Sundown Girls

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Sundown Girls

by holeybubushka

Summary

At the height of the Great Depression, Hollywood heiresses Hannah and Beth Washington encounter a mysterious and enticing band of murderous female vampires.

Notes

Given that the 1930's were not exactly an enlightened time, be aware that there will be blatantly homophobic language throughout this story, including use of the world "queer" as an insult, so if that sort of thing upsets you, I would advise discretion.
I Wished on the Moon

Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 1935 song of the same name by Dorothy Parker.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

October 1935

Beth likes movies. Especially the creepy ones with monsters and wolf men and the frightened hero at his wit’s end in the dark, desperately trying to survive. Every month she and Sam go down to the picture show and spend the evening watching beautiful people on fantastical adventures. She likes watching Sam react as much as she likes watching the movies themselves. Sam doesn’t hide anything, and her reactions to scary scenes and shocking twists are always big and wonderful. Tonight they sat in the balcony, Hannah by their side, as they watched the premiere of Curse of the Vampyr, her father’s latest feature film. Sam, Beth knows, doesn’t like scary movies, but when she asks her coming out of the theater what she thought she beams.

“Oh, it was aces!” she tells her. “It was real scary, but I didn’t mind too much this time. Going to the picture show with you is always a nice treat.”

Beth personally thought the movie was silly, but if Sam liked it, maybe she should change her tune. She’s about to say something else when a servant ushers them both into the back of a town car and they’re driven to the Washington Estate for the gala. It’s a big, fancy event, with such shameless displays of opulence that you can almost forget about the ever-growing bread lines just outside the blissful haze of Hollywood. As they enter the mansion Beth scans the crowd. She sees Hannah and Mike by the buffet, Mike showing her off to a small crowd of friends. Her parents are right in the center of the party, where they always seem to be, Bob getting lauded and Melinda flashing a winning smile at the crowd. Hollywood’s favorite sweethearts.

She scans the crowd again. No Josh. Beth curses inwardly. She guesses her father told folks Josh is dreadful ill again, but she knows where her brother really is.

“Sammy!” calls a familiar voice. “Snazzy party, eh? Come take my arm!”

Beth and Sam look up to see a scrawny boy in a black tuxedo making his way over to them, a thin glass of champagne in one pale hand.

“Johnny, there you are!” Sam half-scoots. “I was looking for you!”

John takes Sam’s arm and nods at Beth, grinning.

“Some party, eh Bethany?”

“Please, just call me Beth,” she tells him for what must be the hundredth time.

John nods, still grinning like an idiot. Sam smiles apologetically.
“Think we’re gonna go chat with Mike and Hannah for a spell,” John says. “You coming, Bethany?”

“I…no, thank you. I’m quite alright.”

Sam frowns.

“You sure, honey?”

“Yes,” Beth says. “I just need some time to think is all. I’ll see you two over there in a minute.”

Sam and John head on, making their way through the crowd and Beth retreats to a corner by the stairs. She’s none too fond of John, though she can’t figure out why. Maybe it’s the way he smiles like he knows everything, or the way he blithely ignores everything she says. Maybe he’s just too happy. No one should be too cheery in times like these, anyway.

She looks over at the buffet table and watches her big sister soak up all the attention, giggling as Mike playfully spins her around. She starts to chat with Sam while Mike gives John a playful little shove and starts nattering on about something or another. What Beth wouldn’t give to be Hannah for a day. Popular, spoiled, showered in affection. Her parents never blaming her for Josh’s latest mishap or asking why she doesn’t have a boy of her own yet.

Then again, if she were Hannah she’d probably have to kiss Mike, so maybe it’s not worth it after all.

“Beth!”

Speak of the devil, Beth thinks. Hannah walks over to her, her face as pretty and made up as a china doll. Her dress is a pretty shade of purple, simple and conservative, but striking. Beth doesn’t know why a girl who looks exactly like her can be so much more beautiful.

“Beth, what are you doing moping around here by yourself? Come talk with us!”

“Maybe later.”

“Aw, Beth,” Hannah says, her face softening. “Did something happen?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Of course you’re not fine. I’m your sister, I can tell. I have twin mind reading powers, like in Tale of the Twins.”

Beth saw that film with Sam last year. It was her father’s favorite to make, but definitely not his best work, at least in her opinion. But ever since he started working on it Hannah just loved to reference the psychic twins and claim she and Beth were the same.

“I’m just a little tired, is all.”

Hannah looks unconvinced.

“It’s Johnny, isn’t it?”

Beth doesn’t answer.

“I know you don’t like him, but I think he’s a good man,” Hannah says. “He can provide for Sammy, and that’s all a girl can want, right?”
Beth shrugs. Hannah squeezes her hand.

“Don’t worry, Beth. We’ll find you a swell guy soon enough, and he’ll take real good care of you, and you’ll finally get why we’re so dizzy for our men!” She laughs. Beth’s about to reply when Mike calls Hannah back over. Hannah heads in his direction, flashing Beth an apologetic smile on her way.

She flags down a servant and grabs a glass of champagne, feeling the way it sizzles down her throat. Thank God prohibition is over, or she wouldn’t be sure how she’d ever manage to put up with her family. She downs it in one gulp and is about to grab another when she hears her father call out to the party.

“Ladies and gentlemen, if I may introduce our film’s key sponsor, the exquisite heiress of the Rosencrantz family, miss Cassandra Rosencrantz.”

Beth looks up and feels her heart skip a beat. Standing in the center of the room is the most beautiful woman she has ever seen. Tall and elegant, with a flowing black dress and long, silky hair the color of smoked wood. She watches as the woman and two girls at her heels make their way through the crowd, not stopping to banter or chat with anybody and heading straight for—

Her?

Beth freezes, suddenly feeling very silly in her red dress and hastily-curled hair. She doesn’t know what to do with the glass, and it ends up hanging awkwardly aside as the heiress approaches. Beth can see now that Cassandra’s eyes are the darkest shade of blue she’s ever seen. Like tiny fragments of the ocean at night. Beth swallows nervously.

“You don’t seem to be enjoying yourself, my dear,” Cassandra says, her voice deep and clear.

“I—oh, it’s quite alright, just tired after a long day is all,” Beth stammers. Cassandra smiles warmly.

“You look lovely, honey. I just adore your dress. Mind telling me your name?”


“Washington? Goodness, then it is you!” Cassandra exclaims. “Why, Mr. Washington told me he had a daughter. You’re just who I was hoping to find.”

Beth’s heart sinks.

“Oh,” she says. “I think he meant my sister. There’s two of us, see. She’s over there.” Cassandra follows her pointing hand to where Hannah stands with Mike. Beth realizes that she and the others are staring at her, wearing a mixture of curiosity and jealousy.

Cassandra smiles.

“I’m not looking for Hannah, dear. I’m looking for you.”

Beth thinks her heart might have stopped for a second.

“Me? Why?”

“Well, to be entirely honest,” Cassandra says, before leaning in and whispering conspiratorially: “you’re the only one in this party who isn’t a bore.” Beth giggles. Cass leans back. “Besides, I hate to see such a lovely girl look so lonely and sad. Why don’t you tell me something about yourself,
honey?”

“Ah, well, I suppose I like to read and to collect things. When Hannah and I were small, we would go to the park and try to catch fireflies in jars.”

Cassandra laughs.

“It sounds like you were an adventurous little girl!”

“I was,” Beth sighs. “Now I’m just supposed to stay around the house and look after my siblings. If I want an adventure, I read one instead.”

Cassandra frowns.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, my dear.” She leans in again and whispers in her ear. “Well, if you ever want to escape for a spell and go on an adventure with me and my girls here—” she gestures to the girls flanking her. “Feel free to come chat with me.”

Beth’s eyes widen.

“Really? You would do that?”

“Oh of course! I hate to see bright young people such as yourself so lonely and bored—”

“Miss Cassandra,” Bob Washington interrupts, moving through the crowd to reach them. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I thought I might introduce you to my other daughter and her man, Michael Munroe. Played the lead in *Curse of the Vampyr*. He’s an up-and-coming star here in Tinseltown, you know!”

Before she can agree or object, Bob takes Cassandra’s arm and begins to pull her away from Beth.

“We’ll have to continue this conversation another time,” Cassandra says to Beth. “Think I could come down here again sometime?”

“Wha—yes, of course!” Beth says. “You can come visit any time you like!”

Cassandra smiles.

“I’ll remember that. I’ll be sure to come and visit you very, very soon.”

Beth hands the scooper two nickels and grabs two cones, one chocolate, one strawberry. She hands Sam the strawberry cone and they head to the back of the parlor, to their usual booth. The table is discolored and flecked with ice cream stains, and the seats are worn and torn in places, off-white stuffing peeking out.

It’s dirty, decrepit and ugly, far cry from the finery Beth is used to in her own home.

She loves it.

Sam sits down gingerly across from her, her plain white skirt ruffling as she moves. She gives her ice cream a few half-hearted licks while Beth watches her. She looks tired. Beth opens her mouth to ask what’s wrong when Sam blurts out “I’m getting married.”

Beth’s stomach drops.
“What?”

“Well, I’m not certain, but I overheard my father talking with Johnny’s folks last night after the party, and, well, you know things aren’t going so well for my family.” Sam stares at her ice cream, watching trickles of pink cream slide onto her hand. “Marrying him could keep my folks out of the bread lines. You know what a big noise Johnny’s daddy is.”

“B-but,” Beth stammers, trying to wrap her head around something that seemed so terribly wrong. “But do you love him?”

Sam shrugs.

“I like him alright.”

Beth gapes at her. Sam’s face hardens.

“Oh don’t you give me that stare, Beth. It’s the Depression. True love won’t fix the holes in our roof.”

“But—”

“Beth, please,” Sam sighs. “Just try to be happy for me. This is every girl’s dream. And when we’re both married women, we can laugh about all this.”

Beth sighs and averts her eyes, looking out the window and the men on the street, dressed in rags and begging with passerby. She can’t imagine Sam out there, even with her house falling apart and her father barely making ends meet.

True love won’t fix the holes in our roof.

“You know, if I were a boy I’d marry you straight away,” Beth says. “I’d make you a doll other guys would kill for. Anything you wanted would be yours.”

Sam laughs and licks at her ice cream.

“What a silly thing to say!”

Beth laughs along with her. Sam’s right. She doesn’t know where that comment came from.

The sun is setting when she gets back to the mansion. Hannah’s away with Mike at some fancy dinner, her father’s at work, and her mother is napping. That leaves—

“Josh?”

She hears something shift upstairs, a soft curse. Beth grumbles and storms upstairs. When she bursts into Josh’s room, she sees him halfway out the window.

“You’re a real crumb at keeping quiet,” she says as she drags him away from the window. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Josh glares at her.

“What’s it to you?”

“Joshua, we’ve spoken to you about this. You can’t go back to that…that place.”
“How do you know that’s where I’m even going?”

“Because you’re even worse at lying than you are at sneaking out,” Beth says. Josh tries to make another run for the window and she grabs him again.

“I am not letting you go back to that battered old clip joint full of greaseballs and queers. You hear me?”

“You don’t have any right to tell me what to do!” Josh snaps at her.

“You think I’m really just gonna let you waltz down to that shack and lay with some fruitcake like you did with—”

“Shut up!” Josh barks. “Like you’re one to talk anyway. I see the way you look at Sam. You’re just as much of a queer as me.”

“How **dare** you—”

“What are you two yelling about?” Melinda calls upstairs. Beth sighs and turns her head to call down.

“Josh is—”

Before she can finish Josh has wriggled free from her grip and is out the window before she can grab him again. She curses under her breath.

“Josh is what, honey?”

“Nothing,” Beth says.

“Well, can you two keep quiet up there? I’m trying to rest.”

Beth sighs again.

“Yes mother.”

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She’s awakened by a loud thud as something downstairs slams, hard, against the expensive marble floor of the foyer. Beth stirs, groggy and confused. She’s about to blame Josh clumsily sneaking in or maybe the family dog knocking something over when she hears her mother scream.

Beth stumbles out of her room and down the hall to the stairs, nearly tripping in the dark at least three times. She hears voices coming from downstairs, not even trying to be discreet.

Women. Three of them, it sounds like. One is cold, clipped and professional. The second is higher-pitched, almost giddy with excitement. The third is deep and clear, like a bell, like—

—Like Cassandra.

“Remember to lift her with your legs, Beverly. We wouldn’t want you hurting yourself.”

“Why can’t I stay and hunt?”

“Don’t talk back to her like that—”
“Frances, dear, let me handle this. Beverly, once we get back to the manor, you can have the first taste of the best wine in the cellars. Deal?”

“Ugh, fine.”

“Excellent. Now go. Frances, with me.”

Beth feels a mix of panic and rage in her and she finds herself bounding down the stairs, ready to fight these women off if need be. She doubts knocking some sense into these wealth-softened ladies will be too difficult.

When she gets down to the foyer, her stomach twists into a knot. The smell of blood is overpowering; she wants so badly to throw up. Her vision blurs as her head spins with nausea and it takes her a minute to see the bright splash of red in the middle of the room.

And the woman lying in it.

“MOM!”

Cassandra looks up, a faint smile on her bloody face. The two other girls she recognizes from the party. The taller one stands by Cassandra’s side, a cold look on her face. The shorter is dragging Melinda’s bloodstained body toward the doorway, smirking up at her.

“Well. Good evening, little girl.”

Beth rushes at the girl, screaming wordlessly, enraged threats when Cassandra grabs her arm and effortlessly flings her across the room. The blood-stained gold and marble of the walls and floor spin and blur as she flies through the air and lands with a crack on the floor near the kitchen door. The wind rushes out of her and she gasps, struggling dazedly to her feet. The world swirls again and she bends over, vomiting in between her bare feet. One of the women makes a noise of disgust. Beth stumble for the door to the kitchen and flings it open, listening to the sound of too-fast feet on marble as the women catch up to her. Beth dives behind the counter, fumbling through the drawers for a knife while the women approach. Beth curls up small in a shady corner, fighting back tears.

This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening.

When the women round the corner of the counter, she dives past them, swinging wildly with the knife. She gets an elbow to the small of her back for her trouble, and slams onto the ground with a whimper. The knife skitters across the floor. The women hang over her, blocking out the light overhead. Cassandra pins Beth down and laughs into Beth’s neck. Beth squeezes her eyes shut and wonders if it will be quick.

“Wait,” the other woman, Frances, says. “Do you hear that?”

The room goes quiet and then Beth hears it too: a quiet intake of breath and nervous footsteps, just a few feet away.

Hannah. The racket must have woken her up.

“No,” Beth manages. Every breath feels like a knife in her chest. “Hannah, go! RUN!”

Hannah freezes where she stands in the doorway to the kitchen, still in her childish nightgown, glasses askew. The color drains from her face as Frances stands and approaches her, grabbing her and pinning her effortlessly against the wall. Beth lets out a pained cry and slams her fist, over and over, against Cassandra’s unflinching arms. Cassandra chuckles.
“My, my, my. What a dilemma, don’t you think, Frances? Which one’s neck do we break open first? I don’t know whose agony will be more fun to watch.”

“Let…let her go…please…” Beth gasps.

“Who? Your spoiled sister? That woman-child leeches off of everyone, including you. Ripping out her throat would be doing the world a favor.”

Hannah lets out a cry of fear and pain. Frances hisses at her until she quiets.

“I didn’t come here for her, you know,” Cassandra whispers into Beth’s ear. “I came here for you.”

