freedom in the world to do what she wants, but what does she want? How will she deal with being surrounded by humans in a dorm? Will she have to dodge any photos of herself to avoid leaving evidence of her existence that will bite her in the ass in a hundred years? Will she have to avoid achieving certain standards so she isn’t noteworthy? What’s better for her: Ivy League or an inconspicuous community college? How do we protect a child that isn’t a child anymore?

Honestly, I’m a little scared of not being able to tell her what to do. Maybe being alpha has gotten me used to being the boss, but I can’t really talk to her the same way once she’s grown. I’m running out of time with her and I’m not sure I’m getting it right. How much more is there to teach her?
How much more prepared does she have to be? How could I ever leave her at a college dorm and drive away? With no Ric or Caroline to look out for her? It’s terrifying.

Hopefully the next few years will be enough to prepare her for the world without us.

Hayley

May 20th, 2023

Klaus read the line again and again until it was seared in his brain.

Hopefully the next few years will be enough to prepare her for the world without us.

Hayley couldn’t have known it was months, not years. Klaus couldn’t reach back through time and tell her. Tell her she was near the end, and it was going to be painful. Tell her they wouldn’t just be leaving their adult child in a college dorm; they’d leave their teenager in this world, alone.

Not alone, he reminded himself. His family was here. Her family was here.

The line was too painful to keep re-reading, so Klaus folded the letter and dropped it into its envelope, returning it to its place in the box. He’d have to pack the whole thing so he could re-read the others. There was only one left he hadn’t gone over yet. He wasn’t ready to be finished.

He wasn’t ready for Hayley to be finished, rather.

Klaus stuffed the box into the small duffel bag he was packing more for appearances than anything else. He didn’t plan to be there more than a few hours, after all.

The box of Hayley’s letters clunked against the slim box with Marcel’s venom inside. Klaus closed his eyes against the sight of them beside one another and zipped the duffel shut.

Chapter End Notes

writing hayley’s final moments with people without mentioning in the scene that it’s her final moment with them ... does not feel organic
Chapter Notes

almost there! thank you all for your lovely comments <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

May 21st, 2026

Klaus checked on Hope in her dorm, finding her still resting. It was mid-afternoon, and he’d have to get her up soon. Couldn’t let her sleep away their last evening together.

The adrenaline from hearing her heart stop hadn’t yet eased entirely. It kept thudding into Klaus, rolling over him in waves. Each course of it through his veins sharpened his senses, heightened his anxiety. He heard more from further, saw more detail in the world around him. He could count dust motes and listen to a study group downstairs and smell Alaric’s afternoon dram of whiskey. It was disorienting, and did little to help calm him.

So Klaus stood in the hallway outside Hope’s room, staring the door down until he could read the history of the wood in the grain beneath the varnish.

Caroline’s perfume reached Klaus before she did, but not by much. She didn’t have to slow herself to human speeds here, so she gladly zipped from corridor to corridor. She arrived beside him, hand hovering over his elbow. No touch, just warmth.

“How is she?” Caroline asked.

“Resting.”

“She had quite an ordeal. She’ll need time to recover from it.”

“I’ll have to wake her soon,” Klaus said. “It’s …”

“Your last night together.”

“I’d rather not waste it.”

“How can I help?” Caroline asked. “I can get you two some space somewhere to talk. You’ll want dinner, right? I can order something or pack something or—”

“Caroline.” Klaus tucked his fingers into his pockets so he wouldn’t touch her. “What your children are doing is enough.” He didn’t tell her that her willingness to trust him around the twins was everything. Surely she had to know that.

“But what can I do for you? Is there something you want to do? Something you don’t want left unfinished?”
“I …” Klaus wanted to say no, to assure her everything was fine. But it had always been hard to lie to Caroline, both because it seemed too cruel and because she was far too smart to believe it. “I have one last thing to attend to before she wakes. Can you monitor her?”

“Of course. Do you need anything else?”

“I’m …” fine? “I’ll manage. Thank you.” Giving in to the temptation, Klaus squeezed Caroline’s arm before he left, wandering back down to the gravel parking lot out back where his car sat. His duffel was in the back seat, so he joined it there.

The box was where he left it. He felt it might have a mind of its own and wander off, but it was always where he left it, as he left it. This thing that held Hayley inside it.

Heart in his throat, Klaus pulled out the final letter and began to read.

#

3rd January, 2026

“Here we are,” Hayley announced, putting the car in park. She’d snagged the last parking space, miraculously, but almost wished she hadn’t. Hope had left everything to the last minute despite Hayley worrying about missing out on a park, and it might’ve driven her point home better if they’d actually had to search for a while longer.

Instead, Hope looked at Hayley and grinned. “Right on time.”

Worst of it all, she was right.

“Okay, smartass,” Hayley retorted. “Carry your own bags this time.”

“Sure!” Hope unbuckled and bailed out the door. Hayley popped the trunk from inside the car, then joined her at the back.

“What a relief I have super strength,” Hope said, hefting both bags out easily.

Begrudgingly, Hayley said, “Give me one.”

“But you said—”

“I know, I know, but people aren’t supposed to know you’re more than a witch. Super strength is off limits.” Hayley grabbed the handles of Hope’s duffel and slung it across her shoulders. “Look like you’re struggling when you pull the suitcase up the stairs, okay?”

“Whatever.”

#
Hayley didn’t spend much time in Ric’s office. He was usually jogging through the halls on the first day back, so she had to catch him on the move or not at all.

This time, however, he was in the middle of a rather intense conversation with Dorian Williams about the basic principles of their Supernatural History curriculum that Hayley was loath to interrupt. She did anyway, because the two of them could talk for hours about the colour of the sky.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said as she closed the double oak doors behind her. “Just wanted to let you know I won’t be around tomorrow.”

Ric stood from where he’d been hunched over some documents. “Rushing away so soon?”

“Heading to New York, actually. Spending the rest of the week with Marcel and Rebekah.”

“No ritual with Hope?”

“She’s getting a little old for the babying. If she’s unsettled, though, just let me know.”

“We will,” said Dorian.

“Great.” Hayley knew Hope found Dorian’s classes particularly helpful, and he was observant enough to catch any issues. Probably more so than Ric, who was going to be so scattered with Caroline absent. “Oh, and if you hear from Caroline, give her my love.” It felt wrong, preparing to leave town without going to the Grill with her. Not that Hayley could begrudge her leaving.

“Sure,” Ric said. “We’ll watch out for Hope.”

Hayley smiled. “I know you will.”

#

It was 10PM by the time Hayley pulled into the undercover parking garage beneath Marcel and Rebekah’s apartment complex. She parked in one of the guest spots and texted them to announce her arrival, then grabbed her suitcase and headed for the elevator.

Rebekah was there, standing right in front of the elevator doors on her floor. She hugged the breath out of Hayley and took her bags before she could object. “You must be exhausted,” she said. “Come, Marcel’s finishing up dinner.”

“It’s late for dinner.”

“We had dessert first.” A wicked gleam in Rebekah’s eye told Hayley more about that experience that she wanted to know.

Any further protests Hayley had planned melted away as she caught the scent of dinner and her mouth started watering. All she’d eaten since leaving Virginia was gas station food.

Rebekah bumped the unlocked apartment door open with her hip and forced Hayley through it first. “I’m going to drop your bags off in the spare room,” she said, flouncing away to do just that.

Hayley had been there before, but she’d have found the kitchen easily even if she hadn’t. Jazz music emanated from the speakers in the adjacent living room and the smell of freshly cut herbs simmering...
on lamb was unmistakable.

“Well, this is definitely better than gas station burgers,” Hayley said, parking herself on a stool across from Marcel. He was in the process of slicing baked potatoes down their middles and loading them with gobs of butter.

Thank fuck they didn’t have to worry about heart health.

Marcel smirked. “Well, we had those last night,” he joked, as if Rebekah Mikaelson had ever stepped into a gas station in her life. Hayley knew she compelled people to fill her car up so she didn’t have to get out of the driver’s seat.

“All done!” Rebekah announced as she whipped back into the room. She grabbed glasses from a cabinet and trapped them between her forearm and her chest so she could snag the napkin holder as well, carrying it all over to the long, thin table near the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. “Red or white, Hayley?”

“We have beer,” Marcel added. “Your favourite.”

“Water’s fine.” Hayley was tired enough without adding alcohol to the mix. She wasn’t a lightweight, but if she started drinking with Rebekah and Marcel she’d be out of it pretty quickly.

“Party pooper.” Fetching a pitcher of water and a bottle of wine from the refrigerator, Rebekah finished setting the table while Hayley took trays of food from Marcel—spiced lamb, baked potatoes, a roast vegetable salad dusted with baked pine nuts, and a boat of gravy Hope would die to drink from.

“This is amazing,” Hayley said, mouth watering before she’d even sat down.

“We like to feast.” Rebekah shrugged and took the seat beside Hayley, leaving Marcel the setting across from them. “Now dig in and tell us all the gossip we’ve missed out on.”

Hayley didn’t have to be told twice. She gouged off some lamb and piled it onto her plate, complementing it with generous servings of the other dishes. “Not much gossip, sorry. Hope’s doing good. Her grades are up and I can tell she’s really growing lately, which is great.” Hayley chuckled. “It’s terrifying, but it’s also great.”

“How was your two-woman Christmas?” Marcel asked as he poured wine for himself and Rebekah.

“Fun. Quiet. We spent Christmas Day just the two of us, but Declan came over on Christmas Eve and Boxing Day. He and Hope are getting along better.”

Marcel raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t know they weren’t getting along.”

