

The Highs and Lows

Maggie's World

Though Maggie hadn't been spending much time in the furniture shop lately, she apparently had no need to worry that business might be suffering. At least that was one thing she didn't have to think about. Holly had called her earlier in the day in an absolute panic. Furniture had been selling left and right, she had five deliveries to make, and the showroom was full of people. Maggie came in as fast as she could to help. She knew that she probably needed a break from obsessing over her lunch with Reed Hackman.

At almost four in the afternoon, foot traffic was still heavy. She'd been waiting on one couple who had just moved to the area for the last thirty minutes. The time drain hurt her ability to serve the others milling about, but the couple bought three pieces, so it was likely worth it. Holly helped as much as she could. The girl, whose Goth lifestyle was only partly concealed by her more formal business dress, was not a salesman by any stretch.

Maggie stood in the center of the showroom trying to gauge if any of the six other customers in the store needed help. The circular layout of the sections made spotting people easy, despite some visual obstacles such as high dressers and television cabinets. The dark-haired woman decided that a couple in the bedroom section appeared to need assistance, so she moved to their area. She barely noticed the ding from the doorway as another person came into the store. Somewhere in the back of her mind she hoped that whoever it was, they were just a looker.

After a moment's conversation, Maggie could tell that the bedroom people were too undecided to buy anything, though they were still good prospects. She offered some information on the piece in which they seemed most interested, then left them with an offer of any further help that they might need. She'd probably never see them again, but if her pieces held up when compared to others, and money wasn't a big problem, she might.

Returning to the center of the showroom, Maggie paused momentarily upon seeing the new entrant to the store. The man wasn't a buyer, but she had as mixed feelings about talking to him than if he was someone who would take up the rest of the night picking out a hundred dollar night stand.

Reed Hackman, dressed in his usual casual slacks and unmatched sports coat, looked like a lost puppy in the middle of her store. Despite her usual turmoil, she still couldn't stop smiling about their pleasant lunch earlier in the day.

"Reed, how are you?" she asked, advancing on him.

He put out his hand, and she looked at it hesitantly. Shaking hands felt a little too formal. Nonetheless, she stopped with just enough space between them to shake it. "Fine. Good to see you again."

"It is," she said, then paused. When he didn't immediately continue with more information about why he was here, she motioned to the furniture nearest them. "Do you need something for your house?"

Reed's crystal green eyes breezed over a few pieces. "I need a lot, but I couldn't afford any of this," he said.

Maggie leaned in a little and lowered her voice. "Don't tell anyone, but I might make you a deal."

"I bet you would," Reed said, then cleared his throat. "But I'm here on official business again, unfortunately. I don't suppose your father is around?"

"Uh, no," Maggie said, glancing around as if the man might show up simply at the thought of him. "He doesn't stop in here too often. Too girly."

Reed laughed. "I think it's nice." They exchanged another silent smile. "I have some more questions about David Willings. Do you think you can help me?"

"Marco? I can try, but I didn't know him all that well." Maggie didn't feel like she was lying, exactly, as she'd made it a point not to know Marco Breaux.

"Do you know how old he was? Any chance your father made a copy of his driver's license or anything?"

Maggie shook her head. "He looked like he was about thirty, but he looked the same from the day I met him. He was probably older."

"Did your father provide him with healthcare?" Reed asked.

Given the horrid state of healthcare and health insurance, Maggie was glad that the Family didn't need to worry about that aspect of modern society. "No, all of Drake's employees are independent contractors and he doesn't have any health insurance. He probably should, but my father can be hard headed sometimes."

"I'm sure. Most fathers are. Did you ever meet any relatives of Willings?"

Maggie thought for a moment. All members of the Family considered themselves as a cohesive unit. Many of their true "blood relatives" were long dead. As far as she knew, that was the case with Marco. "Not that I recall. We only worked together on the rare occasion, and I avoided him and my father socially at all costs."

"Your father can't be that bad," Reed said.

"You don't know my father. I'm going to grow into an old, lonely maid because of him. Trust me."

Reed smiled and seemed to size her up again. "Well, if you think of any other personal information about Willings, or run across anything in your records, please let me know. Any information about him would be helpful."

"I'll let you know if I find something else. I'll ask my father the next time I see him," Maggie said.

A pop song softly emanated from Reed's belt, slowly building until the Cops theme played loudly for everyone in the store to hear. The officer pulled the phone out of its case and chuckled. "I've really got to change that. Excuse me," he said, then turned his attention to the phone. "Hackman."

Maggie turned back to the showroom floor while he talked. Only one couple remained, and Holly seemed to be handling them well. They were looking at a bed frame carved out of a solid piece of oak. Like many of her pieces, it had come from Russia, one of her father's favorite destinations. An artisan there had carved it, and had been paid a month's wages by her. It would likely cost the couple a month's wages in American dollars to buy it.

Reed's phone clicked shut and Maggie focused her attention on him. "Sorry about that," he said. "That was Martin. He's a little needy."