“W-why…? Why are you doing this?”

“I promised you an adventure, didn’t I?” Cassandra hisses. “I’m a woman of my word, my dear.”

And she bites down hard on Beth’s neck.

The white hot pain lasts only a split second before the shock sets in. Beth feels something hot and sticky bubbling down her neck and onto her nightgown. She flails uselessly as Cassandra turns her over, caressing her face with a soft, cold hand. Beth feels something stir inside of her as shame and fear well up in equal measure.

That’s why. She’s being punished. Her whole family is being punished because she’s sick too.

Josh was right.

Cassandra bites down on her own hand and places it over Beth’s mouth, laughing when another dark coil of shame courses through Beth’s heart. The woman’s blood is thick and cold, and it slides down her throat like gelatin. Beth gags but can’t throw it up. Cassandra smirks and stands. Her form blurs and twists as she moves, becoming a wolf, a snake, a huge wild cat as Beth’s vision whirls and melds and bright colors pop in her face. An awful heat grips her body, burning up into her brain. She tries to move, but her body feels like it’s made of worms, squirming and wriggling apart from itself. The world fades in and out and she drags herself toward the monsters menacing Hannah, all three women shifting and twisting in Beth’s hazy vision. She grabs onto something—a leg? A branch? And calls out in a voice that’s not her own but echoes deep inside her. Has she always sounded this small? This scared?

“There’s a laugh like the howl of some great beast. Cassandra reforms in her vision, too big and bright as everything else starts to fade. Her fever is starting to dissipate, leaving a worse cold than she’s ever known behind.

“You still love her? After all you’ve suffered while she thrived?”

“Y-yes. A-always…”

There’s a pause. Cassandra smirks.

“That’s cute.”

She descends upon Hannah and tears a hole in her throat with her teeth. Scarlet spills everywhere as Hannah gargles and gasps. Cassandra laughs and makes a new cut in her own hand, lowering it toward the twitching girl.
The blood is about to hit her lips when Beth blacks out.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! So here's something kinda big. Friend and I are working on this fun little ditty, and we'll see where it goes! We've been working on this collaboration for a while, and we're glad to finally bring it to you. Stay tuned for the next chapter written by my lovely compatriot, holeybubushka!
What's the reason (I ain't pleasing you)

Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 1935 song of the same name by Guy Lombardo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mike always wanted the whole world to be watching him.

Just not like this.

His agent has been on the blower all day, taking calls from the press demanding answers about the Washington family’s mysterious disappearance. Every newsstand on every corner has a picture of Bob’s face, accompanied by breathless speculation about the investigation.

It’s all anyone in this town is talking about.

“What I’m supposed to say?” Mike hissed at Vince, his agent, earlier in the day. “People are going nuts around here.”

“You don’t say nuthin’ ok? Leave the talking to me. The studio doesn’t want to ruin opening weekend.”

“The opening weekend? Who cares about opening weekend? Hannah is missing.”

“Easy there Mike. Look, let me handle this. This is one situation that needs a little finesse. Trust me; you wouldn’t even believe some of the baloney that’s being said.”

“Like what?”

Vince snorts. “Like how this is Bob’s novel way of promoting the picture. ‘

Mike’s feels a surge of hot anger race through him. Who could ever think such a thing? If someone said that to his face he’d give them a whack right in the kisser.

“Who the hell would ever think Bob would do something like that?”

“Hey now, kid, no need to lose your temper. You pay me to think, remember? So you keep your pretty boy mouth shut and let me handle this.”

Mike had no choice to comply. So he stayed in his hotel, staring at the wall and feeling every single excruciating second tick by. Sleep offered no respite, either. He couldn’t rest. Resting felt like a betrayal, somehow, and if he’s being honest, he’s already betrayed Hannah enough already.

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It seems like nobody else wanted to be alone, either, since Vince rang him in the late afternoon and told him the whole production crew were gathering at his friend George’s house in the evening. And while making small talk with a bunch of almost strangers was the last thing he wanted to do, it sure beat pacing around his room like a caged animal.
Most people have gathered around the only radio in the room but a few people nod grimly in Mike’s direction when he enters. They were supposed to be celebrating, but this party feels more like a wake instead.

He spots John and Sam on the other side of the room. Mike almost swoons with relief, taking his hat off and heading straight for them.

“Mike!” Sam cries. For the first time since he’s known her, she throws her arms around him and gives him a quick squeeze. Mike pretends he doesn’t see John’s eyes narrow at the sight. “Isn’t this awful?”

“No kidding,” Mike mumbles as Sam lets him go. She looks a bit sheepish at making a scene.

“What have the coppers said?” John says quietly. Mike doesn’t think he’s ever seen him look so grim.

“They’re telling me squat. They only spoke to me for five minutes. They’re going to interview everyone again tomorrow but who knows?”

Sam lets out a quiet, pained sigh. Mike wonders if he looks as pale and drawn as she does.

“Baby Doll, do you mind getting Mike and I some punch? I think we’re all a little parched.”

“Sure,” Sam says. John waits for her to leave before turning to him and looking at him seriously, brow furrowed with concern.

“Alright give to me straight, Mike. What did the detectives say?”

“It’s serious.” Mike pauses, not sure what he should say. Then again, it would be a relief to finally tell someone the awful truth. “They found…bodies.”

“What?!”

“Keep it down, will ya? Just the two guards, and, uh,” Mike struggles to swallow the hard lump in his throat. “And Mrs Washington.”

“Jeez. But no sign of…of anyone else?”

“No,” Mike says, squeezes his eyes shut, thinking about all the horrible things those brutes could have done to Hannah.

“Well then. Maybe that’s a good thing, pal. Maybe someone is going to make a ransom request. Times are tough and everyone knows Bob has a lotta dough.”

“If they were going to make a ransom request, why did they take Bob as well?”

John doesn’t have response for that; he just goes a shade paler than he already is. Sam returns with the drinks and looks between them suspiciously.

“Everything alright?”

“Sure thing honeybun.”

Sam narrows her eyes at him. “Mike?”

The last thing he wants to do is worry Sam, so he tries to stretch his mouth into what he hopes is
something resembling a smile. He must have failed considering now Sammy looks more worried, not less.

He spots his friend George down the hall who is gesticulating wildly at him. He scrambles away from Sam and John as fast as he can, stomach sinking at how frantic his pal looks.

"Mike," George whispers. He looks sweeter than usual as he takes out a handkerchief and wipes his brow and under his chin “Have the detectives spoken to you?"

"Only once. They’ll probably want round two tomorrow. Why?"

"Why? What are we going to do for an alibi?"

"An alibi? What you mean an alibi?" Mike has to restrain himself from shaking him. “Look, I don’t see the need for us to tell the detectives anything more than we have to. We went out for some hooch after dinner with everyone. No one needs to know anything else.”

"Mike, you know I don’t do well under pressure,” George whines. And Mike believes him. Sweat is beginning to congeal on his forehead again. He takes out his sopping wet handkerchief and wipes himself down while patting his comb-over nervously.

Any gumshoe worth his salt will break George easily.

"Mike, if Mollie finds out I was seeing some other bird…"

"Don’t worry about it, Georgie-boy."

"What about the evidence? Didn't you give that broad you were buttering up a necklace?"

"I said I'd handle it, George.”

Mike tries not to roll his eyes at his friend, but he’s in no mood to be a nice guy. George is being hysterical, as usual. It’s not even like he has anything to worry about. George wasn’t smooth enough to convince some floozy to go home with him.

Mike wishes he could say the same.

"The police shouldn’t be looking at us anyway. Everyone knows who did it."

Mike snaps his attention back to his friend. “What?”

"Come on, you know it’s that fruit Josh. Bob tried to hide it but everyone knew.” George lowers his voice and beckons Mike closer. “You know, a few years back they had to fire some stage boy because one of the crew found him and Josh…” George’s face screws up with distaste. “Old man Washington should have sent him away for good. Those people are sick. Who knows what he’s capable of?”

"You’re right,” and the thought of what sick plan Josh might be carrying out makes his stomach turn. But he can’t let his mind wander down that dark road. Hannah has to be okay.

She has to be.

"That sick son-of-a bitch better hope the coppers get to him first. I’m going to rip him to pieces.”

“Yeah well, join the club,” George mutters, starting to move away from Mike. His girlfriend is calling him over; and when Mike strains his ears he hears her nattering on about Washington family
update in the news.

Practically the entire party is listening to the radio. Like vultures, hungry for scraps.

It’s sickening.

Suddenly, the party doesn’t feel so swell anymore. He feels hot, like the room is closing in on him and he can’t breathe.

None of these people care. Not really. It’s game to them, a bit gossip. His tragedy is their sport.

He makes a beeline for the only other person he knows is as worried as he is. Sam is still with John; sitting in the corner looking like she’s not listening to a word he’s saying.

“Sam, I can’t be here anymore. I can’t.”

“I know,” Sam says, glowering at the group of people gossiping around the radio.

“But I,” and he tries to swallow, but his throat is dry. Oh, to hell to with it. He grabs Sam and pulls her in for a tight hug.

“I’m going to find her, Sam,” he whispers into her neck. “I’m going to find Hannah and the others. I’m going to bring them back safe and sound. You wait.”

Sam looks like she is holding back tears when he releases her. John is practically glaring at him, but what he thinks doesn’t matter. Nothing matters anymore.

Except Hannah.

There’s a group of reporters out the front of the party, meaning one of these greaseballs must have tipped them off. Mike doesn’t have the patience to deal with them, so heads to George’s room and starts to climb out the window…

…and promptly falls straight on his face.

“Holy jumping catfish,” he groans.

The grass on George’s backyard is damp and sticks to his face. It’s probably all over his suit too.

Just swell.

He drags his sorry ass up and lights a cigarette. His head is staring to throb and his throat is dry as he tries to blink back tears that threaten to dribble down his face.

God, he doesn’t need this. This was supposed to be the happiest time of this life.

Mike had it all figured out, see. He was going to be a movie star. He just starred in his first feature film. He was signed on to do another. His biggest patron was one of the most popular directors in Hollywood. He was dating his daughter who was wild about him. They were going to get married in the fall.

He was on the cusp of greatness. And now everything he worked for, everything he strived for, everything he loved had slipped through his fingers in the course of one damn night.

And as much as he tried, he couldn’t shake the feeling of guilt that clung to him like a shroud. He shouldn’t have taken up George’s offer to sneak out for some booze after dinner with Hannah and
some of their mutual friends last night. He should have gone home. Then again, he just starred in his first movie. Surely no one expected him to have a quiet night in after starring in his first movie.

Right?

He takes a deep drag of the cigarette, enjoying the burning sensation he feels at the back of his throat. It hurts just thinking about Hannah. She looked radiant when she was out with him yesterday. She was wearing an elegant, understated gown and her face was made up real nice. He could tell the other guys were jealous she was on his arm. She was as pretty and sweet as a girl could be.

So why wasn’t she enough?

“Christ,” Mike mumbles. He drops the cigarette and grinds it hard into the pavement.

He’s not going to sit around like some sap and wait for the coppers to do their job.

Starting now, he’s going to be the fella Hannah deserves.

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“Excuse me, sir, have you seen this girl?”

Fifth person he’d asked, fifth blank stare he’d received in return. He’s outside a movie theatre he and Hannah go to all the time. Like a lot of places nowadays it is a bit run down. Mike didn’t mind the grime, his family wasn’t that flash after all. He felt a little self-conscious though about taking a high-class broad like Hannah to a rundown shack of a theatre, where the paint was peeling and the seats squeaked whenever you moved.

But he knew she was the girl for him when she made it clear she didn’t care about any of that.

A man was walking towards him. The cinema was on a busy road but there isn’t a lot of foot traffic at this time of night. Mike waved the gentleman over and held up a picture of Hannah he had taken out from his wallet.

“Sorry to bother you, sir, but have you seen this girl? She comes by here sometimes.”

The man gets out his glasses and peers at the picture. “Pretty girl.”

“Yeah. Have you seen her?”

“I’m afraid not. Sorry son.”

Mike feels his heart sink. “Uh. Well, thanks.”

“Hey mister!”

Three kids, no older than sixteen, approach him. The tallest one with reddish hair and freckles is smiling broadly at him.

“Hey, you look like the guy from that flick we just saw. Curse of the Vampyr or something.”

Just a day ago being recognised gave him a real buzz. It feels hollow now.

“Sure, that was me. Have you seen this girl? Her name is Hannah.”

“Can I have your autograph?”
“No,” Mike growls. “I’m going only going to repeat myself once for you wise guys. Have you seen this girl?”

“I’d remember if her if I saw her. If she were my broad,” another boy pipes up. “I wouldn’t let her outta my sight.”

“She’s a looker. Does she have a sister?” the red headed boy leers.

He laughs along with his friends. Mike thinks about how satisfying it would be to slam his fist against the runt’s jaw.

“Yeah, real funny, now scram before I make you regret it.”

The boys keep laughing and Mike squeezes his fists into a ball and starts to move towards them threateningly. The kids must finally get the message because they suddenly start to run the opposite direction, laughing as they go.

“Like this night could get any better,” Mike thinks, fumbling around in his coat for his cigarettes. Before he finds them he hears a girl giggling right behind him.

“Gee whiz, Frances, isn’t he a handsome one?”

Mike turns and spots two girls who look vaguely familiar standing behind him. One of them is taller, with long dark hair and a stern-looking face. The other is small, pretty, with dark eyes and a mischievous smirk. And Mike hates himself a little when he can’t stop running his eyes over the smaller girl’s frame.

She must catch him because she smirks and raises her eyebrows at him.

“You look like you could use a drink. Fancy joining me and my friend on a little adventure?”

For a split second Mike considers it. It’s been an awful night, and there’s a familiar comfort in falling into the arms of a stranger. And he thinks this girl could be up for it. She’d probably spread her legs for him the second he told her he’s a movie star.

It’s an enticing thought. But he can’t be that guy anymore.

“That’s a neat offer. But I’m a little busy. Have you seen this girl? She’s missing.”

He holds out Hannah’s picture. The taller takes one look at it and her eyes widen.

“Is that…Hannah?”

“W-what? You know Hannah? Have you seen her?”

She looks at him seriously. She has the darkest eyes Mike has ever seen.

“You must be Mike.”

“Yes. How do you…”

“Hannah has told me all about you. She wanted us to find you.”

Mike thinks his heart actually leaps into his throat. He reaches out and grabs the girl’s hand. It’s cool.
“Holy smokes, she’s alive? What are we waiting for? You know where she is?”

“We do. We’ll take you to her Mike. Straight away.”

She turns on her heel and starts to walk quickly away. Mike scampers to keep up.

The smaller girl, who Mike had forgotten about, lets out a frustrated sigh.

“Guess we’ll just have to party when we get home.”

+++ 

They seem to be walking further and further away from the bustling hub of the city. Mike thinks they must’ve walked for blocks already. It’s late, or perhaps very early. The mist hangs heavily over their heads, obscuring the dim, flickering light coming from the lampposts. It’s so cold Mike has to pull his jacket close to his body to keep the chilly air at bay.

It’s almost like he’s waltzed straight back into the *Curse of the Vampyr* set.

At first he tried to keep pace with the two women. That was difficult. They seemed to be moving languidly but at a pace where Mike had to hustle to keep up. But the stranger the situation became, the slower he walked until there was a few feet behind the girls.

“Mike,” the taller one, Frances, looks back at him with a small smile. “Try and keep up.”