“Pretty sure I told you, love.” Rebekah’s smile was perhaps more forceful than mirthful. Hayley had spoken about Hope and Declan’s issues at length with Rebekah, assuming the information was being passed to Marcel and that he was too polite to enquire about her relationship when they spoke. Despite Rebekah’s comment about telling him, Hayley could tell he hadn’t heard about it.

“It’s no big deal,” Hayley assured. “Just the predictable stuff. She wasn’t too thrilled about someone else coming onto the scene and occupying space that belonged to Klaus.”

Rebekah held her wine glass in front of her nose, inhaling deeply. “That’s understandable.”

“But she’s better now?” Marcel prompted.
“Yeah. I think growing up and spending more time with him around helped a lot. He gave her a few
driving lessons during her Christmas break, and he said she’s doing okay.” Hope had come back
from all of them in a good mood, and Declan told Hayley they talked a lot on the road. She didn’t
know what about, since he seemed hesitant to share and she didn’t ask. Presumably whatever
teenage girls with abandonment issues talked to their mom’s boyfriends about.

At the mention of driving lessons, Rebekah’s eyes lit up. “At what age do you feel it’s appropriate
for me to gift her a sports car?”

“College graduation."

“But that could be years,” Rebekah whined.

Snorting, Hayley said, “Unless she becomes a super genius and graduates high school in a few
months and college a year after that, it’ll definitely be years. She’ll be starting with something used
and reliable like the rest of us.”

“Meaning the rest of us started with a used and reliable car, or the rest of us are used and reliable?”

“Both,” Hayley answered, just to watch Rebekah roll her eyes. “I’m serious. It’s a nice gesture, but
not ‘till she’s older. We’re trying to be careful with how we introduce her to frivolous things.”

“A sports car is a lifestyle choice, not a frivolity.” There was no heat to Rebekah’s words, just
teasing.

“Just wait a while,” Hayley said. “I’m sure she’ll be ready before any of us knows it.”

Marcel wiped gravy off the corner of his mouth with a napkin and said, “I don’t suppose Freya can
spare any of that de-aging spell she’s definitely using on herself.”

“Oi.” Rebekah glared at Marcel. “She might just have an excellent skin care routine.”

“It’s definitely magic,” Hayley confirmed. “And I asked her as a joke once. Received a lecture about
the ethics of slowing aging in children just so I can extend Hope’s childhood to fit my own timetable,
blah, blah, blah. Apparently it’s a big no-no in the magical community.”

“Spoil sports.” Rebekah pouted. “When I have children, they’re staying under five forever.”

“Good luck with that.” Hayley raised her glass of water in a mock toast to distract from the awkward
phrase of When I have children instead of When we have children. Did Marcel want kids? He loved
them, but did he want them? Hayley realised she had no idea.

“So,” Hayley began to cover the silence, “what’s my itinerary while I’m here?”

“I’m busy tomorrow, so you’ll have to keep this one company.” Rebekah indicated in Marcel’s
direction with her knife. “After that, it’s shopping and booze and booze while shopping.”

“Can’t wait.” Hayley was only half being sarcastic. They weren’t her favourite things to do, but she
did all her favourite things in New Orleans. Things with Rebekah were fun in different ways. “So
what are we gonna do with ourselves tomorrow?” she asked of Marcel.

Marcel shrugged in a way that was too nonchalant. “Whatever you want.”

“Mmm, I’ll think of something.”

“Just don’t have too much fun,” Rebekah instructed. “I might get jealous.”
Marcel grinned. “We’ll find a park to walk in. Maybe listen to separate podcasts.”

Rebekah returned his smile ten-fold. “Sounds like the perfect day for me to miss.”

Something told Hayley that wasn’t exactly what would be happening tomorrow.

#

4th January, 2026

“You look … comfortable,” Marcel observed sarcastically.

Hayley laughed and picked a stray hair from her coat. Rebekah had left the entire outfit—including the woolen wrap dress, crimson leggings, and calf-length boots—on the end of Hayley’s bed before she left that morning. It was physically comfortable, if slightly different from Hayley’s standard fare.

Her discomfort stemmed more from the locale than anything else.

She and Marcel had been escorted to a private lounge decked out like something out of Marie Antoinette’s wildest dreams. The booze was free flowing and there was even a water feature against one wall.

“Is this really how rich assholes go ring shopping?” Hayley asked, sipping on her champagne. She rarely indulged in anything other than beer, but it felt weird to ask the attendant for Guinness while parking her ass on a silk, hand-embroidered chaise lounge.

“Apparently.” Marcel reclined comfortably beside her. He seemed far more accustomed to the locale than Hayley, and had imbibed half a bourbon as they sat there. Pacing himself, but still indulging.

“Why not enjoy ourselves?”

The attendant—a balding man with pleasant eyes whose name tag read ARMAND—returned, a velvet tray balanced atop his open palms. Gems of every colour in the rainbow winked and sparkled atop it as he rested it on the mahogany coffee table before them.

“Here we go, Monsieur,” said Armand. “This is an overview of the gems we have an offer. There are of course different cuts and sizes, and we can order something in or cut something to specifications you provide us. If you have any questions about our selection, please ring the bell.” He swept a hand toward the lone bronze bell on the table. “Enjoy.” He bowed his head, then departed.

Hayley’s eyebrows rocketed up her forehead. “They really just leave us alone with all these?” she asked.

“They will if they’re compelled—what? Don’t look at me like that. I’m not actually gonna steal anything. I just like privacy when I make major life decisions.”

Hayley nudged him with her boot. “Then why am I here?”

“You’re basically impossible to get rid of.” Marcel smirked at her briefly, then turned his attention back to the tray. He slid it closer and picked up a fat red ruby, pinched between his thumb and index finger.
“She does love red,” Hayley said. “Has she ever given any indication of what she’d want?”

“I have an old setting she liked way back when. The stone had fallen out before she ever saw it, but she got this gleam in her eye. I just have to figure out what she was imagining.”

“Shouldn’t be hard,” Hayley said sarcastically. She poked a sea-foam gem with her fingernail. “There’s only a million different options.”

Marcel groaned and set the ruby back in place.

“Maybe I’m not the best person to call in for this,” Hayley suggested. “Freya might be more helpful.”

“Freya and I hanging out would be too suspicious. Rebekah knows we barely tolerate each other.”

It was true. Ever since Freya betrayed Davina and left her in the ancestral realm, Marcel had been very chilly towards her. Hayley loved Freya, but she couldn’t blame him.

“But she knows you and I are fine,” he continued. “Given the depth of our history.”

Hayley forgot about it, sometimes. The occasional off-hand comment about her parents reminded her, but even then there was a distance to it.

“So you knew me when I was a baby?” she asked.

A smile took over Marcel’s face. Serene and wistful, like nothing Hayley had ever seen there before. “You snored. From day one, you’d snore this ridiculous, honking sound. Your parents got you checked out and everything, doctors said it was fine. Once your mom stopped freaking out about it, it was just cute.”

_I knew your father_ hadn’t quite prepared Hayley for that. There was a difference between knowing someone and being close enough to know their kid’s health struggles. “You were … I mean, you and my parents, you weren’t just acquainted.”

“We were friends.” Marcel paused. “That seems too simple a way to put it.”

“I didn’t realise you were close like that.”

“Mm. I took your dad ring shopping, actually.”

Hayley couldn’t stop her shocked guffaw. Thankfully, she didn’t want to. “No way.”

“Yes way. He was so nervous and sweaty he dropped every ring they let him hold.”

“Gross.”

Marcel shrugged. “It was cute. I’d never seen him that terrified before.”

“But he found something for her?”

“Yeah.” Marcel’s grin rivalled the sparkle of the gemstones. “I made sure it was something she’d like. She was always going to say yes, but he still doubted it.”

“Do you doubt Rebekah is going to say yes?” Hayley meant it mostly as a joke, because how couldn’t she?

The look on Marcel’s face said it wasn’t that funny at all.
“Seriously?” Hayley pressed.

“I think things are always more complicated than that where Rebekah and I are concerned. With her family scattered across the world, it’s like she’s holding her breath. Waiting for Klaus to come back.”

“And you’re not?”

“Waiting for Klaus? Not even a little.” Marcel’s hands fisted, then released. “Sorry if that’s rude.”

“It’s not—don’t worry about it. I know that Klaus wasn’t horrible to any of us the way he was to you.”

“And Rebekah,” Marcel added. “But I guess she’s never really let herself hate him the way she should.”

“If he comes back, do you think he’d interfere in your relationship? He hasn’t for a while.” Marcel laughed. “Nah, lately it’s just been us interfering. But sometimes I wonder if Rebekah isn’t … waiting for him to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean every man she’s ever loved was killed at her brother’s hand. Often in ways meant to deliberately punish her.”

Rebekah waking undaggered for the first time to find Alexander dead in her bed sprang to mind.

“So you think, in her mind, love comes before punishment?” Hayley asked.

“I think it’s a thousand-year-old connection in her brain that’s not gonna rewire because of a couple years of domestic bliss with me.”

“I don’t know.” Hayley nudged him. “You might just be that powerful.”

“Not really. I rarely fix people the way I want to. Can’t quite protect them enough, it seems.”

Any thoughts about laughing him out of this funk flew out the window. “You know you don’t have to fix people, right? That’s not your job here. Not with her.”

Marcel swept his bourbon up again. “I guess I think it’s my responsibility to fix what I broke.”

“She was broken before you were on the scene. Klaus has that effect.”

“She was worse after I let her rot for several decades.”

“What—you didn’t challenge Klaus and get yourself killed, so now you’re responsible for her trauma? Marcel, that’s bullshit. It was Klaus.” It was always Klaus.