Silence settled between them and quickly became awkward. Maggie glanced around the store at the other customers while Reed stood in front of her silently, as if he didn't want to leave.

Maggie didn't want him to leave either, but she also wasn't sure what she wanted him to say or do. After a moment, she cleared her throat and spoke. "I guess I should attend to my customers, unless you need something else from me, officially."

Shrugging, Reed paused for another long minute, thinking. "Officially, I guess that's all. I don't want to keep you."

"Come by anytime," Maggie said. She wanted to tell him to stay. Instead, she took a step back and gave a little waive. "See you around."

The officer rocked on his heels, then took a step backward. "Yeah, see you around."

Maggie turned and walked toward a pair of lost looking customers, wanting nothing more than to return to Reed.



Maggie had never felt any exhilaration like the one she now experienced. For the first time, she knew what it meant to say that her head was in the clouds. She'd felt that way since leaving Martin's house. Her feet didn't seem to touch the ground when she walked, and she couldn't recall one turn in her drive from her office to her home. Reed's face stayed in the forefront of her mind, and she couldn't make it leave if she wanted to. The day had been nothing less than magical. She'd only been on a couple of real dates in her lifetime, whimsical dreams by her teenage self when she thought she could be normal. After that, she'd had plenty of liaisons with other members of the Family. Some of those had been pleasurable interludes. She even had come to care about a couple of the men she'd hooked up with, like Stephan. No one in her memory had given her the indefinable feeling filling her heart and mind now. Though she wasn't completely sure of the definition, Maggie thought she might be happy.

Not being one to deceive herself, even in the most delirious of states, she knew the feeling wouldn't last long. Pulling into the front drive at the manor, the young woman felt a deep, gut kick loss upon seeing cars parked haphazardly along the drive. It appeared that a meeting of the Family had been called. Since she'd not known of it, something had to be horribly wrong. Her father had a lot of flaws, but he was a planner for the most part.

Inside the house, the front entryway was dark and empty, and there were no signs of the fifty or so people she knew to be there. As she approached the great room, Maggie could hear a low murmur that told her that she had not missed the meeting just yet. If it was over, everyone would be leaving. If it was ongoing, there would be no voices save her father's booming tones.

The usual suspects comprised the crowd in the room. The Family had been steadily growing in recent years, and now filled their meeting place to capacity. Mostly young men and women stood side by side dressed in a variety of fashions and tastes. Many shifted on their feet in anticipation of what their fearful leader might be set to say, wondering if a life changing revelation might be afoot.

The room itself was not prepared as it would have been for a planned meeting. The wall sconces hung in their normal positions with ruted candles filling their bottoms. The overhead florescent lights blasted artificial illumination on the crowd instead, eliminating the usually eerie effect of flickering shadows. Somehow with the lighting effects, the room felt much more sinister than normal. The air hung heavy in the room, blunting the quiet whispers of the occupants to an almost inaudible hiss.

Maggie worked through the crowd and stopped near the front of the raised podium. Normally, she would be expected to stand behind her father on the little stage, his lapdog. For this meeting, she didn't want to be in that position, as if she knew and supported whatever he planned to do.

Complete silence fell over the hall when the side door opened and Warin Drake emerged. As he mounted the dais, several Family members closest to the front gasped in shock. When he stopped in the middle so that Maggie could fully see him, she understood why. She also knew that her gut feeling had been right, and something horrible was about to take place.

Warin Drake held up his hand, letting the severed head that he grasped by the hair hang like a grotesque lantern. The patriarch's face twisted into a rigid mask of rage, his eyes on fire behind his slitted lids.

"Ronald Jeremiah has brought hell upon himself," he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. "He has taken from us one of our most valued Family members, and for that, there can be no mercy."

Staring at the head, Maggie's mind finally made the connection of who the deceased had been. His face was a blank, pale slate, white from loss of blood and already turning putrid. Despite the decomposition, she could see that it had belonged to an older Family member named Jon Cambridge. He was only a few people down the list of her father's confidants, and someone with a lineage that went back to when the world was no bigger than Europe for most.

"Jeremiah has done this without the knowledge of who and what we are." Drake lowered the head to his side, making no attempt to step away and hide it behind the podium. "He thinks he's dealing with a group of petty criminals and drug dealers, like the legions he commands."

A snicker of laughter rolled through the room.

"We are so much more." Drake let the head fall to the floor with a thud. It tumbled forward, mercifully concealing Cambridge's face. "We are the children of the night. We are masters of disguise and masters of all men."

The crowd rumbled its approval.

"Our kind has existed since the dawn of time without bother from or need of men like Jeremiah. And we have never allowed such men to dictate how we live. Vampires have lived how they have wanted forever, and we will not let an overblown greaser compromise our existence now."

Drake stood before his flock silent for several moments, content to let his message sink into their brains. Maggie had always been amazed at his oratory skills. Hundreds of years of practice had apparently paid off for him. She had never seen even the slightest hint of dissent in the Family since she'd been involved. Most everyone now nodded their approval of his comments.