“I feel like I’ve walked my legs off. Why didn’t we take a cab?”

“There are barely any cabs this time of night. And it’s easier if we walk. But we have to hurry.”

“Everyone is looking for Hannah. Why didn’t you tell the police where she is?”

The smaller girl, Beverly, snorts. “Like you can trust the police.”

“How she doing? Hannah? We’ve been walking for miles and you gals have barely told me a damn thing.”

“She’s fine. When we left her she was sleeping. But I know she’ll want to see you as soon as she wakes up. So we have to hurry,” Frances says.

Mike frowns. He can’t shake the feeling in his gut that this is off. The girls look familiar; he thinks he may have spotted them at the *Curse of the Vampyr* premier party. But Hannah’s never mentioned them before, and she tells him everything.

They have now walked into a deserted backstreet. There are tall, run-down buildings either side of them but the lights are out and they look abandoned. Faintly, he can hear cars passing by but they are well away from the busy highway.

They’re isolated. And alone.

Mike’s a gentleman, but if these two girls attack him he knows he could take them. But what if they’re leading straight him straight into a trap?

What if they’re leading him straight to the goons who kidnapped Hannah?

Mike stops. The girls keep walking ahead of him.
“Hey,” he calls out. “Look, I’m sorry but we’re not going anywhere until I get some answers. What happened to Hannah? How do you know her? Why didn’t you come find me sooner?”

“Oh Christ, Frances, can’t we just get him already?”

Get him? Mike’s heart begins to pound in his chest. The two girls turn their heads towards him. Through the gloom he sees a bit of light glinting off their fangs….

Wait. Fangs?

On instinct, Mike turns and runs as fast as his shaking legs can take him. Behind him, he hears the pitter-patter of the girls’ feet right behind him.

Right behind him? How can they be so fast?

The girls are right on his heels as he runs away as fast as he can. Ahead of him he can faintly see the lights from the road. But the girls are snapping at his heels.

He can’t outrun them. Oh god, he can’t outrun them.

He makes a snap decision to pivot and head down an alley way. He feels one of the girls reach to grab him, her fingers slipping off his coat when he swiftly changes direction. Dimly he hears one of them laugh, high and cruel, the sound reverberating through the air.

“Oh fuck oh fuck,” Mike pants. He runs down the alleyway. There’s a wire fence at the end of it, and thankfully there are two narrow laneways branching off in two different directions.

“What way. Which fucking way?”

He thinks he hears a growl so he takes off to his left, running faster than he ever has before, dodging and weaving his way through the rubbish and debris left in the alleyway.

There’s another alleyway to his right, so without thinking he starts to run down it. He’s probably heading further away from the road. He looks up, but all he sees is a tall building with nothing within reach for him to climb up.

‘How did I get here? How did the fuck did I get here?’ he thinks.

He hears something being knocked over close by. Too close. He ducks behind a bin and tries to calm his frayed nerves.

He can’t run. They’d catch him. And in any case they probably have Hannah.

Defeating these creatures is the only hope he has of finding her.

“You want this? Huh? You fuck.” Mike mumbles under his breath. He shuts up when he hears footsteps approaching.

“Miiichael? Michael. You stopped running, Michael. Tired already? Funny. Thought you’d have more stamina.”

Mike sucks in a breath and stays very, very still. Stiller than he’s even been in his life.

‘Don’t move,’ he thinks. ‘Don’t fucking move a muscle.’

The creature moves past him, sniffing the air and looking thoughtful. She takes another few steps
away.

Mike tenses. Then -

“Argh,” he lets out a guttural scream and leaps forward, hands arms outstretched to grab the creature who-

Turns and swiftly tosses him onto a wooden palette.

Mike lands with a sickening thump. The palette crumples under his weight as bits of wood cracks and snaps around him.

His side aches. Everything aches. He tries to suck air into his lungs. He rolls onto his back and feels blood oozing down his face from what must be a wound on his forehead. Blindly he reaches for a piece of wood and weakly wraps a palm around it.

Somewhere from above he hears the creature speak.

“I’m to bring you back in one piece for the initiation ceremony. So play nice and maybe this won’t hurt too much.”

“F-f fuck you.”

He forces himself to look up. The creature that calls itself Frances is standing over him, the thrill of the chase writ large on her face. She opens her mouth. Her fangs look sharp.

“Arrogant child.”

Within a second she leaps at him, and Mike squeezes his eyes shut, the sharp piece of wood his only protection.

She’s onto of him but the force of her jump makes the wood sink deep into her chest. She lets out a hideous, inhuman shriek, right in his ear. The sound is still reverberating around his skull when the creature on top of him goes rigid and shrieks again.

Then like a wave crashing over him, she dissolved into mush. A black goo cascades over him seeping and trickling into every orifice.

“What the fuck,” he moans. He wipes the gunk away from his face. It stinks of smoked tar and ash. He retches, prays he hasn’t swallowed any of it.

“What the…”

He snaps his head to the side. The smaller, darker girl is standing over him now, mouth hanging open. Maybe it’s the fear but he thinks she looks genuinely shocked.

“You killed Frances.”

He struggles to breathe. The sludge that used to be the creature is heavy, and it sticks to him like clay. He can’t move.

“You…killed….Frances,” she says again. She cocks her head at him. Smiles.

“Thanks.”

Within a breath she’s on him. He squirms and struggles as she bangs his head against the ground
again and again and again...

He can still hear her joyful laughter as he blacks out.

+++ 

His head aches terribly when he comes to. Like the worst migraine he’s ever had.

Groggily he opens his eyes. He’s cold. He feels like the chilly air has seeped into his bones.

He’s on his side. His face is resting on what feels like slightly wet concrete. He takes a few shallow breathes in, wincing as it hurts a bit. He may have bruised a rib.

But at least he’s breathing.

Those fuckers made a big mistake keeping him alive.

His heart is hammering in his chest but he knows now is the time to be calm. He can’t get out of this unless he’s calm. They’ll be assuming he is panicking. He can’t afford to fall into another trap.

The room is drafty. Even though he’s on the ground he can feel cool air moving around, indicating either a window is open or the room has a very high ceiling.

Cautiously, silently, he moves onto his back. There are four candles, bolted to the wall and spaced evenly apart. It’s the only light in the room. The walls are curved into a circle. He feels like he’s on the basement and the walls and ceilings stretch up high above him.

It feels like a stage. Or maybe an arena in a smallish coliseum.

Whatever it is, it’s a room designed for an audience.

He stays still, sucking in only shallow breaths while he waits for his eyes to adjust to the gloom.

It’s only then that he realises why he’s so cold. His clothes are gone. The only thing he’s wearing is one of those hospital gowns given to patients before surgery. His skin and hair is not damp with sludge but instead water. He’s wet, from top to bottom. When he reaches up to touch his forehead he feels gauze wrapped around his head, covering where his wound should be.

Shame and fear coil within his gut.

Someone has taken great care to prepare him for something.

He stays still for a few moments but he can’t hear anyone else. So he turns on his back and looks frantically around the room. His eyes dart around.

There has to be a door. There has to be.

He spots one on the other side of the room. But his stomach drops to his knees when he sees he’s not alone.

“Oh god,” he mumbles. There’s a person lying, still as a slab of concrete, only a few feet away from him. He peers over and sees-

No. Oh god. No.

“Hannah. NO!”
He scrambles over to her on his hands and knees.

“Oh God. Hannah.”

Her eyes are closed. Her perfect face is unmarked. But she’s not breathing. He can’t see her breathing.

“No, Hannah. No. N-No. Hannah…”

He reaches out a shaking hand and to touch her. Hannah. His Hannah. She’s still his Hannah.

But she’s so cold now.

“Hannah,” he sobs, his voice breaking. Tears are now running hot down his face. He was trying to be quiet. But it doesn’t matter now.

He puts his head on her chest and cradles her body in his arms.

He’s too late. He’s always too late.


“It’s almost like you care.”

“What?” Mike’s head snaps up. He has to blink back a few tears. But there she is. Beth, standing above him, looking down at him with an impassive expression on her face.

“Beth. Beth! I tried to find you. But I was too late. Oh god. Hannah.”

“No. I think you’re right on time for once, Munroe.”

“What?” he can’t think straight. Grief is making his brain foggy. But he knows, deep in his bones, that he and Beth are in danger. “Beth, we have to get out of here. Have you seen an exit?”

Beth sneers at him. Her eyes are cold and still.

“Always thinking about yourself. Typical. You’re a greaseball, Munroe.”

“I don’t…what?”

And just like that, below him, Hannah opens her eyes.

Mike springs back away from her, shuffling backwards along the floor as quickly as he can.

‘I touched her. She felt dead. She was cold as a corpse. How. How?’ he thinks.

Hannah’s retching, making the most horrible sound Mike has ever heard. Like she’s struggling to suck air into her lungs.

Beth is by her side so quickly Mike doesn’t even see her move.


“What the…what the fuck is going on around here?”

“An excellent question, Mr. Munroe.”
His world is suddenly bright. Someone has turned on the lights. He blinks and sees twenty or so women standing above them on a platform. They’re all looking at him, fangs out. He sees the small, dark girl right above him, looking pleased. And next to her is—

The woman from the Washington party. The patron of his film.

Cassandra.

“Now that we’re all here I’d like to welcome everyone to tonight’s second initiation ceremony,” Cassandra’s voice is crisp and even, but Mike can tell that she’s relishing every word.

“Most mortals are doomed to live out their wretched half-lives. But a few lucky girls are chosen to ascend. To become immortal. To become a vampire.”

Cassandra smiles. The girls behind her cheer and chant wildly.

“But this is an honor bestowed only to a few.” The arena goes quiet. Everyone is listening to every word. “Immortal life is what all creatures crave. But there must be a price. And that price is paid in blood.”

The girls cheer again. Mike feels panic course through him.

“Hannah Washington, you have been chosen. But you have to prove to your sisters that you can leave your childish, insipid mortal coil behind. You must show us you can kill.”

“What?” Hannah asks. She's shaking, pale. She looks ready to burst into tears at the slightest provocation.

Mike feels relief wash over him. She still sounds like Hannah. She can’t be a…creature.

“Hannah, it’s going to be alright,” Beth says. “I know what you crave. I felt it too.”

“I can’t….what do you want from me?”

“I gave you life, Hannah.” Cassandra looks Mike straight in the eye. “I want the boy’s blood in return.”

“No!” He’s not sure if it’s him or Hannah who cries out. Mike scrambles away from the twins, as far as he can get.

“Blood begets blood.”

“No,” Hannah’s trembling. She looks at twin. “Beth?”

“You have to, Hannah.”

“And if I don’t?”

Beth glances up to the women above. “Please, Hannah. It’s you or him. Please.”

“How can you ask me to do this?”

“Hannah!” Beth's voice is high, wild. She grabs Hannah by the shoulders and shakes her. “I'm scared and I need you. Please, do this for me. You'll burn if you don't.”

“You wouldn’t be so reluctant if you knew what I know, Hannah. This…boy is like all men. A
lecherous fool.”

“Fuck you,” Mike snarls at Cassandra. “Hannah. Don’t listen to her. I love you.”

“Love? He talks of love,” Cassandra sneers. “Do you know what he was doing when my girls and I were paying you a visit, Hannah? He was sharing his…love…with someone else.”

“What?” he curls into a ball. This has to be a nightmare.

“Don’t look surprised, Mike. I wanted you for myself, so I had one of my girls follow you. And my-oh-my, what an active life you lead!”

“Hannah. Don’t listen to her.”

“What- what did she see?” Hannah asks faintly, looking up at Cassandra for the first time.

“You have an eye for beauty, Mike.” Cassandra holds up a necklace.

Mike’s blood runs cold.

That necklace is exactly the one he gave the girl from the bar last night.

“I think we can both agree she tasted very sweet.”

“What did you do to her?!?”

There’s a cheer from the creatures above. Mike’s stomach sinks to the floor.

“You see!” Cassandra crows, her voice clear and loud above the din. “He admits it.”

“Mike? What did you do?” He’s never seen Hannah look at him with such cold fury.

“Hannah. It’s not what you think.”

“Don’t lie to me!”

In less than a second she’s looming over him, fangs bared. Mike shrinks away but she grabs him by the neck and lifts him up with one hand. His feet flail in the air uselessly.

“I’m not a child anymore. What did you do?”

“Hannah,” Mike croaks. Her grip is like iron. “Please. I made a mistake. I love you. I love you so much.”

The cheering grows louder. The creatures above urge Hannah on.

He looks into her eyes. They’re darker than he remembers. She doesn’t look like his Hannah anymore.

He would have been a better man. He would have treated her differently.

But he thought they had more time.

“Hannah. I’m sorry.”

“Oh Mike,” Hannah says, voice soft like velvet. “I’m not.”
He sees the pillar before he hits it. There’s a loud crack and he feels his skull crunch against it, and the pain is bright and hot and awful and then…

Black.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man. I'm sorry Mike. I really am. But these vamps mean business.

What next for our fledgling twin vamps? Will they leave Sam in peace? Make sure to read the next chapter by my extraordinarily talented pal, indisappointingmyparents.

Also, I read in some very scientific journal that there is a strong correlation between being a good lover and leaving a kudos or a review on a new chapter. Not suggesting anything but you know....just saying.

Thanks for reading.
I Can't Escape From You

Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 1936 song of the same name by Bing Crosby.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

June 1936

She always goes back to that party when she closes her eyes. The night before Beth and the others disappeared—died. The night before they died—always plays back in her dreams. Except in her dreams there’s no Cassandra, no mystery woman to waltz in and hold Beth’s heart in her hands all night. In her dreams Sam leaves John and Mike and Hannah and she takes Beth’s arm in her own and they dance. Beth is light on her feet, graceful and practiced, and she leans Sam back into a perfect dip as the ceiling turns into a blur of flowing gold.

When she wakes, her own ceiling is spotted and brown, water stains threatening to carve holes in the cheap material. Sam slips quietly out of the bed she shares with her sister, careful not to wake her. She hears the steady chop chop chop of her mother cutting vegetables in the kitchen. A few days ago they’d found a basket of fresh vegetables on their front doorstep, with an anonymous note reading “I miss you”. They’d never been able to figure out who sent it.

Their kitchen and living space are cramped together in a small, dirty room, with creaky floorboards and walls partially eaten by dry rot. Sam walks into the room and coughs. Her mother looks up.

“Morning, dear,” her mother says. “Can you help with breakfast?”

After breakfast Sam puts on her uniform and heads over to John’s house to work. His family offered to pay Sam to be a maid for them to help keep her family afloat. After all, they couldn’t just give Sam’s folks the money; John’s father respects Sam’s father too much to give him a handout. It’s a short walk, though with the morning fog floating over the streets it feels strange and foreign, like she’s in one of Bob Washington’s movies.

John dragged her to the movies about a month ago, even though she never wanted to go to the place again. They saw some forgettable romance and John squeezed Sam’s hand like he was scared she’d run off. Right before they left at the end of the showing Sam found a little box of chocolates under her usual chair at the theater. They’d looked fresh, like the box had just been put there. Attached was a note reading “thinking of you.”

The other maid, Lorelei, comes in late. She’s pale, unsteady, but with a sleepy smile on her face. She hums as she clumsily dusts a vase to Sam’s left as Sam clears the coffee table.

“You don’t look too well, honey,” Sam comments. Lorelei smiles.

“Oh, I’m quite alright.”