“I didn’t go after her when they left.”

“Mikael was chasing them. You shouldn’t have had to saddle yourself with running from him too.”

“If I loved her like she deserved, I would have.”

Words stuck in Hayley’s throat. You loved your city more . Or had he just feared Klaus more?

Recalibrating, Hayley said, “Do you think she’ll say no?”
“I think she’d be a fool to say yes. And I might be a fool to ask her.”

“Do you love her?”

“More than anything.”

“Then it won’t matter who’s a fool for what. Just that you’re happy fools.” It felt like terrible advice, but Hayley definitely couldn’t argue Marcel down from this particular ledge. Maybe the only way forward was to make it okay to be up there. Or okay not to climb higher. “But you don’t have to propose if you’re not ready. You guys have a good thing going here, and it doesn’t have to end, and it doesn’t have to move forward either. Now might be enough.”

Marcel rested the lip of his glass against his bottom lip. “It’s not enough for me.”

*There goes that theory.* “Then we’ll find the perfect ring and craft the perfect proposal. Beyond that, it’s out of your control. And if it doesn’t end well, you can always come home. Not everything good in your life is riding on this one moment.”

Marcel definitely didn’t believe her. “I told myself every day for a century that I could’ve made this work if I’d had a chance. That I was enough of a man, a good man, to love her right and build a life if nothing else was waiting. But the reality … she’s distant sometimes. There’s stretches of time where I don’t even know if she’s okay, and she won’t talk to me. It’s like I told myself I could do this so much it was foundational to who I was, that I was capable of this. Even if I was evil, even if I killed or let others kill for me, I was capable of this perfect love. And now I have a shot and I’m ruining it.”

That, Hayley could understand. She’d always been desperate to be a good mother, better than the one she had. Relying for so long on some hidden talent to love the way she always dreamed she could meant that there was a lot riding on getting things right with Hope.

Not that she was going to say any of that to Marcel. It wasn’t his to fix, but he’d definitely try if she mentioned it.

“There are two people in your relationship,” Hayley reminded him. “You should talk to her about this.”

“Mikaelsons aren’t very good at confrontation. They only know how to escalate.”

Hayley was almost stunned into silence at that. Truer words had probably never been spoken. “Wow, I … can’t argue with that.”

Marcel smiled at her limply. “So you see my predicament, then?”

“Yeah, I see it. I’m just sorry I don’t have any better advice to offer.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Marcel bumped her shoulder with his. “You can’t be perfect at everything.”

Perhaps not, but it’d be nice to be better at this. “So what are you gonna do?”

“Keep looking for the perfect stone. I’m thinking maybe opal, but one with more history than we’ll find here. Besides, I think half of these are conflict diamonds.”

Hayley knew Rebekah probably wouldn’t care, but there was no way Marcel would spend a cent on it. “Are you going to have words with the owner about responsibly sourcing his collection?”
“Maybe. More effective to talk to someone about introducing tax incentives for imports that can
prove cruelty-free sourcing of their wares.” Marcel set his bourbon down onto the table with a clack.
“Both can’t hurt, though.”

Hayley’s lips quirked. “You’re really gonna save the world one day, huh?”

“I’d have no idea where to start with a goal like that. There’s too much—always has been.” He stood
and offered Hayley a hand up too.

Hayley pretended to ponder the issue a moment. “My vote is to just take over. I wanna be able to tell
people our Non-Evil Overlord took my dad ring shopping in the 80s.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Marce chuckled and pulled Hayley to her feet. “I’ll see what I can do.”

#

6th January, 2026

The rest of her trip unfolded in the usual fashion. Rebekah and Hayley got far too drunk, Marcel
defeated strangers at karaoke, Hayley bought a separate suitcase for all the outfits Rebekah foisted
upon her, and it ended far too soon for anyone’s comfort.

“You should come back before the summer,” Rebekah said, stomping her feet in place to keep
warm. The three of them stood in the undercover parking lot beneath their building at five in the
morning. Rebekah and Marcel were still in their pajamas, but Hayley was dressed and ready for a
twenty-hour car journey.

“I’ll see if I can find time,” Hayley promised. It wouldn’t be easy, but she couldn’t come up during
the summer vacation since Hope would be with her. Of Marcel she asked, “Can you come visit for a
bit while Hope’s on vacation from school?”

“I always do,” was Marcel’s answer. “I’ll start making plans with her so she knows I’m gonna be
around.”

“That’s helpful, thanks.” Planning New Orleans shenanigans with Marcel would certainly take
Hope’s mind off things. “Well, I’d better get on the road.”

The warmth of two simultaneous hugs engulfed Hayley’s body as she was embraced by what was
probably the two strongest vampires in the world. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling.

Rebekah’s hand lingered on Hayley’s elbow after the hug had ended, and her eyes were almost teary
when she said, “Let me know when you’re available. I know it’s a while away, but I’d like your
input on that sports car for Hope.”

Slapping on a veneer of false irritation, Hayley said, “Fine, whatever.” Rebekah’s hand on her elbow
eased before dropping away. “Go back inside, you two. I can see myself out.”

Fingers intertwining, Marcel and Rebekah both stepped back and away to avoid getting run over
when Hayley backed out of the parking space. Otherwise, they remained put, waiting to wave her
Rolling her eyes, Hayley raised a hand in farewell and hopping in the car. She’d had it on and warming while they said their goodbyes and so was greeted a wall of warm air that had her tossing her jacket into the back seat.

Under the watchful gazes of both Rebekah and Marcel, Hayley reversed, waved at them through the windscreen, and put her brief holiday in her rearview mirror.

#

6th January, 2026

Dear Klaus,

Just got back from visiting Marcel and Rebekah in New York. Things are apparently getting complicated here, so my letters might not be so frequent for a while. Vampires are being real assholes, despite Josh’s best efforts.

I want to see if Hope will write some letters for you too, so I might broach that topic when she comes home in the summer. Not sure if it will aggravate her more or give her some release to be able to talk about her thoughts and feelings even if she doesn’t get a reply. It’s been kind of helpful for me, so we’ll see I guess.

Also, if you ever read this, you should talk to Marcel. I think he needs your blessing before he can move forward with Rebekah, and you have a lot of apologising to do to both of them.

Miss you,

Hayley

#

21st May, 2026
Klaus hadn’t realised the car door was cracked under his fingers and cutting into his skin until a few flecks of blood touched the letter. He wiped his hand off on his jeans and tried to dab the blood away with the sleeve of his jacket, with mixed results.

The tap at his window startling him was a sign he was certainly out of his mind. Caroline stood there, her face painted with concern. “I smelled the blood,” she said. “Ric’s watching Hope.”

Speeding around to the other side of the car, Caroline let herself in, Klaus’ duffel still between them. She sourced a travel package of tissues from the back of the seat in front of her and took the letter from his hands, dabbing it clean as best she could. Better than his efforts, but still not perfect. Not what it used to be.

Folding it away quickly, Caroline looked at Klaus’ bloody hand. The wound had healed, but the mess remained. “I don’t want to ask you if you’re okay,” she admitted. “But I feel like there’s nothing else appropriate to say, so I’m kind of at a loss here. Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Klaus tried to keep the bitterness from his tone. The last thing he wanted was an apology from Caroline Forbes. “I—I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

Klaus winced at her eagerness. He didn’t deserve it. “These letters from Hayley … I want Hope to have them eventually.”

“Not right away?”

“No. It’s too much, I think. I worry it won’t be as cathartic as she thinks it is.”

“Has it not been for you?”

Klaus lifted his blood-stained hand. “It’s been hell, actually.” It was a cruel thought best kept to himself, but Caroline had a way of drawing these things out of him, letting him monologue.

“How has it been hell?”

Klaus took some tissues Caroline offered and started wiping his hand clean. “She didn’t know.”

“Know what?”

“Anything.” Klaus’ chest felt filled to bursting, like if he took in another breath he’d explode. It made his voice come out strangled. “She didn’t know what was coming. That we’d fail her one last time.” He paused, waiting for Caroline’s rebuttal. It didn’t come.

Instead, Caroline said, “I agree. We did fail her.”

“I didn’t mean you,” said Klaus. “I meant Elijah and I.”

“But I was there, remember? If I hadn’t been distracted, Elijah wouldn’t have been able to snap my neck. I could’ve helped her fight Greta while you and Elijah faced off.”

It was impossible to argue against ifs. It was also impossible not to. “Please don’t,” Klaus begged brokenly. “Please don’t make this your responsibility. She was my—” Nothing. His nothing. “She was my responsibility. All this danger, all the hell at her doorstep because of me … I can’t live with myself.”

“You don’t have to for long,” Caroline pointed out. Her tone was gentle for someone who had just
reminded him he had hours to live. It was a cruel fact but a kind sentiment. She cleared her throat, not quite crying but on the cusp of it. “So—when do you want me to give Hope these letters?”

“In a year or so, when she’s ready. When things are peaceful enough to not be upended by the weight of them. I trust you to judge it from afar.”

“I'll do my best, I promise.”

Klaus watched Caroline slide the last letter back in its envelope and stick it in the back of the box, closing it over.

“You can read them,” he told her. “You're mentioned in a few.”

Caroline seemed genuinely surprised by that. “Really?”

“She cared for you. Enjoyed your friendship, and worried when you were struggling. I know she was grateful that you and Alaric take care of Hope like this.”

At that, Caroline did start crying. “It’s our job.”