"I will be dealing with Jeremiah personally. What I need from all of you is vigilance. We must protect each other from his henchmen, while at the same time continuing to be discreet and careful not to disclose our presence. We enjoy a charmed life in New Orleans, and I have no plans to move. The wrong kind of attention could change that, however."

A young Family member, not yet at his peak of development, stepped forward, disrupting those around him. "Make Jeremiah pay," he yelled, a fist raised.

Drake smiled like a lion after a catch. “He will pay with his life and more,” he said, his voice forceful and confident. “Jeremiah has been a thorn in our side for entirely too long. He’ll be eliminated for his transgression, and we’ll be all the better for it.” The leader held up his hands as if he were granting mass absolution. “Heed my warnings, but go about your business. If you encounter any of The Company men, let them know with whom they are dealing.”

With their father’s blessing, the flock disbursed with quiet orderliness. Maggie watched them leave down to the last, wondering what tragedies would be visited on the city in the night. Giving vampires an almost blank check to kill—even an enemy—could be a complete disaster. There was something about the taste of blood that made a night creature want for more, and stop at nothing to get it.

After everyone was gone, Drake turned his attention to his daughter. “You don’t look happy, Magnolia.”

Trying to relax the grim expression that she knew made her lips tighten into ugly white lines, Maggie shook her head. “That is what you would expect. I don’t like talk of murder.”

Drake stepped off the stage, coming down to her level. “This isn’t murder, it’s self defense. If we don’t stop Jeremiah, more of the Family will be killed. When dead bodies make it into the hands of authority, the risk goes up for us all. You know that.”

“I do, but I’m afraid this will get out of control,” she said.

Laughing, Drake stepped to within a foot of her and put a hand on her shoulder. “Maggie, I appreciate that you would like to keep this world an understandable place, but I’ve been around enough to know that it’s not. Sometimes a little chaos is good.”

The young woman shook her head. “So because you’re a few hundred years old and bored, we’re going to have a war with a drug cartel?”

“There will be no war. A few skirmishes, maybe, but that’s all. It will be over before you know it. Then you can play shop keeper again, and I’ll be a real estate man, and you can have your normal life for a while.”

Not liking to think that she hated anyone, Maggie turned away from Drake and moved toward the hallway leading deeper into the house and to her bedroom. She didn’t need to hear him make fun of her dreams to know that they were far fetched. Having any goals at all made her life worth living sometimes.

“Maggie. We’ll do what’s got to be done and I’ll need your help,” Drake called to her.

“I know,” she whispered as the darkness of the hallway consumed her.



“I’ve been assigned to a Jeremiah patrol,” Stephan said, looking through the smoke to Maggie.

She shut the incinerator door and stepped back from the warming surface, wary of the hot metal surrounding the chamber. The small cedar block walls of the encompassing building provided barely enough room to accommodate two people and a body, and allowed no independent light. A small window into the fire box cast an orange glow on them that felt more like condemnation than light.

Flames fully engulfed Jon’s body. She couldn’t see it, but she knew that his form would soon be turning to a fine dust, unidentifiable to humans. In a matter of minutes, it would be like this man who had lived hundreds of years never existed. The irony of the vampire life would have amused her if it often wasn’t so tragic.

“Be careful while you’re out hunting. They’ll be hunting you, too,” she responded.

“What is Drake making you do?”

Maggie shrugged. She’d been trying not to think about it. “I don’t know yet. I’m sure it will be detestable. Whatever it is, I’ve got much better things to do.”

“Like what?” Stephan asked, chuckling. “Stalking your little cop?”

Because her mind was occupied with dread, she hadn’t spent much time thinking about Reed. The mention of him, though, brought back the elated, joyful hope that she’d been feeling only a few hours before. Instead of dreading what vile deeds she’d be doing with her father, she wished she was simply dreaming about the forbidden things she shouldn’t do with Reed, but probably would.

“Holy shit,” Stephan said, moving closer to her in the cramped room. “I can’t really tell, but I think you’re blushing. Did you and the cop do the nasty?”

Maggie shook her head and chuffed Stephan on the shoulder, pushing him away. “No, asshole, but we have progressed a bit farther than stalking. We kind of went on a date.”

“Kind of? There are no kind of dates. I can’t believe you.”

“You’re always telling me that I should get out more,” she said.

Stephan held up his hands. “I meant with me.”

Maggie looked into the fire chamber again. The flames were dying down and the body’s mass disintegrating. Jon was almost gone. She turned away from the sight and took the two steps to the outer door. When they were outside, she turned back to Stephan.

“I’m sure it won’t last and you’ll have me back again. Don’t worry,” she said.

Trying to contort his face into an angry scowl, Stephan remained silent as they walked toward the manor. After a few moments, a crooked smile took over his lips. “I can’t believe you, but you go for it.”