Sam frowns.
“You sure?”

Lorelei looks out the window, a dreamy smile on her pale face. She scratches what looks like a spider bite on her neck.

“Positive.”

Sam’s nearing the end of her work day when John comes back to the house, wearing a sharp suit from a long day at his father’s work. He beams at the sight of her.

“Sammy! How are you?”

It’s all Sam can do to muster a little shrug. John frowns.

“Bad day?”

“No, I’m alright,” Sam lies. “How was work?”

“Swell!” John says. “Dad says I’m going to be just the right fit for the firm.” He beams. Sam can’t help but smile; the boy’s like a puppy. That’s what folks always said about the two of them—two eager puppies in love. Sam’s about to ask him about the firm when Lorelei taps her shoulder.

“Oh, Sammy, I almost forgot! Someone asked me to give this to you!” She hands her a small box wrapped in paper. Sam frowns.

“Who gave this to you?”

“She…well, now that you say it, I can’t seem to remember,” Lorelei says with a confused look. Then the dreamy smile is back. “Oh, but she was quite pretty.”

John looks at Sam.

“Are you sure you want to take this? It could be dangerous.”

“Don’t be silly, Johnny, it’s just a package,” Sam tells him, not fully convincing herself.

"Sammy, come on, just let me look," John says. He reaches for the package and Sam wrenches it away. Both John and Lorelei look at her in surprise.

"I...just want my privacy, please," Sam says. "If it's dangerous, Johnny, I'll tell you."

John looks at her seriously.

"Promise?"

"I promise," Sam lies.

After her work is done, Sam and John walk arm in arm down to the boardwalk, watching the ships come in to the harbor. The fog has lifted, and she can see the sky just beginning to deepen as the sun begins its slow fall to the sea. John takes her hand and squeezes it.

His fingers brush against the tiny engagement ring on Sam’s finger. The one he’d put there three months prior.

That night, watching night fall through her dirty window, Sam unwraps the package and opens the small brown box. Inside is a pendant, a dull metallic grey with a flat oval centerpiece. Sam swallows.
This looks familiar. Very familiar.

When they’d all been children Sam had given Beth a little locket for her birthday. She’d scraped the money together herself by running errands and odd jobs for people in the neighborhood. It wasn’t the prettiest, but Beth’s eyes lit up when she got it and she hugged Sam so hard Sam saw little pops of light in her vision.

The locket trembles in her shaking hands. Sam squeezes the top and bottom of the pendant and the locket front swings open, revealing a slightly blurry photograph of Sam and Beth, beaming at the cameraman.

The locket slips out of Sam’s hands and lands with a dull clatter on the floor. She stands there, shaking, until she hears a rustle. A slip of paper has fallen out of the box onto the floor.

It reads: “Go to the ice cream parlor tomorrow just before closing. You know the parlor. Go to your usual booth.”

Sam stuffs the box and pendant into a bag and hides it behind her bed. She spends the rest of the night lying next to her sister, muffling her panicked sobs.

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She doesn’t tell John.

The following night she sneaks out and hurries down the street, careful to avoid shadowed alleyways and old speakeasies. Ever since Hannah and Beth went missing there’s been a rash of murders in the area, all of them happening at night, and to people no one would miss. She hears a beggar call out to her but she doesn’t stop.

Hard times make hearts harder.

She wonders what Mike would do. He never came back after he promised to find the twins. He was always braver than her, stronger than her, more resourceful and suave. If he couldn’t find them, how could Sam ever hope to do so?

The parlor is just about to close when she rushes in, almost running to her usual booth, the last place she saw Beth before she disappeared. Her engagement ring feels tight on her finger. For an absurd moment, Sam want to take it off. She hears one of the clerks cough audibly and knows without looking that they’re staring at her. She sighs and starts to feel between the cushions, searching for a clue when her hand brushes against something wrapped in paper.

She pulls it out from between the cushions and tears away the paper with trembling hands. The paper falls away to reveal a still-ticking watch. She flips it over and sees the initials on the back.

BW

Sam whimpers. A tag attached to the watch has another message waiting for her, in the same handwriting: “If you want to see Beth and Hannah again, come to the alleyway between John’s father’s office and Amore Bakery tomorrow night. I will be waiting there until dawn. Come alone.”

Sam stares down at the paper. Tomorrow night. Her wedding rehearsal. There’s almost no way she’ll be able to sneak out of it, and even if she did, she’d probably just end up walking straight into a trap. She should tell John, her parents, the police. Someone.

So why doesn’t she want to?
“Miss?”

Sam nearly jumps out of her skin. She wheels around to see the clerk staring at her with a look of concern and embarrassment.

“Oh, gee whiz, dolly, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare ya,” he says.

“It’s alright,” Sam mutters.

“I just wanted to tell you it’s about closing time, miss.”

“Oh, right, of course,” Sam says. “Thank you.”

She heads out into the night, Beth’s watch in hand.

More than once she thinks she sees someone watching her out of the corner of her eye.

“Wow, Samantha! That little dress is just as cute as a bug’s ear!” her bridesmaid, an old school friend, coos. “I just can’t wait to see the real thing tomorrow!”

Sam blushes. She's not wearing her actual wedding dress; this one's just for the rehearsal. It's her older sister's formal gown, simple and a pale cream color. The only adornment is a little off-white shawl over her shoulders. Her outfit altogether is quite plain, but it suits her well.

“Well, the real wedding dress belonged to my grandmother, so it’s pretty ragged, but I think it’s still pretty,” Sam says. She’s trying to focus on the rehearsal dinner, on John, on all the things they all have to do to make this wedding perfect, but her mind keeps wandering back to the notes. She still hasn’t told anyone yet, not even the police.

She’s starting to wonder if Josh was really the culprit at all. She doesn’t think he’d do something like this, stage an elaborate ransom just to bleed a girl with no money, even if the others were right about him being a punch-drunk gunslinger.

A boy like Josh would make an awfully convenient patsy. But if he was just a patsy, then who set him up?

“Sammy, kitten! You look so snazzy tonight!” John crows. He’s wearing his father’s finest suit, a blood-red rose pinned to his lapel. He’s grinning like he’d won the Great War by himself. He gives her a quick kiss on the cheek and looks at her. His broad smile fades a bit.

“What’s wrong?”

Sam laughs, unconvincingly.

“Oh, Johnny, don’t you mind me! I’m just being a silly jitterbug, that’s all.”

John gives her hand a soft squeeze.

“Don’t you worry about this wedding, honey. This is going to be great for us! Our whole lives are only gonna get better from here, and you better believe it. Alright? I’m gonna take real good care of you. Promise.”

Sam nods. She thinks of Hannah as a young girl, pointing at pictures of beautiful brides and strapping grooms.
“Oh Johnny, Hannah always wanted a nice wedding,” Sam whimpers. Her vision blurs with tears. John pulls her into a soft hug. She thinks about Hannah, her first real friend, the girl at school who always giggled and smiled and played princesses with her, brushing her tangled hair and going on and on about her prince.

She’d disappeared before she’d gotten the wedding she’d dreamed of.

Sam can feel her makeup running, probably getting all over John’s nice suit. She backs out of the hug and sniffs.

“Sammy?”

“I, I just need, a m-moment,” Sam says between sobs. “I need to redo m-my makeup before the dinner starts.” She walks off without another word, ignoring the concerned stares all around her.

The washroom is, thankfully, completely empty. Sam goes to the sink and scrubs all of her makeup off with her handkerchief, watching the water run black with eyeliner and mascara. She looks in the mirror at her tear stained, reddish face and sighs. She can’t do this anymore, can’t keep living a life without the twins in it. She heads over to the window by the farthest stall and jimmies it open, squeezing through before anyone can come looking for her.

It’s raining outside the chapel, blurring the streetlights all around her and leaving spots of watery grey where they land on her dress. Sam hugs herself and shivers. Usually June in California is muggy and warm but this night feels as though it wandered here straight out of the heart of winter. Sam hurries down the uneven streets, wishing she had her bag with her so she could use what measly change she has to flag down a cab. Her heels fumble on the rough pavement and she kicks them off, running barefoot through the frigid rain until she feels like she’s about to collapse.

Sam stops to catch her breath. She isn’t sure how long she’s been running, but she’s sure it’s been long enough that her folks are bound to be looking for her by now. Sam breathes in, slow and steady, and looks around to try and get her bearings. Just ahead she sees the Amore Bakery, and right beside it, John’s firm. Right in between is a skinny alleyway, no light shining within. Sam swallows. She thinks she may be about to die.

She heads into the alleyway, stifling a sob of fear.

No one is there. She searches the alley for another clue and finds nothing. Sam slams her fist against the alley wall and swears.

The killer was just yanking her chain for the fun of it.

Sam leans against the wall and fights back tears. She was such a twit. Of course the killer wasn’t going to give her the twins. How could she be so stupid? She sighs and stands, ready to walk back to the rehearsal diner and explain herself when a shadowy figure strolls into her field of vision, and turns slowly and precisely into the alleyway. Sam backs away until her back hits the end of the alley. The figure approaches, blocking the only way out.

Sam thinks at first the figure is a man, but as it approaches, she can see clearly that it’s a woman. She’s dressed like a gangster, wearing a sharp black suit over a pressed white shirt, a deep red tie the only splash of color. An open overcoat is half-shrugged off her shoulders, its end nearly touching the ground. Atop her head she wears a black bowler hat, her immaculately curled hair spilling out from under it.

She’s the most beautiful woman Sam has ever seen. It’s not until the woman comes close enough to
touch her that Sam realizes who she is.

“B-Beth…?”

Beth grins, that same wayward, careless grin she’d worn ever since they were kids.

“Hey Sammy.”

Impulsively, Sam rushes her, pulling Beth into a fierce hug. Her hand touches Beth’s and Sam nearly jumps back at how cold it is.

“You’re freezing, Beth. What happened to you? Where’s Hannah? And Mike?”

“You looked for me. You actually looked for me,” Beth whispers. “I—I didn’t think you would…”

Sam pulls away and stares at her. Beth looks pale but inexplicably healthy. She shakes her head in bewilderment.

“Beth…?”

“You had to choose. Me or John. And you picked me.”

None of this is making any sense. Sam’s head is so full of questions she thinks it might explode.

“Beth, what are you talking about? What happened? What’s going on—”

Before she can ask anything else, Beth’s bridged the distance between them. She puts her hands around Sam’s waist and presses her lips to Sam’s.

They move back, Sam’s feet fumbling a little, until Sam’s back is pressed against the wall and Beth is holding her in place, gently but firmly, kissing her all over. Cold hands move to Sam's shoulders and gently pull away the shawl. It falls in a soft heap at Sam's feet as Beth comes close to her neck. Sam’s brain is too foggy with bewilderment and euphoria to put up a fight as Beth kisses her cheek, her jaw, her neck. She’s never experienced anything like this before. Sure, she’s kissed, John, but it was always so brief and stilted. Nothing like this.

She can’t resist.

Nothing in the world could compare to this.

Beth presses her lips on Sam’s neck again, soft and careful, before Sam feels a sudden sharp pain in her neck. She lets out a soft moan and Beth closes her eyes, drinking the blood that comes from what Sam slowly realizes is a bite. Each drink sends an ache through her whole body, and she begins to feel her fingers going numb. Everything starts to spin and blur as Beth pulls away, biting down on her own hand and holding it out for Sam to see. Beth’s blood is thick and dark, congealed as if it’s been still for years. The sight of it makes Sam’s stomach turn. Beth holds Sam steady with her uncut hand. She leans in and whispers in Sam’s ear.

“Sammy, please. Drink it, please.”

“W-what…?”
“You have to,” Beth whimpers. “Please. It’ll save you. Trust me, please…”

Sam doesn’t know what’s happening. She thinks she might be dying. Beth is shaking, crying, begging her to obey. When the cut hand is brought to Sam’s mouth, she’s too tired to put up a fight. She presses her mouth to the cut and drinks, feeling her stomach lurch. Her vision blacks out and fills with strange, shadowy monsters as Beth’s voice echoes somewhere very far away. She feels memories rush past her, Hannah on her bike, a young Beth gripping her locket, John getting down on one knee, holding out a ring, her sister hugging her, her mother kissing her, Mike whispering into her ear how he was going to save their friends.

Something looms, big and dark, before Sam. It opens its mouth to show a thousand glistening teeth and she wonders if this is what happens to sinners when they die.

The mouth closes around her and she falls into darkness.

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For hours she fades in and out, feeling first feverish and hot and then as cold as a corpse. She shakes and twitches and mumbles but her eyes won’t open when she wants them to. She faintly hears people around her, feels her heartbeat beginning to slow.

When she wakes, all she can feel is an awful, yawning pain in the pit of her stomach. It’s like someone ripped her stomach out of her body and threw it away. The hunger is all she can focus on. It’s empty and painful and it hurts to move and speak. It takes her a second to notice she’s not breathing. She gasps in panic, feeling the harsh air burn down her windpipe and tear the insides of her lungs. She’s never felt this awful.

Suddenly there’s arms around her shoulders, helping her into a sitting position. Beth holds her gently, rubbing her shoulders and planting a kiss to her forehead. Sam whimpers.

“B—B—eth…”

“It’s okay, shh, oh, honey, everything is going to be okay…”

Sam looks around. She can’t see very much, but when she coughs and hears the echo she knows the room is big, cavernous, like the Washington foyer.

“Beth, where are we?”

Before Beth can answer, Sam hears another familiar voice.

“Sammy…? Is…is that you…?”

Through the dark she sees John lying on his side, wearing a plain white hospital gown, some bruising around his mouth and eyes. His hair is rustled and dirty, and Sam could swear she can hear his heartbeat from here. The rhythm is intoxicating. She thinks about the blood moving through his veins, smooth and thick and full of nutrients, keeping him alive.

Involuntarily, Sam begins to salivate.

“Sam, where are we? What’s happening?” John asks. Gone is the carefree confidence, replaced by the undisguised fear of a lost little boy.

“An excellent question, Johnathan,” says an unfamiliar voice, low and clear. Dim lights fill the room and Sam can see it’s a sort of arena, with her, Beth, and John in the middle, surrounded by a chorus
of strange young woman, all with near-identical looks of bloodthirsty curiosity. In the center of the crowd of women stands someone Sam recognizes. Tall and beautiful, and deeply unsettling.

Cassandra Rosencrantz. The woman from the party.

“You,” Sam whispers. “You did all this.”

Cassandra laughs.

“Well, ‘all’ is a little generous of you, my dear. Bethany set up your little scavenger hunt for you all by herself. Pretty ingenious, I must say. She led you to us like a moth to a flame.”

Sam stares at Beth. Beth doesn’t look at her, but instead looks straight at Cassandra, her face blank.

“Samantha, you have been given a wonderful gift. By joining our ranks you will live forever, will live by no one’s creed but your own, and will be wholly free from the kingdom of men. You’ll never go hungry, never be sick, never be trapped in loveless misery.” She looks pointedly down at John, whose face goes red with frightened rage.

“Who the hell are you?! What are you doing?! Let—”

“You will speak when I allow it, little thing,” Cassandra snaps, her voice cold as ice. John shrinks into the shadows of the far side of the arena. Cassandra smiles down at Sam. “There is only one thing you have to do for us, my dear.”

Sam hesitates before speaking.

“A-and what’s that?”

Cassandra nods at John, cowering in the shadows.

“We’ve prepared you a meal. Drink deep.”