“It's always been more than that,” Klaus insisted. “Which is why I’ve arranged for a portion of my assets to be handed over to the school upon my passing. Hope and Marcel retain the rest, but I wanted some to go here. For all the cheques I won’t be around to write.”

Caroline’s mouth hung open, jaw practically unhinged. Coupled with her tear-bright eyes, it was almost a comical expression. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.” And then Klaus gave voice to a thought he’d never allowed himself to speak before: “I often wonder what I would be like if I’d had somewhere like this. I regret that I won’t be around to see this world made over by the students you save here.”

Caroline smothered her mouth with her hand, tears running. “I’m sorry,” she said, voice muffled. “I wanted to travel with you but I left it too late. I'm so sorry.”

“It’s all right, love.” Klaus rested a hand on the back of her neck. No pressure, just warmth. “I wouldn’t have been very good company.”

“Oh, god, when are you ever?” Caroline asked, laughing through her tears.

“True.” Klaus waited until her tears cleared, then slowly slid his hand from her neck. “I’m going back inside to wake Hope. Might take her in town for that event happening in the square.”

“See you there.” Caroline wiped the mascara her tears had stolen and run down her cheeks. “I’ll be the one bawling her eyes out.”

“I hope not,” said Klaus. “I hear it’s going to be quite the merry affair.”

“I’m sure it’s got nothing on a Mikaelson ball.”

Klaus grinned. “You're damn right.”

Chapter End Notes
yes it is a terrible idea to start plotting a marcel-centric sequel when i'm in the middle of three fics, my own novel, and university. yes i have done it anyway

let me know what you thought!
December 19th, 2026

Hope hated Christmas. She’d never hated a Christmas before now. Her mom had worked so hard to make them wonderful, so how could she? She wasn’t a monster.

But she’d decided to hate Christmas now. She wouldn’t hate it loudly, since that would upset the rest of her family, but she would hate it in private. She would hate it when she washed the dishes after Christmas lunch. She would hate it when she burned a wish on the fire that would never come true.

Hope would hate Christmas because her parents were gone and no one could look at her without remembering it.

Tucking her anger between her ribs, right where it could thump beside her heart, Hope shoved the last of her clothes into her duffel. Christmas break was short, so she’d packed the bare minimum. Less clothes meant Aunt Rebekah had a better excuse to dress her, and she seemed to like that. Hope used to like it, too.

The rapping of knuckles on the door wasn’t a surprise. Hope had heard Miss Forbes approach—slowly, at human speed, just like always.

“Come in.”
Miss Forbes was decked in a quintessentially Christmas outfit—motley red and green knit dress with tassels on the sleeves, pale cream stockings and calf-length boots the colour of mustard. Aunt Rebekah would hate it when she saw it. That was probably why Miss Forbes had picked it out.

“How are you going?” asked Miss Forbes, face pinched in that your-mom-is-dead kind of way. So, her normal face when she was talking to Hope. “All packed up?”

“Yes.”

Miss Forbes eyed the stack of sketchbooks on the desk. They were all months old and laden with dust. “You’re not going to take any of your sketchbooks?”

“I have some there.” True, but it dodged the reason Miss Forbes had asked. Everyone knew Hope hadn’t painted or drawn anything since the night her dad died. Hope wasn’t going to be using the sketchbooks in New Orleans, either.

“That’s great,” Miss Forbes enthused. Her smile slipped slightly, teeth digging into her lower lip. “I, uh, wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Okay?”

Miss Forbes gestured to the chair at Hope’s desk. “Mind if I …?”

“Go ahead.”

Settling on the chair, Miss Forbes crossed her ankles and tucked her yellow boots back a bit, hands folded in her lap. She looked like a debutante. “So … I wanted a moment to chat today because I have something for you. Not a Christmas gift, and not perfectly timed, but I’m not going to be around much next year so I thought I should give this to you sooner rather than later.”

Hope didn’t like the nervous edge to Miss Forbes’ tone. She folded her arms over her chest and waited.

Miss Forbes reached into a deep pocket in her dress and pulled out an envelope. Pale, yellow, with dark ink swirling into the shape of a name.

Hope.

That was her father’s handwriting.

“As you know,” said Miss Forbes, “I have a collection of letters that your mom wrote your dad. He gave them to me because he figured I’d be around you for most of the year and I could judge when you were ready for them. Since I lost my parents too, I guess he hoped I’d be the best person to keep my finger on the pulse of that particular situation.”

Hope nodded. She had been furious when she found out the letters were being kept from her, but Aunt Freya explained at length that it was her dad’s express wish that she get them at the right time.

“So is that one of them?” Hope asked, indicating the letter in Miss Forbes’ hand. It couldn’t be from her mom. Not with her dad’s script on it.

“It’s … from your dad. He wrote it a couple hours before he and Elijah …” Died. No one ever said the word. Miss Forbes was no exception.

“He wrote this while he was with you?”
“I encouraged him to write it for you. So he could leave you with some words as well, long after he was gone. He wanted me to wait until you were ready, but I don’t think that’s something you’ll advertise. I don’t think I should keep it from you any longer.”

Hope tried her best not to act like the world had tilted on its axis and begun revolving around the paper clutched in her headmistress’ hand. She was not doing a very good job.

“What about the other letters?” asked Hope. “Do I get to read them?”

“If you think you’re ready after you’ve read this, I’ll give you the box to take with you to New Orleans.” Slowly, Miss Forbes extended the letter to Hope. Hope snatched it away with none of the same care, not daring to look at it in her own grip while she still had company.

“Can I have some privacy?”

Miss Forbes smiled sympathetically and sprung to her feet. “Of course you can. Please, call if you need anything.”

Finally alone with nothing but the cool press of paper between her fingers for company, Hope sank onto the bed.

Seized with terror but unable to look away, Hope began to read.

#

May 23rd, 2026

There was a significant difference between sleep and a magical slumber. Klaus was intimate with this difference, and he knew before he opened his eyes that this had been the latter, not the former.

The anger that fizzed through him at first was easily tamed by the memory of who had done this to him. Hope was powerful, even without the Hollow, and she’d refused to let him stake himself. He was glad she hadn’t watched him die, but knocking him unconscious made things more complicated.

“You’re awake,” Elijah observed from the chair by Klaus’ bed. They were back in New Orleans, where everything was dripping with such familiarity that Klaus might almost believe it was a regular day. The sights, the smells, the sounds—it was all so painfully normal.

“How long was I unconscious?” Klaus asked. He rubbed his head as he sat up, the headache slowly retreating as his healing factor beat it back. There was whispering at the back of his mind—the Hollow, amping up and waking as he did …

“Some hours. We drove through the night, at Hope’s request. It’s mid-morning now.”

“How long was I unconscious?” Klaus asked. He rubbed his head as he sat up, the headache slowly retreating as his healing factor beat it back. There was whispering at the back of his mind—the Hollow, amping up and waking as he did …

“Where is she?” Klaus listened closely throughout the house and located his daughter before Elijah could respond. “We have to find a way to distract her.”

“Niklaus …” Elijah’s disapproval was another ordinary thing. “Things have become more complex. Hope won’t allow you to do this, and even without the Hollow she is a formidable foe.”
“I’m aware.” He’d been counting on her formidability to protect her once he was gone. “I’ll find a way to get a moment alone.”

“And what—let her find your corpse?”

Ignoring the way the Hollow began taunting and screaming at him, Klaus stood. “I trust you to keep her clear. She doesn’t need to see me that way.”

“Niklaus, if you would just let me take this power—”

“I will not.” Klaus stepped back from his brother, briefly scanning the room for any signs of spellwork. Would Elijah try to wrest this power back from him by force? It was possible. “I will not allow you to take this on. It’s my responsibility. If you try, we will only spend these last moments together at war. And I will win that war, brother. I always do.”

Tears brightened Elijah’s eyes but did nothing to soften the fury in them. “This is how you would spend your final hours? Readying for battle?”

“I will do whatever I must for my family, and that includes you. If you take this from me, what is to stop Rebekah from trying to take it from you? Would you have our sister die for this?”

“Never.”

“And I would not have you lost to it, either.” Klaus skated his hand up his brother’s arm to rest it on his shoulder, squeezing tightly. “It’s time to consider what your life looks like without my redemption on your to-do list. I am disappointed to miss the sight of you free from me, but … being able to watch would defeat the purpose.” He released Elijah and put distance between them. “I leave you to ponder what your life will be, brother.”

And with that, Klaus left him.

#

The Hollow was not kind to conversations.

It felt like jealousy. Like the moment Klaus tried to focus on something else, to speak with someone else, the Hollow reared itself and hissed at him, screamed at him, beat his mind with its fists until he relented, until he listened.

Really, Klaus wondered if Inadu was even in there anymore. This didn’t feel like a person anymore. It was just power, cleaved by distance for years but now so thrilled to be together once more.

And angry to have been taken from its true host—Hope.

Klaus was doubled over in a back alley, stomach heaving. The fingers that fluttered over his hair were familiar, but every time she spoke it was like glass in his head, stabbing him from the inside out.

“Caroline,” he groaned through gritted teeth.

“What do you need?”

“Quiet.” Klaus hoped it sounded like an answer, not a command. He certainly didn’t have the
He could do this. He could manage this. Cami appearing to him on the street was like a slap to the face, but a fortifying one. She wasn’t real, but she still believed he was more than the darkness. Perhaps believing was what made her real.

He could do this. He’d done it before, when he killed a member of the Five and spent years in agony as the Hunter’s Curse took him. Every cell in his body had told him to die, and his inability to do so tore him apart. But he’d survived it.

He could do this.

He could do this.

He could do this.

He could do this.