Sam doesn’t comprehend for a moment, but then the rush of John’s blood and the ache of her hunger come together and Sam realizes exactly what Cassandra is saying.

“No.”

Cassandra looks disappointed.

“No? After all the work we went through to get you this lovely meal? That’s impolite, Samantha.”

Sam shakes her head.

“I can’t. I won’t.”

Sam tries to move away, ignoring the ache in her stomach, the hole buried deep inside her. Beth grabs her arm, earnest, genuine pain in her eyes.

“Sam, please. You have to. It’ll be quick.”

“Beth, what are you saying? I can’t kill him. I won’t kill anyone!”

“Blood begets blood, Samantha,” Cassandra says.

“Sam, you don’t get it,” Beth pleads. “John’s going to die. They’ll kill him no matter what you do. If
you do it you can make it quick. That’s better, right?”

“This is insane,” Sam says. “This—who can’t be happening. No. No. No…!”

“Sam, they’ll kill you if you don’t,” Beth says. “They’ll kill you. You’ll burn!”

“Now, now, Bethany, this is Samantha’s decision,” Cassandra says. “If she is too weak to join us, then you must leave her to her fate.”

“But—”

“Beth. I order you to leave her and join me in the audience.”

“Please—”

“Now.”

Beth hangs her head and walks away from Sam, toward the stone steps of the audience. Weakly, John stands, and begins to stagger towards Sam, wordless thanks in his eyes. As Beth passes him, she raises her hand and grazes his shoulder, so quick Sam almost misses it. She keeps walking, up to the audience, and climbs up beside Cassandra, staring impassively off into space. Her eyes are red, but no tears fall.

As John gets close, Sam can smell it. Metallic and salty and so, so sweet. Her mouth waters. She stares at a tiny, tiny cut on John’s shoulder, the miniscule drop of blood spilling from it. John smiles weakly. She can hear his heart, can practically see the veins and arteries spooling together in a fleshy maze under his skin. The smell is all she can focus on, filling her up, calling to the yawning hole in her stomach.

“Sam—” John starts.

He never finishes his sentence.

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When the red haze clears, she’s kneeling over a corpse, both her and it covered in pulpy red gore. Female voices crow and cheer and laugh. Her ring feels oppressively tight on her finger.

John’s blood tastes disgustingly sweet in her mouth.

Cassandra says something to her, but she doesn’t really process it. It’s just sounds, echoing through her frazzled brain. She’s a murderer. She’s a monster.

She was so hungry.

Sam curls up into a ball and sobs, crying for John and for Beth and for herself, and for the life she already knows she can never go back to. When someone finally picks her up off the ground, it’s not Beth. It’s Hannah. Sweet, naïve Hannah, who looks just the same as before. The girl who caught fireflies in a jar with her and helped her name each and every one of them. The girl who lent her fancy dresses and taught her how to dance and cook and sing. The girl who only ever wanted good books and a fairytale wedding.

She’s killed too, Sam supposes. She tries not to think about that as Hannah hugs her, soft and gentle, before slowly leading her out of the room.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, okay?”
She leads her into a pristine bathroom down a dark hallway. Sam feels absurdly guilty for smearing the white tiles with blood. Hannah draws a bath and helps Sam out of her ruined dress and stockings. Hannah turns her back as Sam shrugs off her underwear, feeling completely numb.

She slips into the water, barely feeling the heat on her skin. Sam closes her eyes and sinks into the water. She lets it run over her head, knowing she has no real need to resurface. Lost under the surface, she watches the clear, pure water turn red.

Chapter End Notes

That's the second straight white guy dead in a row. I promise we're not doing that on purpose.
Maybe.
Stay tuned for next chapter, set in the thick of World War II, and written by my endlessly talented writing partner holeybubushka!
Leave a comment if you liked it. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

Evil Gal Blues

Chapter title from the 1944 song Evil Gal Blues by Dinah Washington. There is some explicit lady loving at the start of this chapter. If that isn't your bag of chips, then just scroll down a little.

April, 1937

Even though she’s technically dead, Sam still dreams.

She dreams of Hannah, laughing and dancing with childish abandon. She dreams of John and his carefree smile. She dreams of her sister’s stern face and her parents, anxious and tired, huddled around the only working radiator in their home. She even dreams of Josh; she sees the police searching fruitlessly for him, eager to find him and wrap a noose around his neck.

Most of all, she dreams of Beth.

She sees Beth as she sits in the movie theater, lights and colors flittering over her face. The way she barely notices when her ice cream runs onto her fingers because she’s too preoccupied with what she’s saying. The way her eyes light up whenever Sam walks into a room.

Sam sees her in a sharp suit, looking at her with unguarded desire. The desperate way she throws her head back onto the pillows in their bed, gasping even though she doesn’t need to draw breath. The way she sinks her fangs deep into her prey.

She’s radiant. Savage.

For some reason, Sam always wakes up at dusk. She’s been here less than a year (nine months and 22 days. She needs to count otherwise time will just slip through her fingers) and she knows she gets up earlier than most of the other girls, who don’t seem to rise until eight o’clock or so unless Cassandra’s ordered otherwise.

This evening she’s feeling particularly anxious. Her stomach is starting to twist and throb with that familiar ache.

It’s been three days since they found a human and drank deep.

She won’t be able to draw it out much longer.

Beth is lying next to her, cool and silent. Sam sees her mouth twitching slightly, her brows furrowing in thought. Sam wonders what she dreams about.

She’s too afraid to ask.

(When she was a human Sam was happy being alone. Now she feels completely unmoored, lost, without Beth. Like she can’t exist in this world without her. There are too many pitfalls, too many risks. And nothing is more pathetic than a vampire without its kin.)
The room in the mansion is the most lavish she’s ever been in, and that includes the Washington Manor. The bed is soft yet firm and the covers so plush that when she curls up under it she can almost convince herself that’s she’s warm.

It’s so hard to get warm these days.

Sam’s attention is jolted when Beth mumbles something in her sleep. Sam props herself up on her arm and kisses her. Then kisses her again, and again, hard enough that it half rouses Beth from her deathly deep sleep.

Finally, Beth starts to kiss back, the wet and sleepy kind that Sam likes best. Sam rests her forehead against Beth’s and rubs their noses together.

Beth makes a sleepy noise of approval, her thumb stroking Sam’s bare skin. Sam surges forward and kisses Beth firmly.

“I love you,” she whispers in between kisses. “Oh, I love you.”

Beth doesn’t say it back, just smiles at Sam with a warm, lopsided grin. She’s so gorgeous, even with her hair a tangled mess and last night’s make up smeared across the pillow.

Sam thinks she could put up with every deprivation that comes with being undead if it means Beth would keep looking at her just like that.

Beth rolls onto her back, taking Sam with her. Sam straddles her, runs her hands around the outline of her breasts, watches Beth’s nipples harden under her touch. Beth pushes up against her, eager and desperate.

She reaches down and wraps her mouth around a nipple, sucking and lapping at it. Then moves to the other breast, sucking and groping at her roughly. Beth buries her hand in her hair and squeezes tight. Sam grins down at her, kisses the space between her breasts, her collar bone, the base of her throat, the curve of her jaw. Beth sighs and wraps her arms around her shoulders and pushes her down until their skin is flush up against each other. She spread her legs and Sam pushes a thigh in between them.

Sam groans. She can feel she’s wet, just from this.

She grinds down on Beth, relishing how it makes her gasp and shudder.

“Please,” Beth moans.

That’s all the encouragement Sam needs. She reaches down and slides her fingers against Beth, feeling how wet she is and getting wetter herself.

“Please, Sam.”

She obliges, dipping her fingers into Beth and positioning her thumb so it’s pushing against her clit.

The first few times they made love Sam was in awe of Beth’s body, in awe of the pleasure she could give and take in return. But she couldn’t shake the feeling that it was wrong, that she was perverse, corrupted. Damned.

And maybe she is damned anyway. But if she is damned, it’s not for this.

Sam speeds up, pushing her fingers harder into Beth. Beth’s hips buck up, trying to take Sam deeper
inside her.

Sam kisses a trail up Beth’s body until she gets to her neck. Beth is groaning loudly in her ear as Sam pushes against her, head thrown back and teeth bared. Sam laps her tongue against Beth’s fangs, making her whimper and moan.

“I love you,” Beth murmurs. “Sammy, I love you I love you I love you.”

Sam groans in response, fingers moving against Beth purposefully. She drags out their love making for as long as she can, loving the way desperate way Beth bucks and squirms underneath her. Beth raises her arms and locks her hands behind Sam’s neck, pushing them closer together. Sam tries to smother Beth’s moans with kisses but to be frank at this moment she doesn’t care how loud they are.

Eventually, Sam takes pity on her, curving her fingers inside Beth just the way she likes it. She brushes her thumb hard against her clit, waits until Beth is on the cusp before biting down gently on her neck. It’s enough. Beth gasps and shudders, coming undone loudly beneath her.

Sam watches as the pleasure ebb away from Beth’s body. She licks her lips, tasting the faint tang of Beth’s blood. It’s not as sweet as a human’s, but it’s not unpleasant either.

Sam doesn’t want to pull out, enjoying the feeling of being inside her. But within a few minutes Beth has recovered and is pushing Sam into the mattress, hovering over her with a devilish smile.

If this is the price of being undead, then it’s one Sam’s prepared to pay

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May 1944.

It’s quiet in the mansion.

For once, Hannah can’t hear the other girls. The whole four-story building is unnervingly quiet.

They all must have gone out and left her alone. Again.

Hannah’s not blind. The other vampires regard her with barely contained contempt. They may not be as obvious about it as Beverly, who has taken to calling her “the spare” but it’s clear they don’t believe she belongs.

She tries. She’s been out with the other girls before, taken part in groups killings of a homeless man or a stray drunkard. She tries show she belongs, dispatching her victims in the cruelest possible way.

It’s never enough. She knows when the other girls look at her, they see her reluctance. The way she can never draw out a kill. The way she baulks at looking too long at the carnage she’s created.

She’s weak. And the other vampires hate her for it.

The only solace she has is her sister (actual sister, Hannah doesn’t buy into the idea the other vamps are her family) and Sam. The three of them sometimes even go out together. Some evenings it almost feels like it was before the horror and death and being reborn.

Before her entire family was murdered.

The three of them spending time together is becoming less and less frequent. Beth has swiftly climbed the ranks in their household. Their sire, Cassandra, trusts her with important tasks.
She trusts Hannah with none.

When Beth isn’t doing work for the household, she’s spending more and more of her time with Sam. Their room is across from the hall from hers. Hannah wishes it wasn’t. She feels like she’s intruding every time she knocks on their door. Once she walked in unannounced to see them naked and wrapped up in one another, dozing in what Hannah assumed was a lovers’ embrace. She didn’t hang around for long; Beth rose from the bed and called her a nosy jerk and threw her out quicker than a human draws breath.

Sam came to find her later, took her out to watch a film in what Hannah assumed was her way of apologizing. But Hannah couldn’t unsee what happened.

She never thought women could feel this way about each other. She thinks, perhaps, becoming vampires had warped them. But looking back now with knowing eyes, she thinks they’ve loved each other for a very long time.

She doesn’t understand it, not quite, but she’s happy for them. They love each so fiercely, so deeply. It would be nice to be loved like that.

Hannah’s broken away from her thoughts when there is a loud knock on her door.

“Hello?”

“Don’t sound so frightened, dear.”

Cassandra? Hannah practically trips over her own feet in her haste to open the door. There before her is her sire, looking immaculate and imposing as always.

“Cassandra. Uh. Hello!”

Cassandra smiles, and Hannah tries not to feel too pathetic for basking in it. “May I come in?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, of course.”

Cassandra strolls into her room and sits on her bed. Hannah can barely contain herself, shuffling from one foot to the next.

What could her sire want from her?

“You know, I’m not to play favorites. I love all my girls.”

“Yes, of course. We’re all lucky to have –”

“However, most of the girls,” Cassandra says, talking over her, “have the benefit of being able to learn from their own sire. Since I have only turned a handful of girls.”

Hannah stares at her, too nervous to look away. Cassandra cocks her head and gives her a searching look. Hannah feels herself wilting under her gaze.

“However, there are some things only a sire knows. And I know you aren’t happy, Hannah.”

It’s pathetic how easily tears begin to sting at Hannah’s eyes. She feels pitiful, like a child. But Cassandra pats the bed next to her.

“Your happiness is my concern, Hannah. Tell me what’s wrong.”
“It’s nothing, really. I’m so lucky to be here.”

“Please be honest with me, little dove.”

Cassandra’s words are gentle, but Hannah feels a threat lingering behind them. Reluctantly she goes to sit by her.

“I just…I’m not like the other girls.”

“Oh?”

“Beverly and the rest…they think I’m weak.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be taking her opinion too seriously. Beverly has a limited appreciation for most things. For her, and most of the other girls, the thrill is mindless. They don’t bother to stop and savor what they’re doing. Not like us.”

Hannah starts, stares at her sire in shock.

Like us?

Cassandra smiles, leans in and whispers conspiratorially. “You’re my fledgling, Hannah. You and I share a primal bond. It’s my duty to help you see what I see.”

Hannah feels a lump in her throat. She swallows hard. “What…what do you see?”

“I see a predator. I see vampire with a talent for the hunt. I see someone who appreciates the joy of being able to snuff out a life before it’s realized. You’re lucky, it’s a predisposition not all our kind share.”

Hannah looks away.

She wants to be able to bask in her sire’s praise.

But it still feels like Cassandra is talking about someone else.

“I don’t…I don’t know if that’s me, Cassandra.”

“Well,” Cassandra says brightly, getting up and patting Hannah on the knee. “I’m not often wrong but we shall see. I’ve bought a dress for you. Wear it tomorrow and meet me in the parlor at eight. We’ll go on a little outing, you and I.”

“Cassandra…. thank you so much-”

“Eight o’clock Hannah. Don’t be late.”

It doesn’t sound like a threat.

Except Hannah knows, somewhere deep in her bones, that it is.

+++ Attracting men is ridiculously easy when she’s out with Cassandra.

Despite the war, bars along the docks in California are filled to the brim with men. Boys, really. Sailors and airmen, clinging onto the last vestiges of normality before they’re shipped off to battle.
Hannah can smell testosterone and anticipation in the air. It’s intoxicating.

The bar they go to is full of sailors, the most beautiful boys she had ever seen. Not that it mattered. Even dressed up to the nines, none of these men would ever look at a plain-Jane like her. Especially when she’s with Cassandra. She’s practically an ugly duckling squatting next to a swan.

Cassandra asked Hannah who she wanted. It hadn’t been easy to pick, there are so many boys here and they were all delicious in their own way. But there was one broad shouldered, sandy-haired boy with an easy smile Hannah couldn’t take her eyes off from the minute they arrived.

Cassandra barely had to try. One coy smile and a few lingering looks and the boy and his friend were traveling back with them in the car, carefree and ignorant.

“Gee whiz,” the shorter, dark haired boy, who called himself Thomas, whistles as they enter the hall. “This place is snazzy.”

“Thank you. It’s my father’s estate.”

Hannah looks at Cassandra in awe, amazed at how easily lies roll off her tongue.

“Ah. And what does your old man do?”

“Why, he’s in the war effort, of course.”

“Really?” Thomas puffs his chest out and points to the insignia on his navy uniform. “I know some higher ups. What does he do?”

“Do?” Cassandra twitters. She giggles, a high, girlish laugh, so different than her real one. “My father doesn’t tell me that.”