Gritting his teeth until his fangs pierced his gums and filled his mouth with blood, Klaus shoved the screaming, the whispers, the agony—with everything he had, he shoved it into the back of his mind. Into a box. No, a coffin. Klaus daggered the Hollow and shoved it in a box and shut the lid.

And slowly, the pain eased. Not gone, but muffled.

Swallowing back the thick blood, Klaus reached out to grip Caroline’s leg before he fell over. She knelt by him, steadying him. Blue eyes clear and unwavering, the brows above them knotted with concern.

Klaus was crying, he realised. He didn’t do that often in front of her.

Slowly, horror barely hidden, Caroline touched Klaus’ cheek. Her fingers came away red.

Oh, good. Crying blood was now within his capabilities.

“Here.” Caroline pulled a travel pack of tissues out of her pocket—how did she always have those just on hand?—and used one to clean Klaus’ cheeks quickly. “Not perfect, but it will do. Here, sit.” She guided him off his knees so his ass was on the concrete, back to the brick wall of some factory that had been gentrified into a kitschy bar with patrons Klaus was trying hard not to imagine killing.

“Seems like the worst has passed?” Caroline asked hopefully, settling in beside him.

“For now.” Klaus licked the blood from his teeth and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’m sure it will come back.”

“Hope is looking for you still.”

“Mm.”

“Are you going to go to her?”

Klaus sighed. “I have to return for the Marcel’s venom at some point. She took the syringe from me last night and I’ve no idea where it is.”

“Smart girl.”

“Unfortunately.” Klaus didn’t find it unfortunate usually, but in this case, it certainly became less than ideal. “I blame you for that.”
“Well, next time you have a magic baby I’ll be sure to educate her less.” Caroline bumped his foot with hers.

“Thank god.” Klaus doubted he could handle another Hope. One was enough for him.

Saying goodbye to just one was enough for him.

“You have to go to her,” Caroline said. “You can’t avoid it forever. The Hollow will just get worse and worse.”

“I have to figure out how to keep her from taking it back. I won’t watch her die.” Perhaps, with time and no interference, the Hollow would kill him too. No venom necessary.

“I think she might let you go. It’s just hard right now. She’s in denial. But she’ll see—she’s smart.”

“Smart and selfless. A combination that won’t serve her interests.”

“Yeah, well, Hayley wanted it that way.”

Klaus couldn’t argue with that.

“What do you need?” Caroline asked. “To make you ready to say goodbye.”

“I need to not say goodbye.”

“Don’t deny her closure,” Caroline cautioned. “She didn’t get that with Hayley, not really. But she deserves it with you.”

“What closure could I possibly provide?”

“You could do what Hayley did for you.” Caroline’s mouth lifted, just on the one side. “Write her a letter.”

“Would that really be so helpful?”

“My mom wrote me a letter to try and give me closure.”

“Did it work?”

Caroline’s smile turned sad. “I had my humanity off, so I burned it before I could read it. It kills me every day, that I’ll never know what she wished for me.”

“Something tells me you’ve fulfilled her wildest dreams.” Klaus had never thought he’d understand Sheriff Forbes so intimately, but right now he did. Knowing you were dying, leaving a child behind without you. She must have been terrified to let Caroline go.

“So, will you?” Caroline prompted.

“Will I what?”

“Write her a letter. She doesn’t have anything from Hayley, but she should have it from you.”

“Actually …” Klaus’ mind whirled, carrying him back through the years. Like flipping pages through a book. “She did write something for Hope.”

“Really?”
“When she was pregnant, she—I don’t know why she thought Hope would need the letter, but I suppose she was steeling herself for the worst. In case I killed her the moment she gave birth.”

Caroline stiffened. “Did she really think you would do that?”

“In the beginning, I thought I would do that.” Perhaps his last day alive wasn’t the best time to confess such ugly truths. Or maybe it was the best.

Caroline was clearly disturbed by this, but she shook it off and stood, offering him a hand. “Do you know where the letter is?”

Klaus took Caroline’s hand and let her pull him upright. Just as strong as he remembered.

“I’ll have to look through her room. Maybe I can search for the venom while I’m at it.”

Caroline guided a hand to his back, walking him back onto the street. “Let’s focus on one thing at a time, shall we?”

#

The compound was mostly silent when Klaus clambered up into it through the catacombs. Rebekah was off chasing Kol, Marcel was on the street with Hope still, and Elijah was nowhere to be found either.

“Are we looking for the venom or the letter?” Caroline asked as she picked her way over a rotted wooden stair, stepping into the main house.

“Ideally both.” Klaus made his way to Hayley’s room first, since that’s where she was most likely to have hidden Hope’s letter. He didn’t think she’d ever shown it to Hope—really, Klaus thought Hayley was embarrassed about it. Like she’d jumped the gun and written an ‘IN CASE OF DEATH: BREAK GLASS’ type letter and then everything had been fine. Like it was an overreaction to write a letter to their as-yet unborn, unnamed child.

Or perhaps she’d been saving it in case she died after all.

“I’ll search her room,” Klaus said. He’d not entered it since she passed, only giving it a cursory glance when she went missing. It felt like a sacred place that neither he nor Caroline should enter, but he felt better about being the one to do it.

Caroline must’ve picked up on Klaus deliberately not inviting her along, because she asked, “Where should I look?”

“The study, just through there.” Klaus indicated to the door. “It’s where most of the stationery she wrote her other letters on came from. Maybe she left it in there.”

Caroline nodded. “I’ll keep an eye out for the stake, too.”

Left alone, Klaus had nothing left to do but enter the bedroom.

It had been Elijah’s room, once. Klaus wondered if that made Hayley uncomfortable, especially when Declan came around. The room smelled like the rest of the house, barely a trace of Hayley’s scent left. In retrospect, he might’ve sealed it better than just closing the door. The building was old
and draughty and no scent would linger for longer than a few days.

It didn’t smell of her, but it was her. Different furniture to Elijah’s. Most of it seemed custom-made, perfectly fitting into the alcoves of the room or tucked between the two large windows. The comforter was the mottled green and auburn of a tree in autumn, slowly dying off for the winter.

It was also cleaner than Klaus thought Hayley would’ve kept it. Perhaps Freya tidied up a bit.

Starting with the bedside tables, Klaus sifted through old receipts and scraps of paper to find nothing of use. A few condoms made him roll his eyes—she didn’t need them for protection against pregnancy or illness, but evidently the charade with Declan had gone that far. Old phone chargers with frayed cords, a few gum wrappers, an empty foil wrapper from block of chocolate, the cork from what smelled like a red wine bottle, a book ominously titled *TEENAGERS AND PTSD: How Can We Save Them?*—the contents were nothing notable, but Klaus found himself turning them over in his hands like they were jewels.

Nothing of use there. Moving on.

Klaus turned his attention to the closet. There were a few boxes of storage up on the top shelf above the hanging space, so he pulled them down and sorted through their contents quickly. Every item had the potential to side-track him, so he forced himself to focus only on paper.

This bedroom was like her letters—so easy to get lost in. So easy to be hurt by. It was like standing in memories, scattering them all over the floor.

There was nothing in the boxes.

Cursing, Klaus looked under the bed, finding only empty space. He searched the chest of drawers, finding only clothes in there, too. He knocked on the floor to listen for secret hiding places and checked even the bathroom cabinets for something. Nothing was there.

Dejected, Klaus sifted through Hayley’s closet as he tried to think. The clothes still smelled like her—mostly like laundry detergent, but there was Hayley there. He flicked the coat-hangers with his fingers, past the almost endless line of t-shirts and jackets, past the few dresses Rebekah had picked out for her, past the white gown she’d worn to Jackson’s wedding, past even more jackets—

Wait.

Klaus flicked back through a few coathangers back and found what had stalled his mind. He knew this jacket.

She’d worn it to Father Kieran’s funeral, and for a few days after. She hadn’t been wearing it when the witches abducted her and she gave birth to Hope, but she’d still worn it that morning. There were plenty of old clothes in the closet, so it wasn’t its age that was unusual, but … it was maternity wear, wasn’t it? Klaus tested the fabric at the front. Too much of it for Hayley to wear without a belly beneath.

Something crinkled under his hands.

Awed and wondering if he was imagining it all, Klaus slid his hand into the coat, fingers slipping over the supple silk and sinking into an inner pocket.

His fingertips met paper. Grasped it.

The letter.
Klaus released the breath that had been holding itself hostage in his lungs. As if the letter was set to self-destruct, he unfolded the paper hurriedly and raked his eyes over the words to confirm it was what he desperately needed it to be.

Dear Zoe … or Kaitlyn … or Angela …

To my little girl,

Your dad just asked if this was a love letter. I guess it kind of is.

I never got to know my mother. I have no idea what she must have felt when she carried me. So I thought I’d write to you, so that you could know how happy I am at this very moment. How much your father and I can’t wait to meet you.

And I want to make you a promise—three things you will have that I never did: A safe home. Someone to tell you that they love you every single day. And someone to fight for you, no matter what.

In other words, a family.

So there you go, baby girl. The rest we’re gonna have to figure out together.

I love you,

Your Mom

#

Klaus didn’t know how long he sat there for. The paper in his hands felt like a brick, weighing his arms down until he had to rest his hands in his lap. He was sitting on the bed. He did not remember sitting on the bed, but it had happened.

In the back of his mind, the Hollow’s whispers started up again.

Caroline approached slowly. Klaus had to meet her eyes before she crossed the threshold, obviously
reluctant to intrude.

There was a letter in her hands.

“‘I found it.’ Klaus raised the paper in his own grip, eyeing Caroline’s. ‘What’s that?’”