“Of course,” Thomas says, and smiles patronizingly at Cassandra. Hannah hides her wince. This won’t end well for him.

“You ladies have anything to drink around here?”

“Of course. Hannah, be a dear and show Thomas where we keep the wine.”

Hannah nods, feeling awkward now that the men’s eyes are on her. She shows Thomas where the bottles are, careful to avoid the other rack full of wine of another sort entirely.

Thomas looks at her, eyes freely roaming over her body. He takes the bottle from her hands and brushes his fingers over hers, smirking when she blanches a little.

“Here you are,” Thomas says, handing Cassandra a full glass with a flourish. As if he should take some credit. He’s got a glass for himself but left Hannah and the other boy out. Hannah swallows hard and pours two glasses of red for herself and the sandy haired boy. (Seamus, she reminds herself. His name is Seamus).

Thomas looks completely at ease, sitting down next to Cassandra on the settee. It’s like he wants to dominate the space. He spreads his legs and wraps one arm around Cassandra, pulling her close. Hannah thinks she spots the merely hint of a leer on his lips.

Hannah goes to sit next to Seamus, who smiles softly at her as she takes her seat next to him. She thinks he says something to her, but Hannah can’t concentrate. She can’t take her eyes off Cassandra, searching for a hint of when the carnage will start.
It doesn’t come. Thomas makes loud, obnoxious jokes, and Hannah half expects Cassandra to gouge his throat open there and then. But Cassandra seems to enjoy stringing the boy along, watching him blunder around the stage like he’s the star in a macabre play.

“Do you often invite men over when your daddy’s away?”

“Only when it’s handsome navy men like you.”

“Oh, I see,” and Thomas drags his hand up Cassandra’s leg, his fingers brushing under the hem of her black dress. If blood still flowed freely in Hannah’s veins she would have blushed.

Seamus puts a gentle hand on her arm. He murmurs something about a bedroom and Hannah finds herself stumbling towards her room.

He closes the door behind her. Hannah can’t meet his gaze. In the privacy of her own bedroom he’s even more handsome.

“You haven’t done this before, have you?”

“No…”

She thinks he’s going to laugh at her. Or sneer. He has every right to. She’s killed a hundred men before but it’s ridiculous how she trembles at this.

But Seamus just smiles and takes her hands in his.

“Don’t worry. I’ll walk you through it.”

And he’s pushing her gently up against the door. At first Hannah is too surprised to kiss back. She hasn’t felt the faint sting of stubble since…well, not for a very long time. But soon she relaxes, enjoys the feel of him pressed up against her.

The boy is eager but practiced. Hannah feels a delicious warmth filter through her body as he pushes against her, making her ache in forgotten places.

He seems to enjoy her reaction, groaning a little in her ear, his fingers ghosting over her breasts.

Her body feels like it’s coming alive. If this is what Beth feels with Sam, then maybe Hannah understands why they always hide away from the world.

She grabs a fist full of his hair, pulls a little harder than she meant to, although from Seamus’s reaction he doesn’t mind. He’s panting, breathing hard, groping her with greedy hands.

She can smell his desire.

His heart is pounding. She can hear it reverberating in her own ears. Her arousal mirrors his and soon she doesn’t hear his moans. She hears his heart instead, pounding away. Hannah kisses down his neck until she gets to his pulse point, worries it a little with her teeth. Feels it beating underneath her lips.

She’s so close she can almost taste him.

Hannah only knows what she’s doing when dimly she hears the boy’s moans turn to squeals. But it’s too late. She sinks her fangs in deep, gulps him down, trying to suck the life right out of him.

She’s practically drained him dry when she finally stops. The hunger is satiated. She can feel at
peace.

For now.

The boy falls to the floor like a sack of a cement. Hannah gasps, presses her back against the wall. She’s trembling.

She was supposed to savor the hunt. Draw it out. Learn to kill like her sire. But she got greedy and now she’s gone and ruined everything.

She prays to a God that hates her that Cassandra is in a forgiving mood.

Hannah knows firsthand the damage she can do.

She’s on the verge of hyperventilating when there’s a knock on her door.

“Hannah?”

It’s Cassandra. Hannah looks around the room wildly, thinks about hiding the corpse under her bed.

“Hannah, I can hear you. Open the door, little dove.”

She reluctantly does, stepping aside so her sire can see the bloody mess she’s made. She expects to feel the sting of a palm on her face, but instead Cassandra chuckles.

“Little too eager I see.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Hannah says in a rush. “We were kissing and it felt so nice and I wanted to keep going and going and then suddenly I’m draining him, and I’m so stupid, just stupid!”

“Hannah, Hannah!” Cassandra takes her hands and squeezes them. “It’s all right. You will learn self-control. If you listen to me, I promise one day you’ll be able to use and discard men however you please. But you have much to learn before then. I have something to show you. Follow me.”

Silently, Hannah follows her. Across the floor then up the staircase, then up another, then another until finally they are at Cassandra’s door.

When she opens the door, Hannah lets out a gasp.

The boy Thomas is lying on Cassandra’s bed. Hannah takes a step into the room and sees that he’s naked, with his hands handcuffed to either side of the bed.

Gone is the strong, robust boy she saw less than half an hour ago. He looks frightened and small now. She can see his chest rise and fall shallowly. Hannah almost mistakes him for being asleep except the fact his lips are already turning a sickly shade of blue.

Hannah’s stomach churns. She starts to back away but she bumps into Cassandra who propels her forward, right where she can see the whole ghastly show.

“Not so proud now, are you, Thomas?”

The boy opens his eyes his at the sound of his name. He has thick gashes on his neck and both wrists. He struggles to keep his eyes open.

“My god,” Hannah whispers.
Cassandra ignores her. She goes to her bedside table and picks up the empty wine glasses. She takes a pocket knife and opens a scab on the boy’s wrist, watching as the blood trickles into the glass.

“Drink,” she says to Hannah, holding up the full glass.

She hesitates.

“Drink.”

Hannah relents, hates how sweet Thomas’ blood tastes on her tongue.

The boy mumbles something. Cassandra chuckles and leans in closer.

“You have to speak up, little thing.”

“Water,” the boy rasps.

“That won’t be necessary. Water won’t help you now. In fact, nothing will help you now.”

Her cruel laughter echoes off the walls. The boy starts to cry, soft and shaky, mewling like a lamb. He weakly tugs at the handcuffs.

“Why are you doing this?” Hannah cries.

“Why? Why not?”

“Because,” Hannah is shaking so hard. She stares into the boy’s eyes. He looks on the cusp of death. But he’s struggling hard to stay alive. “It’s cruel.”

“Cruel? No. Humans are cruel. Haven’t you been paying attention? Haven’t you seen the depravity they wreak upon themselves. A whole continent is on fire, and you call me cruel?”

“But….”

“But…but!” Cassandra mocks. She rolls her eyes at Hannah. “This is our nature, Hannah. We’re killers.”

“I know we must…feed. I know that. But why must you draw out his death?”

“Do you hear that, Thomas? Hannah wants you die!”

The boy’s eyes shoot open. He blearily focuses on Hannah, and tries to vein to shrink away from her.

“No, please. No. Don’t let me die…!”

“Oh, but Thomas, you wanted to die, didn’t you? That’s what you told me. An honorable death on the battlefield, defending your country from the Japs.” She leans close to him. The boy whimpers.

“But you’re not going to die in the battlefield. You’re going to die here in my mansion, alone and exposed while the world moves on without you.”

The boy shakes and cries miserably. He’s sobbing and blubbing, like a baby. Hannah squeezes her eyes shut but she can’t shut out his voice.

“Cassandra. Please stop this!”
“Why!” Cassandra snaps. She walks towards Hannah, moving sleekly across the floor. “How childish you are. Are you going to deny your own nature? I thought you wanted to learn?”

“I do…. but…”

“If you wish to learn then you must listen. Listen to your instincts. The same vampire instincts that made you kill this thing’s friend. You think you were doing Seamus a kindness when you drained him dry?”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him!”

“You say this because there is still kindness in you, Hannah. I see it. It makes you weak. It makes you suffer.” Hannah looks away, but Cassandra puts a hand on her chin and forces her to meet her gaze.

“You cleave onto your humanity. Why? You left that behind when you smashed the boy Mike’s skull. Trying to eke out an existence, neither vampire nor human, is no way to live.”

“Please,” the boy rasps, interrupting them, “I don’t want to die. Please God, don’t let me die.”

“God? You are a religious man, Thomas? Well, you’re in luck. We’re Angels. My dear Hannah is the Angel of Mercy. And I’m…. I’m the Angel of Death.”

“Oh, please, please, please, please no.”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes” Cassandra replies in a sing-song voice. She goes to sit next to Thomas. He weakly tries to shrink away from her. “You’re dying. Are you going to confess your sins?”

For the first time, Thomas looks hopeful. He looks between them both, wide eyed and desperate.

“If I do, will you let me live?”

“No, silly. Look at your wounds. Look at all that blood you’ve already lost.” He starts to whimper. Cassandra tuts at him impatiently. “Stop your mewling. I thought you were a man?”

“Please,” he begs, looking at Hannah now. “Please, girl. You won’t let me die?”

“You ask her for mercy? You think just because she looks like a simple girl she will save you?” Cassandra leans over to whisper in his ear, but never takes her eyes off Hannah’s. “She’s a killer. I’ve seen her murder dozens of men. I’ve seen her enjoy the moment where a life is snuffed out by her own hands. Why, she’s even killed tonight. Haven’t you asked yourself where Seamus is? Or are you too busy thinking about yourself?”

“Oh, god, no,” the boy moans.

Hannah looks away from Cassandra’s knowing eyes. Tries to swallow back the bile that slinks up her throat.

It’s true. Everything Cassandra said about her is true.

She struggled against her own divided nature from the moment she was turned. But still, even then, she hurts people. She can’t help it. Wherever Hannah goes, carnage follows.

The only time she finds peace is the exquisite moment when she sinks her teeth into her prey. It’s the only time she quells the yawning hunger within.
Cassandra is right. She is a vampire. She’s a fool to deny it.

“I’m sorry, please forgive me. Please. I’m sorry.”

Cassandra makes another cut, this time on his upper thigh. Blood flows freely into Cassandra’s cup. She looks thoughtful.

“You shouldn’t apologize to me. You shouldn’t even apologize to God. You should apologize to your family.”

“He has a family?” Hannah blurts out. Cassandra cocks an eyebrow at her.

“See his ring finer? His skin is pale where a wedding band would be. He took it off so people wouldn’t see what a scoundrel he is.”

Hannah feels a spike of hot anger surge and twist through her.

“He would leave his family?”

“Yes, without a thought.” She leans away from Thomas. “And if we were human girls he would’ve used us up and discarded us without a second thought. He would have gone back to his wife and child and pretended none of this happened…yes… Thomas, I went through your wallet, what an example you are to your son!”

Hannah grits her teeth, a faint growl rumbling through her chest.

The human starts to cry again, choked, wracking sobs that shake his whole body.

“I’m sorry I’ve been bad. I didn’t mean to be bad. I didn’t mean to be.”

Hannah sneers. He’s sorry, but not for what he’s done. He’s sorry that he’s been caught.

It’s pathetic.

“Only the weak leave their family.”

“That’s right. It is weak, but then humans all are. They’re not evolved, like you and I are.” Cassandra takes out a handkerchief from a draw in her nightstand and daintily wipes the corners of her mouth.

“I tire of this mortal. Let’s go downstairs.”

“What will…what will happen to him?”

“Oh,” Cassandra shrugs. “I’m not sure. I’ll get Beverly to put him into the pit. Perhaps I will use the rest of him for blood wine. Or I’ll feed off him when it suits. He’ll last a few more nights yet.”

“Alright,” Hannah says quietly, trying to bury the horror deep inside her chest.

As they shut the door (and Hannah ignores the faint, desperate cries of no, no) Cassandra turns and regards her seriously.

“You did well.”

“Oh,” and buoyed by the fresh blood, she feels a blush color her cheeks.

“We came to an understanding in there. I think…. I think you can learn from me.”
Hannah doesn’t dare to look Cassandra in the eyes, too scared, even now, that her sire is playing a trick on her.

“I’ve been watching you for years. I see the way you look at your sister and her…companion. You wish you could have that, but you don’t crave what they do. Like you did when you were a girl, you still look to handsome men for guidance. Don’t look away, Hannah. I see it.”

Cassandra motions back towards her bedroom. “But as I just showed you, humans are weak. Men most of all. But they have their uses. Follow me, and I can make any man want you. You’ll walk into a room and all eyes will follow you, men and women alike.”

Hannah thinks back to only a few hours ago, at how Cassandra commanded the attention of the all the men at the bar. She had a presence, an aura. People were drawn to her, like moths to a flame. Perhaps it was because there was something a little bit dangerous, a little bit tantalizing, that made men want her and women envy her.

Hannah casts her mind back when Cassandra came to the Curse of the Vampyr party. Back…before. How she commanded everyone’s attention. How jealous Hannah felt that Beth had Cassandra’s ear and not her.

She was like a movie star.

Hannah couldn’t be like that.

Could she?

“Hannah,” Cassandra gently interrupts her train of thought. “I have so much I want to teach you. What do you say? Do you want to want to learn?”

Hannah pauses. She thinks about how she’s suffered. She thinks about how she’s never been accepted by the other girls. She thinks about her sister and Sam, who are so in love they barely have time for her anymore.

She thinks about the rest of her long-dead family, their corpses rotting in the Earth.

She raises her eyes from the floor and stares resolutely into sire’s dark, dark eyes.

“Yes, Cassandra.” She replies. “Yes. I want to learn.”

+++ 

Sam thinks it’s a wonderful time to be…well, sort of alive.

Women are finally allowed out into the world. The dearth of men, who are fighting against an enemy even Sam thinks is as monstrous as she is, means that women are everywhere. Sam sees them, in the shops, working in factories, even recruiting for the army. Most surprisingly there are scores of women working in the shipyards. It’s hard, physical and even dangerous labor. The girls work twelve hour shifts and when they leave the look exhausted, like an oily rag that’s been wrung dry.

Despite all this, they also look liberated.

Sam watches them as they file out in the evening, giggling and talking. Mostly about the war. Or their sweethearts. But underneath it all, these women are proud. They’re happy to leave their homes behind to come do backbreaking, filthy and unforgiving work.
While she watches the girls leave she hears Cassandra’s voice reverberating in skull. She’s chiding her. In Cassandra’s eyes, humans are not worth watching unless you’re on the hunt.

Sam thinks she’s wrong. Not that she’d ever tell Cassandra that.

Faintly, she hears the crunch of gravel from the alleyway behind her. Sam smiles.

Two arms snake around her waist, pulling Sam backwards towards a familiar body.

“Enjoying the view?” Beth whispers in her ear.

“Yes, but for a different reason than you are, I think.”

“Can you blame me? I’m a real sucker for a girl in overalls.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Now, now,” Beth whispers, kissing down her neck. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“I know that.” She squeezes one of Beth’s arms that’s around her waist. She leans back into her, sighing when Beth props her head against the crook of Sam’s neck.

“Do you ever wonder what we would’ve been like?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, do you think it could’ve been us in there? If things were different. Working in the factories?”

Beth chuckles, low and warm, right in her ear. A pleasant shiver rolls down Sam’s spine.

“I’d have loved it. You wouldn’t have been able to keep me away.”