“It’s …” Caroline peered down at it. It was folded, no words visible. “‘Hayley was in the middle of writing another letter.’”

Klaus wondered if being stabbed might have been more pleasant than the hope that shot through him at that statement. Most likely.

“There’s another letter,” he breathed.

Caroline extended it for him. “I’ll give you some privacy.”

Klaus took it in hand like it was a bomb. Not simply set to self-destruct, like the other letter in his hand. This one could do such incredible damage.

Caroline was gone before he could thank her.

Setting aside the letter to unborn Hope, opened the bomb in his lap, and began to read.

#

May 4th, 2026

“Motherfu—” Hayley cut herself off before she remembered Hope wasn’t there. “Fuck.” She shook the milk carton as if doing so would magically produce enough milk for her cereal. “Freya!”

Freya appeared after a few minutes, wearing pajamas and with hair still mussed from a solid night’s sleep. She saw Hayley’s predicament and winced. “Oh, sorry. Thought I put it on the list.”

“It’s fine.” Biting back her irritation, Hayley crushed the carton in her hands and tossed it into the trash can reserved for recyclable material. “I’ll just have toast. Can I put any one for you?”

“Ah, sure. If you can find bread.”

Sure enough, the pantry was void of any bread-like substance. Hayley rubbed her temple and tried to keep her annoyance out of her tone when she said, “Do you just, like, not shop while I’m gone?” She’d been in Mystic Falls for Hope’s fifteenth birthday over the weekend and had imagined she’d return to more food than … a bottle of pasta sauce, expired baking ingredients and the gross yoghurt she’d refuse to eat at gunpoint.

“I was trying to perfect an astral projecting spell to talk to Keelin more reliably, and I kind of forgot to do anything, really.”

“Jesus.” Hayley rolled her eyes and checked the fridge again. Yep, just the disappointing yoghurt and two empty glass bottles that should have water in them. Were they just refrigerating air now? “Tell me you still ate something.”
“I had dinner with Vincent and Ivy on Saturday. Have plenty of gossip if you want it.”

“I can’t eat gossip for breakfast, Freya. Do I have to hire someone to babysit you when I’m away?”

“I’m a grown woman.”

“Noted,” Hayley said, despite completely ignoring it. “Josh would probably do it if I paid him enough.”

Freya sighed. “I’m sorry you have no breakfast. But we’re leaving to meet up at Rousseau’s in like, an hour. I’m sure Declan will make you something delicious.” Freya’s eyes searched Hayley’s face. “What was that?”

“What was what?” Hayley asked.

“The look.”

Hayley touched her cheek as if her fingertips could read her own expression. “I’m not that pissed at you.”

“No, it wasn’t about me. It was when I mentioned Declan. Is something wrong?”

*Fuck.* “Everything is definitely fine. You’re just paranoid because you’re hungry.”

“You know I don’t get paranoid when I’m hungry. Just horny.”

“I know, and that’s super weird by the way.” Hayley had sat through many a painful conversation with Keelin about how Freya abandoned hot makeout sessions to re-do the wards on the house or double-check the stove was off.

“I’m not being paranoid,” Freya argued. “What’s going on with you and Declan?”

There was really no point trying to ignore a Mikaelson. Even less point trying to distract one. Even less point trying to lie to one.

“Nothing is wrong, per se,” Hayley said. “I just … he’s been … and I’ve been …” She shrugged.

“Well, that clears things up.” Freya swung herself up onto the bench, leaning against the kitchen cabinets. “It will benefit you to just be straightforward with me.”

“Ugh, fine. I … don’t want to break up with him, but I also don’t think I want to keep dating him.”

Freya pulled a knee up to her chest and set her chin atop it. “Why don’t you want to break up with him?”

“Because he’s wonderful, and it feels like such a waste of time. He and Hope just started getting along, and she trusts him. She doesn’t just trust anyone.”

“And I’m guessing she’s a big part of why you don’t want to just dump him?”

“I could never *just dump* him. He’s important to me.”

“But not important enough to keep dating.”

Hayley went to shove her hands in her jeans pockets, then remembered she was wearing sleep shorts, so her hands just did a weird slide over her thighs instead. “He’s important in a different way.
It’s like I …” She fumbled for the words.

“Like you what?” Freya prompted.

“It’s like I told myself I wasn’t committing to Declan because I didn’t have closure with your brothers, but now I have as close to closure as I’ll get and it’s … it’s like I was using the lack of closure as an excuse. It’s still not working. I’m still not on the same level as him.” He’d been asking about moving in for weeks now, and keeping him at arm’s length was heartbreaking to watch. Hayley didn’t want Declan out of her life, but she really couldn’t commit the way he wanted. The way he deserved.

“Plus,” she continued, “I think he wants to have more kids.”

“Have you told him you can’t?”

Hayley scratched her neck. “I … he knows I don’t get periods. I told him I had a hysterectomy or something and he bought it. So he knows I can’t physically, but he talks about adoption like it’s … I don’t know. Like he loves the idea of taking in a troubled kid and lifting them up or whatever.”

“And you don’t love that idea?”

“I’m not opposed to it on principle, but I think one is enough for me. I can’t explain it. I have the time and the energy and the money to take on another kid if I really wanted to, especially a teen or something, but I just … don’t want to enough.” It sounded so selfish, said out loud like that.

“There’s nothing wrong with not wanting to. You shouldn’t have to qualify your decision to not have more kids by an inability to do so. It’s enough to just be done.”

Hayley tried to act like she knew this was true. Really, it wasn’t penetrating her anxious, churning mind. “Have you and Keelin talked about having kids?”

“She has. I haven’t disagreed with her about it.”

Hayley saw the vagueness and grabbed it with both hands. “But do you want them?”

“Want what—kids?” Freya shrugged a little too carelessly. “I guess that’s something I’ll figure out over the next little while.”

Hayley did not want to leave that comment unpoked, but Freya already looked nervous enough about it. Plus Hayley was in desperate need of a shower and probably some of the chocolate she’d stashed away in her room. “I’m going to interrogate you about that later,” Hayley warned Freya. “So be ready.”

Freya rolled her eyes. “I’ll prepare some flashcards.”

“Good.” Hayley flicked Freya’s knee on her way out of the kitchen. “I’m gonna grab a shower.”

“Don’t use all the water!”

“Yeah, yeah.”
Eating chocolate in the shower was messy but good, Hayley decided. It got kind of melty and messy because of the steam, but she was perfectly positioned to clean herself up.

She didn’t use all the hot water, leaving some spare for Freya, who started her shower downstairs the moment Hayley switched off her own. She dried off, dressed, spent two minutes failing to style her hair, and then resigned herself to waiting another half hour before they could leave for Rousseau’s.

Hayley flicked through her Mardi Gras notes. The wolves were doing a float and providing some security for the event. Last year, they’d coordinated with the vampires okay on that front. A focused event with patrols and surveying the crowds carefully meant that the once mortal enemies spent less time concerned with one another and more time concerned with their task—a task they had to work together to complete.

Hopefully this year would be just as successful. The werewolves were open to renegotiating treaties with the vampires, and the vampires probably just needed a little push to stamp out the remaining anti-werewolf sentiment there. Hayley still had notes on Greta Sienna, the vampire at the heart of most issues between the species. Things were quiet on Greta’s front, which had to be a good sign.

Hayley checked her phone twice. No new messages. She’d deleted the time-wasting games to avoid … well, wasting her time, and there wasn’t a lot to do while she waited for Freya to finish primping.

Maybe …

Hayley retrieved a sheaf of paper from the study and grabbed a book—a grimoire, actually—from the shelf to press against. She parked herself in a chair by the unlit fireplace and began to write.

_Dear Klaus,_

_I’ve been thinking a lot about moving on lately. Not just moving on, I think, but when it’s okay to admit you don’t want to move on. Or that maybe moving on looks different for different people._

Hayley winced. She sounded like a twelve-year-old girl in her diary. Though that was likely true of plenty of her letters.

_What I mean is, it’s hard to strike a balance. It’s not grief, exactly. Not like when Jackson died._

Great. Mention Jackson. Klaus was respectful of Jackson, since he’d died loving and protecting Hayley and Hope, but she knew there was no love lost between them when he was alive. Not even time could erase the animosity there.

_You and your family being gone is like a half-grief, because you’re not dead and there may be a way to see you again._
Hayley was desperate to write *Like if you used FaceTime like a normal, non-asshole person*. It was too juvenile, but it was tempting. Instead, she wrote:

So it’s hard to grieve something that’s not fully gone, and that you don’t know when to expect to come back.

Well, that made it sound like she wished he was dead for simplicity’s sake.

Maybe things would be easier if you and I still talked. I didn’t feel so much like I was losing something huge when we were still in contact. But the longer you’re gone, the more it’s like I’ve buried you. You and Elijah both.

Hayley felt bad for not mentioning Rebekah and Kol, but at least they still called. Elijah didn’t know who she was (other than Andrea, the mysterious art enthusiast visiting Manosque), and Klaus didn’t care.

No, he cared. Just not in the way she needed him to.

*I don’t think I want to move on the way everyone wants me to. I’m a single mom, even if I don’t want to be, and it’s like everyone is waiting for me to un-single myself. To build a family unit around our kid. It’s not fair, and I think I*

“Ready to go?”

The pen skittered across the page, leaving an ugly mark. “You scared me,” Hayley said, folding the paper quickly.

“Didn’t mean to. Are you ready to head out?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.” Hayley jumped up and set the pen back in the holder on the desk. “Are you?”

Freya nodded. “I’ll go lock the back door and whatever. Meet you out front?”