She’s right. Beth would’ve fought her father on this. She would have done whatever she could to forge an independent life for herself. Beth would have enjoyed the camaraderie in the shipyards. She would have even enjoyed the onerous work, especially if it meant she could spend her days in the company of women.

They’d be no work for Sam though. If she was alive she’d be 28 years old. She would have had children by now. She’d be taking care of them, while John worked long hours in his father’s business. If the army hadn’t taken him first, that is.

Sam shudders. Tries to shove memories of Johnny away, deep into her subconscious.

“Hey,” Beth sees the change in her expression. She turns Sam around so they’re facing each other. She bites her lip, obvious concern writ large on her face.

“Hey, there’s no use lingering over the past, alright. It’s over.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“And besides, I have some good news. Anna’s performing tonight.”

“Anna! So tonight is the night?”

Beth bounces on her toes. “Yes. She’ll be onstage soon. Let’s go.”

Sam’s smile couldn’t be wider.
Sam likes to think of herself as the clenched fist of justice.

She must hunt to survive. Cassandra has made it clear that vampires can only be sustained by human blood. But that doesn’t mean Sam can’t be judicious about her choice of meal.

Criminals are the best. Bottom feeders who prey on people’s misery. And ever since the war started, there’s been plenty of misery to go around.

Aggressive drunkards who hound call-girls are also a satisfying kill. However, Sam must concede she derives the most pleasure in dispatching anyone who even dares to look at Beth sideways. A man last week, old enough to escape from being conscripted, but young enough to be bitter about it, had sneered at Beth. Laughed at her suit and called her a dyke and wondered what a nice girl like Sam was doing in her presence.

There was something obscene, yet oddly gratifying, about making love in the alleyway while he bled out a few feet away from them.

Most of the time, when Sam interacts with a human for a significant amount of time, death and destruction is lurking nearby. But not tonight. Tonight, she and Beth get to give life.

Anna’s got the crowd captivated. As usual. She’s starting to make a name for herself performing in smoky, rundown bars like this one. People flock to hear perform jazz tunes in her velvety voice.

“Sam, Beth!”

She’s finished for the evening. It’s almost three am and the bar is starting to wind down. The convivial atmosphere remains though. The humans are leaving in droves. Girls scurry off with their friends, laughing and joking, while some couples sneak off for their own personal rendezvous. Anna though is waiting by the stage for them.

“Anna,” Sam pulls her into a tight hug. She feels her heart beating steadily up against her chest.

“You were fantastic. As usual.”

Anna blushes. She tucks a piece of her thick, blood red-hair behind her ear.

“Thanks. You guys are so lovely. I don’t think I’ve got any bigger fans than you.”

“You’re not wrong,” Beth grins, shooting Sam a cheeky wink.

They’ve been watching her for months. She was so shy at first, doubting her own talent. She was listening to all the naysayers who told her she wasn’t good enough. That she’s only getting a turn because all the male singers have been shipped off to war.

She knows better now. She’s starting to believe in her own talent. Sam almost feels proud, like she’s watching a delicate, gorgeous flower beginning to bloom.

But for all her talent, Anna feels alone in this world. Sam can practically see the loneliness reverberating from her every time the patrons slink away after one her performances and she returns home to her dour living quarters she shares with an elderly matron and a group of girls who seem to enjoy spreading nasty rumors. She doesn’t have a man, either in Los Angeles or away at war. Sam doesn’t know if that’s because no man has caught her eye yet or if she is…different. Like her and Beth.
In any case, soon Anna won’t be lonely anymore.

They’ve been planning this for weeks. Befriending her, earning the girl’s trust, checking then double checking they are making the right decision. This is for forever, after all.

She’s not performing tomorrow and the girls at her home are being more wretched than usual. Beth barely needs to try before Anna is smiling gratefully at them, accepting the lift back their place for what she thinks is a drink and then a spare bed to sink into.

“Oh, my word,” Anna gapes, as she enters the mansion from one of the side entrances. The other girls have gone on a group hunt, while Hannah left with Cassandra earlier. They’re completely alone.

“It’s not bad, huh?”

“When you said your family were doing just swell, you weren’t kidding around, Beth.”

“Absolutely not,” Beth grins. She swaggers over to bar and pours Anna a drink. Sam takes a moment to admire the graceful way she moves, how the suit is tailored so you can see the curve of her hips and the swell of her breast underneath the dark material.

“You guys don’t act swanky though. I would never have thought you lived in such luxury.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

“Money isn’t everything to those who’ve always had it,” Sam says drily. Anna raises her eyebrows and chuckles humorlessly while Beth shrugs.

They stay together, chatting amicably for a few more minutes. Sam watches Beth like a hawk, waits for the slightest sign things are about to begin. She’s taking her cues off Beth, of course. She’s done this before.

(He feels the wall scrape her back as Beth presses against her. The rain is cold but Beth’s mouth is hot and wet. She feels Beth’s lips slide down her neck, then the sharp press of teeth and-)

“Sam?” Anna waves a pale hand in front of her face. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Sam swallows thickly. She feels nervous. Sitting next to Anna, Beth gives her an encouraging smile.

“Anna. We’re friends, right?”

“Yes of course. Thank god, I know you guys. You’re the only ones I’ve felt like I could talk to. Everyone else is such a fake.”

Sam tries to hide her wince.

“We feel the same way. And I think…well, you know, we think. We think you should come live with us. Full time.”

Anna wrinkles her nose in confusion. She glances back at Beth, who shoots her a small smile. Sam can tell she’s a little anxious. She tugs at her shawl that covers her shoulders.

“That’s sweet, and it would be swell to live here but…I need to perform.”

“You can. You’ll just have a new audience, that’s all,” Beth says.
Anna tugs her shawl around her neck a little tighter. The room isn’t cold though.

“I don’t understand.”

“We really like you, Anna. You’ve told us you’re not happy and we think we can take care of you. And I know you’d fit in with the other girls really well. You’d get to meet Beth’s sister, Hannah. I think the pair of you would get along just great. We practically don’t pay any bond and you’d get to sing for everyone, whenever you want.”

Anna fiddles with the hem of her black dress. The confidence has seeped away and now she’s the shy, awkward girl Sam first noticed months ago.

“That almost seems too good to be true. What’s the catch?”

“You just gotta die a little first, that’s all.”

Sam almost wants to throttle Beth, because now Anna’s mouth is flying open, a scream about to burst from her lungs. Sam lunges forward, cups a hand over her mouth, trapping the scream before it can be released.

“Shhhhh. I know. It only hurts for a second, I swear.”

Anna fights her, pale blue eyes widened in fear. She thrashes about. It’s hard for Sam to lower her mouth to her neck. She doesn’t want to hurt her more than necessary.

“Shhhhh.”

Finally, Anna seems to tire, just a little, and it’s enough for Sam to dive in. She doesn’t have time to really pick her spot though. She just rips her throat open, lapping up the blood that gushes into her mouth.

She’s sweet. Like juiciest nectar in the world.

Sam drinks her in, takes as much of her inside her as she can. She closes her eyes, drinks deep.

Finally, she feels two strong hands on her back. Beth gently guides her away from Anna. Sam smiles gratefully at her. Faintly, she hears Anna sink into the couch.

“Might want to slow down there, Sammy. She still needs some blood in her to mix with your own.”

“Oh my god!” Sam grins. “I can’t believe this is finally happening. We’re going to have a fledgling of our own.”

“Yeah. Our fledgling is going to be the envy of all the other sires.”

“No. No one is impressive as you. I have to give Cassandra credit there.”

“Oh?” Beth smirks coyly. Sam feels a coil of desire curl through her. Sam drags a finger across her own sticky lips, coating it with Anna’s blood. She brings it to Beth’s lips, groaning when she opens her mouth, taking her finger inside her. Beth laps at it, sucking it deeper inside. Sam represses a shudder when she feels one of Beth’s fangs gently graze her flesh.

There’s a sloppy, wet sounding pop when Sam pulls her finger out. Warmed by Anna’s blood, Sam blushes.

“You’re so beautiful, Beth.”
“As are you.” Beth kisses her hard. One, twice. Sam feels a pang of regret when Beth pulls away.

“Gotta finish the job though. Don’t want to keep Anna waiting…oh, crap….”

Sam snaps out of her lust filled haze as she stares down at Anna in horror.

Blood is streaming out from the gash at her throat. She’s making choked, wheezing noises, like someone is smothering her. Her eyes are wild, desperate, pleading.

“What the…. Sam. You pierced her jugular…”

“Oh god, that’s bad, right?”

“They bleed out too quickly if you do that.” Beth hunches over her. Blood is squirting everywhere while Anna curls and thrashes around on the cushions.

Sam tries to stem the blood. She puts her hands over the wound. Blood starts to pour through the tiny cracks between her fingers.

Beth bites her wrist. Puts it against Anna’s gasping mouth.

“Drink it. Anna. Come on.”

Her lips have gone a terrible shade of blue. Her movements have stilled. All her energy has seeped away, leaving her floppy like a doll.

“Anna,” Sam begs. She shakes her. She tries to move closer but her knees slip in the blood. She feels it coating her legs. She feels it seep into her shoes, trickling in between her toes.

“Drink.”

Anna ignores Beth. Her eyes are glassy, like a thin film is covering them. In what looks like it takes an enormous effort, she turns her gaze away from the ceiling and focuses on Sam.

Anna makes no sound but eyes scream: murderer.

Beth tries to force her blood down her throat. But it’s too late. She hears Beth curse beside her. She gets up and kicks the other couch as hard as she can. But Sam stays by Anna’s side, gripping her clammy hand. She feels cold.

“Anna. Please. I am so, so sorry.”

There’s hate in those soft blue eyes but Sam can’t look away.

“Anna. I’m sorry.”

Murderer. Anna says. Murderer.

Sam watches the light dim from her eyes.

_Murderer. Murderer._

Sam sags over the body. Presses her ear against her silent chest.

She’s right. Sam thinks. There’s no justice in this.

She is what she is.
And that’s a murderer.

Chapter End Notes

Yikes. Three dead humans. I'd avoid this gang of vamps.
First of all, thanks so much to my co-author, who was not only patient while I battled through this chapter, but was very sweet when I dumped seven thousand words on her metaphorical desk right before the fourth of July. Thanks dude. You make writing this so much easier.

If you're thinking, this story needs more Jess, then you're in luck. The next chapter will have 100 per cent more Jess.

Also, just so you know, vampires not only live off blood, but also reviews. So if you do not want to anger vampire Hannah, I would suggest you leave one. Even a single line review will be looked upon favorably, and will stop you from becoming a particularly tasty bottle of blood wine. Just saying.
I'd Rather Die Young

Chapter Notes

Named for the 1953 song of the same name by The Hilltoppers. Content warning for graphic descriptions of domestic violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I’d Rather Die Young

December 1953

Jessica has never seen snow. California winters are nothing but grey rain and though she and Richard keep making plans to go up to the mountains to ski one of these days, they never get around to it. Maybe, she thinks, when her and Richard are more settled, with a heap of green in the bank and a couple of kids running around, maybe then they’ll go. A ski trip could be fun for a family. Richard’s always talking about how he wants to show his future son everything the world has to see. He never says anything about a daughter. Jess honestly isn’t sure what they’d do if they had a girl.

Jess’s own parents had tried four times for a son and ended up with four girls for their trouble. Jessica was the youngest of her sisters, and by the time she came around, her parents were reluctant experts when it came to raising a good Christian girl. Jess read the Bible every night, spent every Saturday at the soup kitchen and was never allowed to watch something at the flicks unless it was a special occasion. She wore conservative dresses and long stockings and when her mother would catch her staring at a pretty dress in a shop window, she’d be reminded that women who dress like that are throwing away God’s grace for the sake of vanity. Jess wasn’t supposed to wear makeup or jewelry. She wasn’t allowed to date, and she definitely wasn’t supposed to have any intercourse before marriage.

So, naturally, she ended up fucking Richard behind the bleachers during senior year. She knew the term for women like her, since her mother was quite fond of it; but being a dirty, God-forsaken whore was the most freeing experience she’d ever had in her life. On top of that, Richard was popular, the coolest guy in school. He was the only guy Jess knew who had a motorcycle, and every few nights he’d take her out on it to a little spot behind the drive-in to smoke and talk and make out until the sun rose. When he suggested they run away from her family and live together somewhere their families could never bother them again, Jessica thought she was dreaming.

A month before they were supposed to graduate, they eloped. Jess cut her folks off after Richard suggested it. They didn’t need any trouble.

The town they live in now is quiet, almost somber. It’s only a couple hours north of Los Angeles, but it might as well be in the middle of nowhere. It was just some little farm town before some big shot decided to build a TV factory and hired half the town. Now there’s a cinema, a fancy beauty shop, and a car dealership where Richard just got named Salesman of the Month.
“Come on down to Peterson Ford today and we’ll guarantee you one-hundred-percent customer satisfaction, just as if your car were a brand new Ford!” Richard says to the camera, flashing his winning smile as the jingle starts to play and the commercial fades out. He’s been so busy lately, Jessica thinks she sees him more on the TV than she does in person. This commercial is his second that he’s done for the dealership now. He always looks so good up there, all white teeth and effortless charm. Jess thinks, with a small pang of jealousy, that he’s a bit of a heartthrob among the girls in town.

She hears Richard’s car rumble into the driveway and she stands up, a little too fast because she feels woozy for a second, a soft dark fog creeping into the corners of her vision and then receding. She clicks off the TV and heads into the kitchen to get dinner going. They’re running low on food; Jess wasn’t able to make a run to the supermarket last week because of roadwork. She’s able to get enough together to make a nice beef stew for tonight, though.

Dinner is quiet at first. Richard looks distracted. He stirs his stew without trying it. Jessica clears her throat.

“How was work today, honey?”

“Boring,” Richard says flatly. He doesn’t look at her. Jess stares at her bowl and sighs. Maybe he’s just tired.

“You seem a little down.”

“Oh do I? Aren’t you perceptive,” Richard snaps. Jess jumps at the sudden harshness of his voice. Richard rolls his eyes at her startled expression. “Oh, don’t take it personally, honey. It’s just that Billy from sales didn’t show up for work today.”

“Really? Is he sick?”

“Would I be worried if he’d called in sick? Don’t be stupid, Jessie,” Richard sighs. “Nobody’s been able to find him. His wife’s got no clue where he is. Worried he might have gotten himself into trouble.”

Jess almost laughs at the thought.

“Richie, what trouble could he have gotten into in a place like this?”

“You know what kind,” Richard says. “It was the reds. They took him.”

Jess thinks of late night broadcasts about the Soviet nuclear program, about whispers of spies and traitors and sabotage from the inside. They’ll either convert or kill every last one of us, folks said. The Communists can’t be negotiated with.

“Do you…do you really think so…?” Jess whispers, suddenly, absurdly afraid that somebody could be watching them.

“That’s what everyone says, right?” Richard says. “Their spies look just like everyone else. They hide in places like this where no one will think to look, spreading their lies to normal folks like you and me.”

Jessica shivers.

“That’s so scary. I hope it’s not true.”
“Don’t worry about it,” Richard says. “I’ll talk to some of the boys at Ron’s tonight, and we’ll see if we can find Billy. No need to get all worked up, sweetie.”

“You’re going to Ron’s again?” Jess asks.

“What’s that tone?” Richard snaps. “What else am I supposed to do, stay at home and dither?” He stands up without clearing his plate and heads into the foyer to grab his coat.