“Yep.”

Hayley waited until Freya was gone to shove the letter deep in the bottom drawer. She’d finish it later.

#
Klaus didn’t know he was crying until the ink on the letter began bleeding in splotches. He had spent so long reading finished, polished letters and feeling the ache of an unanswered cry for help. He hadn’t imagined how much worse an unfinished cry would be.

It took time to clean himself up. With the Hollow beating a drumbeat on his skull, shuddering his heart with its fists, he was running out of time to do everything he needed to. It was almost evening, the sun dipping, and he had to finish things with Caroline and see his family.

One last time.

Letters folded away so he wouldn’t be tempted to lose himself in the re-reading, Klaus located Caroline in the hall. She was just returning her phone to her pocket when he stepped out, instantly ready and present the instant he needed her. How undeserving he was of her support.

“I can take them,” she said, holding a hand out for the letters. “I’ll put them in the box for Hope, when she’s ready.”

“Thank you.” Klaus couldn’t lift his hand to give them to her, so she took them from where he held them at his side.

“How were they?”

“You can read them.”

Caroline slipped Hayley’s letters into her coat pocket, out of view. If her gaze softened any more, it might melt down her cheeks. “I don’t feel like I should.”

“They’re not sacred,” Klaus said. “They wouldn’t mean anything if she wasn’t dead. Nothing would.”

“That’s not true,” Caroline denied, voice rough. “You don’t believe that.”

“If she were standing right in front of me, begging me to care, begging me to read, begging me to listen like she did so many times … I wouldn’t hear her. I wouldn’t care.”

“You cared for her.”

Klaus shook his head, the Hollow roiling inside him. “How is it that I can only feel for her when she’s taken from me?”

“You always felt for her. It was just complicated.”

“I was a monster.”

“We’re all monsters.”

“Not like me.” Klaus’ hands balled into fists, constricting. The same hands had choked Hayley, once. In a house that no longer stood in a time before their daughter, he had thrown her against a wall and lifted her by the throat. She’d been nothing to him but a vehicle for their child. “I didn’t care like she needed. Like she deserved. Grieving her like this, like she was mine and I was—” **Hers.**
He’d never been her anything, even when he’d looked at her and believed she was his. His lover. His ally. The mother of his child.

Caroline wrapped Klaus’ fists with her hands and pulled them up between them. “It’s not a crime to love what you can’t explain.”

Someplace in his chest caved in, punching air up through his throat. “So much of it was, though. A crime.”

“Not loving her. Not grieving her.” Caroline blinked tears down onto her cheeks. “Not dying for her daughter.”

Klaus trembled, fists shaking in Caroline’s grip as his head dipped down under the weight of all that spun inside it. Heavy lies head that wears the crown, but heavier still lies the head that bears the Hollow.

“I …” Klaus swallowed the lump in his throat. “I need to write Hope’s letter.”

Caroline brightened a little at the suggestion. “There’s paper in the study.”

“I might need you to stay,” Klaus ground out, working against the hushed hum buzzing in his mind. “The Hollow, it’s …”

“Of course. I’ll stay as long as you need.”

And she did. Caroline had mastered the art of unintrusive hovering, and supervised Klaus’ agonised letter writing without ever peeking at the paper. She poured his drink, set the pen in his hand, touched his shoulder when the Hollow screamed so loud it had him moaning.

He didn’t stop. He had to do this, and he had to make sure it wouldn’t hurt Hope. Not the way her mother’s unknowing messages from the grave would.

Hayley hadn’t known that each word could be her last. Klaus knew these were his. The intentionality had to make a difference.

So Klaus sat where Hayley sat, wrote where Hayley wrote, and tried to love like Hayley loved.

#

Hope,

I spend little time at the compound without you. It feels an empty place without you here, and it agonises me to imagine that it will be the same for you once I am gone. That home may not be home without your parents.

I am reminded of your birth, when your mother and I chose to send you away with your Aunt Rebekah. We did not know when we would see you again, be it as a babe, a child, or a woman. Now, once more, I don’t know when I will see you next. I hope you live a life as full and long as you
can take, and exit peacefully and with good humour to return to us.

The purpose of this letter is to ease your pain, so I must say that I have no expectations that you live for or by me. I spent a thousand years in the shadow of my parents, and I could never wish such an unhappiness for you. Whatever you need to do in the endeavour of chasing your own shadow, your own legacy, I urge you to consider it. Leave the family name behind. Shave your head. Join a convent. Whatever brings you joy, even if it demands that you deny your family, that you deny me. Always and forever is a tortured existence I refuse to leave you with.

Now, to your brother. By the time you read this letter, a while after I’m gone, I don’t know if you will have forgiven him. If you have, I am proud of you. Forgiveness took me a thousand years to master and you truly are a prodigy.

If you haven’t … I want you to be patient with Marcel. I understand you will be furious with him for aiding my death, but he did so at my request and to ensure your safety. Please do not allow your anger to eclipse your love for him. There is a strength in the love of an older brother that I need you to know. Marcel will never waver in his support of you, and it is my wish for both my children that you lean on one another through the ages.

Marcel has been separate from our family for some time, and I think he will follow you anywhere. On occasion, I ask that you take him where he needs to go, as well. I trust that you will know what to do when he needs you.

Please remember that you have been loved by an impossible man.

And please don’t marry any boy with a motorcycle.

My love in eternity,

Dad

P.S. So that your mother doesn’t scold me in the afterlife for leaving you with unkind presumptions on your sexual preferences, I would like to clarify that I also don’t want you to marry a girl with a motorcycle, either. Or any non-girl, non-boy types with motorcycles. Thank you and I love you.
Hope was used to absorbing her power before it lashed out on her behalf. When the tempest welled in her chest she could channel it down, down to where her feet sweated in her socks. It would crack fissures into the bones there, draw lines up her femurs. The damage healed as soon as it came, the rumble through her body passing with each breath.

It was easier than it had been with the Hollow, which never went where she told it.

The power ebbed, and Hope was recalled to her body in the same position she’d been in for some time: letter in hand, body sinking into the corner of the mattress. Feet planted on the floor. Room in order. Bag at her feet.

Hope understood why Miss Forbes hadn’t given the letter to her right after her dad died.

*Marcel has been separate from our family for some time, and I think he will follow you anywhere. On occasion, I ask that you take him where he needs to go, as well.*

Shaking away the sound of her father’s voice in her head, Hope stuffed the letter in her purse where she could access it on the drive and picked up both her bags.

#

The school was mostly empty. Kids who didn’t live so near got picked up earlier in the day, most parents road-tripping in or staying over the night before to catch a flight today. The building took on a haunted quality when empty. Hope could relate.

On her way out, Hope passed Josie Saltzman in the halls. A weak smile and a, “Merry Christmas,” meant that Hope had to at least nod in response so she wasn’t being completely rude.

Whatever. She and Josie would never be friends.

Hope located Caroline out in the parking lot with Aunt Rebekah. Both stood in identical poses—heelled shoes spread wide, arms folded over their chests. Combative.

“My point still stands,” Rebekah was saying. “Even if you’re letting the kids alter their own uniforms, the basic styles are ugly.”

“They don’t have to be attractive! It’s school, not a beauty pageant. I think I of all people would know the difference.”

“Excuse you.” Rebekah uncrossed her arms to plant her hands on her hips. “You’re not the only one that’s ever competed in a beauty pageant. There’s no reason the students can’t be stylish while they learn.”

“It’s not the point. We don’t fit them for uniforms so we can maximise their external attractiveness and have them equate that with worth!”
Rebekah all but screamed in frustration. “See, this is the problem with feminists today—”

“Oh, please tell me all about it. I’m dying to hear.”

Hope cleared her throat loudly, perhaps obnoxiously, bringing both women’s gazes to her.

“Sweetheart!” Rebekah exclaimed, posture instantly morphing into one jagged with excitement. Her grip on Hope was almost painful, hugging her and tugging her towards the car. “I’m here to rescue you from this fashion disaster of a school.”

Miss Forbes made an indignant noise and muttered something under her breath that even Hope’s hearing didn’t catch.

When they’d reached Rebekah’s cobalt blue Camaro, she finally released Hope. She took both bags, saying, “I assume you don’t need the duffel on your lap for the journey?”

“Just the purse.”

Rebekah shoved the duffel into the trunk while Miss Forbes squeezed Hope’s arm to get her attention. “Hey. You doing okay?”

Numbly, Hope realised she hadn’t even cried. “I will be. But I think … maybe you should hold onto Mom’s letters for a little longer. If that’s okay.”

Understanding honeyed Miss Forbes’ tone. “That’s fine, Hope. You just let me know when you want them.”

“Thanks.”

“Have a safe trip.” It would’ve been just a pleasant farewell if Miss Forbes hadn’t paired it with an uncertain glance at Rebekah.

Rebekah slammed the trunk shut. “Oh, fuck off.”

The smile creeping onto Miss Forbes’ lips twitched away. “Pleasant to see you, as always, Miss Mikaelson.”

“And you, Headmistress Forbes.” Rebekah extended an imperious hand to Hope. “Come, come. I want to make it home before dinner. Declan’s cooking for us.”

That … wasn’t really a surprise, but it was still nice. Hope knew Declan had been hanging around still, even with her mom gone. His position as the human representative on the newly-formed New Orleans City Council necessitated it.

Before Hope could even think to wave to Miss Forbes, they were on the road.

Hope spent the first ten minutes picking at her skirt and trying to let the pop radio station ease her nerves.

“What are you stressing over?” Rebekah asked.

Hope balled her hands into fists to make herself stop fidgeting. “Is Marcel coming?”

Rebekah’s hands tightened on the steering wheel as she passed a family van that was definitely going over the speed limit anyway. “He’s going to be in the city. He doesn’t have to come to the family celebrations if you’re uncomfortable.”
“Does he not want to see me?”

“Sweetheart, he always wants to see you.”

Hope’s heart twanged as she remembered the missed calls, the unanswered texts, dodging any mention of him when she was talking to the rest of her family. She’d been so angry when she saw her father holding that syringe of her brother’s venom, when she realised Marcel had given it freely …

But did it matter?

“I’m still mad.” Hope decided this as she said it. “But I’d like it if he could be there.”

“Then he shall be. I’ll text him when we stop next.”

“Thanks.”

Rebekah’s right hand left the steering wheel and landed on Hope’s. “You’ll fix things between you. Easy as anything—trust me.”

“I do.” Hope turned her hand over so she could squeeze back. “Do you think …” She trailed off awkwardly.

“Do I think? I try to, but I’m quite impulsive.”

Hope rolled her eyes. “No. Do you … do you think Marcel would write me letters?”

“If you asked, he’d write them in the sky above the Salvatore School,” Rebekah assured her. “If he wrote you, would you reply?”

Because Hope could think of nothing more depressing than unanswered letters, she said, “Yeah, of course I will.”

So she did.

Chapter End Notes

there we go! there’s an itty-bitty epilogue to come and then we’ll be done with this. i am definitely eyeing a marcel prequel spin-off, but that’ll be at least a few months in coming since i’m now trying to focus on die easy and my own original writing a bit more.

thank you all for coming on this particular ride with me! i’m thrilled it’s resonated so well, and it’s definitely been an emotional rollercoaster to write. much love to everyone who reviewed and kudos’d, i’m eternally grateful for your support <3
January 15th, 2027

Marcel,

School is boring. It's always weird coming back after Christmas. Everyone's louder for the first week, and it's driving me crazy. I'm trying to put a boundary spell on my room so I don't have to hear them talking all the time, but Dr. Saltzman says I'm not allowed to "magically isolate" myself. If you want to complain to him, I wouldn't stop you.

Sorry this letter is so short. I enclosed some sketches to make it up to you.

Love,

Hope

# 

January 19th, 2027

Hope,

Hey, kid. Good to hear from you.

I can tell you're annoyed about the spell, and I did call Ric about it. He and I had a long conversation, and he's pretty firm on it not being okay. I want you to get your space, so he agreed to let you spell it temporarily to muffle the sound when you're studying. I think I agree with his worries about you isolating yourself too much, though.

If the spell to muffle it doesn't work, we can try and figure something else out. Earphones might also work.

I know it's a while out, but what would you like to do for your sixteenth? We can come to town to see you while you're at school, or save it up for a party in the Summer when you come back to New Orleans. Or both. Giving your Aunt Rebekah an excuse to throw you two parties could either be genius or devastating.

Love you too,

Marcel

# 

January 22nd, 2027
Marcel,

The spell is okay. Thanks for talking to Dr. S for me.

I don't really care about my birthday. I'd rather not do anything too big. It doesn't make sense to have a party here since I don't have any friends I want to invite. You don't have to visit if you're busy.

How is the wedding planning going?

Love,

Hope

#

January 28th, 2027

Hope,

Glad to hear the spell is working.

We can just do something small. Aunt Rebekah and I would still like to come and visit, if that's okay. Are you sure there's no one you want to invite? Not the Saltzman girls?

The wedding planning is going okay. We're still talking about the venue at this point. No matter what, we'll make sure it works for you. Do you have any suggestions? I'd like it to be in New Orleans, but Aunt Rebekah is eyeing off some more exotic locations.

Love,

Marcel

#

February 6th, 2027

Hi,

Sorry for the late reply. Things got hectic.

No, I'm sure I don't want to invite anyone to my birthday. I don't really spend much time with Lizzie and Josie anyway, so it's fine. I'd be happy to just to see you and Aunt Rebekah.

I don't think I have any suggestions for wedding destinations. Haven't really given it much thought. Is Aunt Rebekah really that opposed to having it in St. Anne's? Seems kind of poetic to do that. She knows Uncle Kol got married there, right?

Love,

Hope

#

February 11th, 2027

Hope,
Okay, we'll see you in May then. What would you like to do? Is there anything we can bring you from home?

I think Aunt Rebekah is concerned that St. Anne's has a lot of history for our family and it isn't all as positive as Kol and Davina's wedding. Maybe there's a property or a section of land just out of the city that she'll like.

Love,
Marcel
#

February 18th, 2027

Marcel,

I'm happy to do something quiet for my birthday. I'll probably have exams, but I can do a dinner or maybe a weekend somewhere. Can you bring me some of Dad's paints from his studio?

Maybe you and Aunt Rebekah can get married at the compound? It's nice when it's decorated.

Love,
Hope
#

February 24th, 2027

Hope,

I talked to Aunt Rebekah, and she suggested we find a bed 'n breakfast in Georgia for the weekend. Your birthday's on the Sunday, so that way we can spend most of together before we drive you back to school on Sunday night.

I'll bring the paints. I can post them too, if you want, but there's always the risk of them being lost on the way.

I mentioned the compound to Aunt Rebekah. She didn't say as much, but I think she doesn't want to get married where your mom and Jackson did. It's a bit sensitive and I'd rather not push.

Love,
Marcel
#

March 2nd, 2027

Marcel,

That sounds perfect. Just let me know when you need me to be ready to go.

I'd prefer if you brought the paints. I don't know what I'd do if they got lost in the mail.

I guess it makes sense she wouldn't want to get married there. Is there nowhere in the city we don't
March 15th, 2027

Hey kid,

Sorry for the late reply. I've been figuring some things out.

It looks like it might be just you and me for the birthday trip. Aunt Rebekah says sorry, but she can't quite make it. I don't want to speak for her, so you might want to call her up yourself. I'm always happy to talk on the phone, too, but the letters are fine if you want to keep doing it this way.

I will definitely bring the paints for you. Is there anything else I can bring for you?

And yes, you're right. There's nowhere in New Orleans we don't have memories of. I think that might be the problem.

Love,

Marcel

March 19th, 2027

Marcel,

I talked to Aunt Rebekah, and she said you guys postponed the wedding? She said you aren't planning it anymore but she wouldn't say why. Is this all about the venue?

No, I don't think I need anything else from the house. I'll let you know if I think of anything.

Love,

Hope

March 26th, 2027

Hope,

No, it's not all about the venue. We're taking a little break for now, but I don't want you to worry. Whatever happens, everything's always going to be good between us. We love you very much and would never let any of our problems affect you.

Please don't worry about this. Tell me more about what's happening at school?

Love,

Marcel
March 30th, 2027

Marcel,

You're my family. You can't tell me not to worry. What problems are you talking about? I'm not a kid anymore, so you can tell me the truth.

School is normal. I'm getting straight A's again, which is making up for the shit grades I had when school first went back. I think they're going easy on me with marking because I'm an orphan and I don't think I have a problem with that.

Love,

Hope

#

April 5th, 2027

Hope,

Aunt Rebekah and I have a lot of differences. We love each other very much, but it's always been complicated. Even if we don't get through this break, we'll still care about each other, and we'll still care about you.

I think as long as you need extra consideration from your teachers, that's fine. Grief will take time to ease. But I don't want you to take advantage of their kindness and I hope you're applying yourself as much as you can be. School shouldn't take over your life, but it's a good time to work on your self-discipline. This is bigger than grades.

Love,

Marcel

#

April 10th, 2027

Marcel,

What kinds of differences do you guys have? I talked to Aunt Freya and she said Aunt Rebekah is thinking of leaving New Orleans for a while. Is that what's happening? Do you not want to go with her?

Yeah, I'm still working hard. I think they'll stop being so careful with me next year, so I have to work in preparation to keep my grades up when they bring the hammer down.

Love,

Hope

#

April 14th, 2027
Hope,

Aunt Rebekah is happy to stay in New Orleans. She's leaving because we're taking a break, not the other way around. And I don't really want to go anywhere, no. I have a couple projects going on here.

I'm glad to hear you're going to focus on your grades. Have you been spending most of your time in your room still?

Love,

Marcel

#

April 21st 2027

Marcel,

What projects do you have going on?

I do a lot in my room, but I get out a lot of nights and turn wolf in the woods. It helps me relax when there's too much going on in my head.

Love,

Hope

#

April 26th, 2027

Hope,

I've been doing this and that. I'll let you know more when I see you in a few days.

I'm glad you have space to wolf out, but I meant getting out of your room to speak to other people. Which you'll do with me in a few days. I probably won't get your next letter until I come back, so don't worry about sending it 'till after I've left.

See you soon,

Marcel

Chapter End Notes

aaand that leads directly into the sequel in the works ;) and tbh i was desperate to write hope and marcel actually communicating bc hayley and klaus were so shit at it and writing their POVs was frustrating, like ... jfc just join Whatsapp and shut up, you know?

thank you thank you THANK YOU all for your support! your reviews all mean the world to me <3 i definitely don't read them at 3am in the middle of writerly breakdowns
to remind myself that sometimes i can write decent things, not at all (yes, yes i do)

the marcel-centric sequel might be a few weeks in coming, but it is on its way and hoo boy it might be even worse than this, especially as i toy with maybe venturing into post-legacies season 1 finale territory because THAT ripped my heart out. hope to see you all again soon!

(if you want to yell at me about this, find me on tumblr @bikaelsons)

xoxo

End Notes

reviews make the next chapter come faster!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!