“Be sure to do some dusting after you wash the dishes,” he calls into the room. “I swear, it’s like a damn tomb in here.” Jess hears the door slam and the car pull out of the driveway, headed to Ron’s tavern, and whatever sin and debauchery that wait there.

She turns on the radio and hums along to a cheery rendition of *Jingle Bells* as she washes the dishes and dries them off with a tattered dishrag. Yet another new thing to get at the market. She’s not sure if the grocery store will have them, but it’s worth a look. After she cleans up the kitchen she jots down a quick list.

*Eggs*

*Carrots*

*Ground beef*

*Ham*

*Celery*

*Strawberry jam*

*Diced tomatoes*

*Extra milk*

*Valium prescription*

*Dishrag*

Jess looks at the list and frowns. Christmas is only a few weeks away, and she still has no idea what to get Richard. All the magazines are loaded with advertisements for drills and cars and fancy watches, but Jess doesn’t have that much money to her name and she doesn’t want to get Richard a mediocre gift. She supposes she could sell her hair, like that lady in *Gift of the Magi*, and use the savings to buy him something nice, but Richard says short hair would make her look like a lesbian, so she can’t have any of that. She sighs and heads toward her car, figuring she could ask one of the people at the market for gift ideas.

The streets are dark and almost deserted as she drives down the road. The supermarket stays open until nine, but people are rarely out after six or seven these days. She doesn’t know why. People seem afraid of the night all of a sudden, running home as the sun sets and locking their doors. She heard some girl went missing a couple weeks ago, but she was some tramp who lived with her trash family off in the sticks, Richard said. Good riddance, he said.

The supermarket is almost empty by the time she gets there. Jessica moves quickly through her list, and is about to ask the clerk for gift ideas when she sees a pretty, oddly-dressed woman walk into the store with blood on her chin. Her stomach flips over. She hates blood. But nobody is doing anything
and Jess worries the strange woman might be in trouble.

“Excuse me, miss?” Jess says as she approaches the woman, who’s wearing a mannish overcoat and dark pants, “You have some blood on you.”

The woman blinks, and brings a hand to her chin. She blushes, lightly.

“Oh, thank you!” she says. “Silly me, I just went to the dentist today, getting a tooth fixed, and I guess I missed a spot cleaning up.”

More than a spot, Jess wants to say. It was practically dribbling down her chin. But this woman is likely dizzy from whatever painkillers they gave her at the dentist, so she does her best to reserve judgment.

“You don’t look familiar,” Jess says. “Did you move here recently?”

“Yes, I did,” the woman says. “A couple of friends and I are living here for a while. What about you? Have you lived here long?”

“Only about a year,” Jessica confesses. “Though if you ask me, it really doesn’t take very long to feel like you know everyone around here. It’s a cozy little town.”

The woman smiles. Her eyes are dark and pretty.

“Well, I’m glad this town has such friendly people like you in it,” she says, then frowns. “You seem worried. What’s the matter?”

Jess blinks. She didn’t know she was wearing her stress so plainly on her face.

“It’s nothing, really. I’m fine.” The woman looks unconvinced, so to get her off her back Jess says “I’m just not sure what to get my husband for Christmas, is all.”

The woman’s eyes light up.

“Well, as it happens, my friends and I have a Weber kettle grill that we were looking to give away. Does your husband have a grill?”

“He doesn’t, but I’m sure he’d like one,” Jess says. Richard is always trying to boost his business, and outdoor barbeques could really add to his popularity. “How much do you want for it?”

“Not a dime,” the woman says. “Like I said, we’re giving it away.”

Ordinarily Jessica would say that charity is for the poor, but with an offer like that, how can she refuse?

“You’re too kind,” she says. “Uh, when can I come pick it up?”

“Tomorrow night after dinner,” the woman says, smoothly, like she’d rehearsed it. She writes down the address on the back of Jess’s grocery list. “What’s your name, by the way?”

“Jessica,” she says. “I’m Richard Riley’s wife.”

The woman smiles and nods. Despite her strange, mannish appearance, she really is quite pretty. Jessica finds herself looking far too deeply into her eyes.

“My name is Beth.”
Beth’s house is a magnificent mansion in the middle of a small forest just outside of town. It’s hard to believe a single girl and a couple of her friends could own a place so massive. Deep down, she wonders if they’re crooks. The sun has long since set, and when Jess looks up, she can see a sky dotted with shimmering stars. She’s far enough outside the city limits to see them clearly, a while shining jewelry box of stars.

Nervously she walks through the front gardens and stands before the huge oak door. Her hand shakes as it rests on the knocker. When she uses it, the sound echoes, deep and booming, through the grounds. A few minutes later, Beth answers the door.

“Jessica, honey! How are you?”

Beth is, once again, mannishly dressed in a flannel shirt and dark blue jeans. She wonders if those are her boyfriend’s clothes. Nevertheless, as strange as it is to say it, Beth looks good. Handsome, even.

Jess kicks herself. She shouldn’t think like that.

“We have the grill back behind the house. Maybe we can see if we can cover it with something and get it in the back of your car, yeah?”

Jess knows it won’t fit in her trunk, but maybe they can lay it down on the backseat, throw a tarp over it, and Jess can wait until Christmas to show it to Richard. He’ll like a grill. He jokes sometimes that he’d like to have one just to shove burgers in Jessica’s yapping mouth to shut her up.

Well. It was probably a joke, anyway.

They go around back, through splendid gardens lined with, of all things, aspen trees. How on earth are they keeping aspens alive in southern California?

“This place is so beautiful,” Jess breathes. Beth laughs.

“If you think this place is nice, you should see our place in Los Angeles.”

Jess balks.

“You have two mansions? Are you a movie star?”

Beth just chuckles.

“Not exactly.”

Jess shakes her head and laughs.

“If I’d known I had millionaires living in my backyard, I would’ve made you help me with gift-giving a long time ago.”

Beth chuckles.

“Oh, trust me, you do not want me in charge of finding gifts. My friends all agree I’m a terrible gift-giver.”

“Oh, me too!” Jess says. “I never know what to get my husband. Last year I got him a dress shirt and he about threw a fit, saying it made him look like a girl.” She sighs. “Thankfully, he’s the only
person on my list these days, so it’s not like I’m spending all season scrounging around for presents.”

Beth frowns.

“What about your family?”

Jess avoids Beth’s gaze.

“They…I don’t really see them much anymore. I don’t think they’d want gifts from me.”

Beth’s expression softens.

“Well, I’m sure this gift will knock your husband’s socks right off, yeah?”

She gestures to the grill, covered in a simple black tarp. Jess examines it. It seems functional enough, though it doesn’t look like it’s seen much use.

“Now, this isn’t a joke, right? The grill works?” Jess asks.

“That would be both cruel and uninspired,” Beth tells her. “If I were gonna prank you, I’d be sure it was the prank of the century.”

Jess raises her eyebrows. She realizes she’s smiling, just a little.

“Oh?”

“I don’t think you’d fall for any old trick,” Beth says. “I’d have to get you with something special.”

Jess smirks but says nothing. She suddenly feels the urge to do something childish.

On the way back to the car Jess falls, clutching at her chest and letting out choked moans. The grill clatters to the ground as Beth runs to help her, putting two freezing fingers on her neck.

“Jessica. Jessica, can you hear me?” Beth asks, desperately.

A pause. Nothing, not even the sound of breath. Beth’s hands shake. Then—

Jess sticks out her tongue, winks, and blows a perfect raspberry.

Beth leans back a bit. She looks annoyed for a second, but then she smirks.

“Good one.”

She helps Jessica to her feet and they haul the grill the rest of the way to the car. Once they load the grill in, Beth starts to head toward the house.

“Got any evening plans?” Jess asks before she goes.

“Oh, you know, I was actually going to invite you in for dinner, but…uh…I’m sorry, I just remembered, I can’t tonight. Um. Maybe next week? Or something?”

Jess laughs.

“Sure! I’d hardly say no to that. Just let me know when a good time for that is, yeah? See you later, honey.”

She gets in her car and drives off, leaving her strange neighbor in the driveway.
After that, it’s weekly. Jess waits until her husband goes off to the tavern, and she spends her evenings with Beth, sometimes at her mansion, but more often at the Sonata Diner on Main Street. Jess gets fries and a milkshake ("Don’t eat too much, honey. Guys love ladies, not walruses") and Beth gets a soda. They sit at the same booth every time and talk until closing time. Jess learns that Beth is from Los Angeles, that she has a twin sister, and that she was alone for most of her childhood until a remarkable woman came into her life and gave her an incredible opportunity.

“What kind of opportunity?”

Beth smirks, and leans in like she’s about to share a secret.

“We’re starlets. Or we will be soon. Actresses and dancers and musicians, all living and working in her mansion. She takes care of all of our expenses so we can practice and perform all the time. I think some of us are gonna get real big.”

Jess’s eyes widen. She always wanted to be an actress. Her parents thought the women in Hollywood were vainglorious harlots, and Richard thought it was silly for women to want to work, but she’s always dreamed about taking the stage. The women on the stage and screen were so glorious and brilliant, in their dresses and pearls. Jess would’ve given anything to be like that.

“That’s…that’s such a cool gig. How on earth did you get that?”

“Our sponsor has an eye for rising talent,” Beth boasts, taking a long sip of her pop. She looks at Jess. “Do you do anything like that? Act? Sing?”

“Well, I’m acting like I don’t want to give your big head a good hard smack for having such darn good luck,” Jess tells her. Beth laughs. “Honestly, how did such a fream get such a great gig? How can I get that?”

“Fream!” Beth laughs. “I’m wounded, Jessie! I think the way I dress is very modern.”

Jess giggles.

“You look like a skinny little beatnik boy,” she tells her. Beth just laughs again.

“You keep needling me, and I’m never gonna recommend you to the sponsor!”

Jess stops cold.

“You—what?”

Beth smiles, warm and kind.

“I think you’re really charming, and you have an air about you. And we had someone who…left us, recently, so we have a vacancy. You’d make a fine actress, if you’d let me introduce you.”

Jess thinks about it. The thought of living in a splendid mansion, being specially trained to act and sing. Becoming the marvelous actress she always wanted to be, always dreamed of since she was a girl.


“Why not?”
“Richard needs me home. Who would take care of the house with me gone?”

“What, he can’t do it himself?” Beth asks. Jess giggles, though there’s less humor in it.

“I guess most men just aren’t built for that sort of thing. He’s certainly hopeless as a cook.”

Beth cocks her head.

“What’s he like? Richard.”


“What do you mean, ‘angry’?”

Jess doesn’t answer. She feels something prickly in her stomach.

“Jessica, does he get violent?”

Jess can’t find her words.

“Jess—”

“Stop it,” Jess barks. “What are you trying to say!? What do you know about Richard? Stop acting like you know me or my life! Judgmental freak, you’re the one who’s strange, not him! Leave me alone!”

She storms out of the diner, leaving Beth to pay the bill.

The next week is Christmas Eve. Jess feels a pang of guilt as she boxes and wraps up the grill and lays it under the tree. She hasn’t spoken with Beth since their fight.

(“Fight” isn’t accurate. Beth was just worried, that’s all. Jess said terrible things to her. It’s her own fault. Bitch. Whore. Harlot. Worthless wife and worthless friend—)

“Jessica, are you making dinner or what?”

Jess hurries into the kitchen and starts preparing the roast duck. It takes entirely too long, and she can hear Richard pacing in the other room. When she gets to the table, Richard looks tired. It’s ridiculous that he had to work on Christmas Eve of all times.

“How was work, honey?” Jess asks after sitting down.

“Fine.”

“A-any sign of Billy?”

“No.”

A long stretch of silence. Jess pokes at her food with a fork.

“Do you think—”

“Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?” Richard cuts her off. “Even for a woman.
Jesus.”

The rest of the dinner is silent. After he’s through eating, Richard stands up and mutters “going to Ron’s” without cleaning his plate.

“But it’s Christmas—”

“Oh, shut up, will you? I’ll see you later.”

As the car pulls out of the driveway and onto the street, Jess sits at the table and sobs.

She’s not sure what possesses her to go to the Sonata that night—she doubts it’s even open—but she’s on her way there a few minutes later without really realizing what she’s doing. She doesn’t have anyone else to talk to; Richard gets mad when she goes out and tries to make friends, since some of those “friends”, he argued, could have been handsome men trying to hit on her. She can only hope Beth will find it in her heart to forgive her.

She doesn’t even know if Beth will be there.

When she gets to the Sonata, the lights are dim. The “open” sign is out, and a sign on the door reads: Closed tonight and tomorrow. Merry Christmas! Feeling a surge of anger at her own total stupidity —of course they’d be closed on Christmas Eve. What was she thinking?—she feels the sting of tears again as she walks back down the deserted streets. It’s chilly, and dark. It’s not good to be out this late. Something could happen to her.

Headlights fill the darkness around her and she turns to see the bright headlamps of a fancy black town car. It pulls over beside her, and Beth, of all people, gets out.

“Jessie! What are you doing out here? It’s freezing!” Beth calls. Jess doesn’t fight as Beth gently guides her over to the passenger’s side and helps her in. “Here, let’s get you home.” Beth moves to put the keys in the ignition, Jess grabs her hand, ignoring the shiver that goes up her arm. Beth looks at her in surprise. “Jess—?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for calling you a freak. I just…I was…I…”

It takes Jess a few seconds to realize she’s crying. The realization makes her cry harder, because her broken fucking brain doesn’t know how to handle any emotions beyond lust.

Stupid whore. Stupid selfish whore.

“Jess, what happened?” Beth asks, her voice level and calm. There’s no trace of anger or resentment in anything she’s said or done tonight; it’s like she forgot Jess’s insults entirely.

“Jessica,” she says, seriously. “Please tell me what’s happening.”

“I don’t know what I did, but Richard’s angry,” Jess admits. Her voice is a trembling whisper. “He’s always at Ron’s, he’s never home, he won’t even talk to me.” Jess squeezes her eyes shut. She takes in a deep, shuddering breath. “I think he’s seeing another girl. I think he wants a divorce.”

“Jess—”

“I’m not good enough,” Jess cries. “I wasn’t a good enough wife and now he’s gonna leave me.” When she opens her eyes, her vision is too clouded with tears to see anything. “I don’t have anyone else, Beth. My family won’t talk to me, and the only person I ever talk to anymore is you. I’m all alone. What do I do?”
Beth pulls Jess into a firm hug. Gently, she thumbs the tears away from Jessica’s eyes. There’s more kindness on her pretty face than Jess has ever seen on anyone.

“We’ll take care of you. My friends and I, we stick together. We’ll take you in if you want that.”

Jess swallows around a hard lump in her throat. She imagines life in a safe and lovely mansion, away from her family and her husband, surrounded with remarkable women like Beth, who would help her become something she’d dreamed about as a girl.

She wonders if Richard would come for her. People like him; everyone likes him. He could gather a mob and bust down the doors and—

“I…I’ll think about it,” Jess whispers. “Could you take me home, please?”

Reluctantly, Beth agrees.

They drive in silence. Jess stares out of the window at the rising full moon, and imagines the stars in the sky falling like snow. Beth hums a Christmas hymn whose name Jess can’t remember. She remembers her days as a choir girl in the church, singing praises to a God she abandoned the moment she fell for Richard. Everyone who has found and cared for her has abandoned her. She wonders how long Beth and the girls would be able to stand her before they left her.

The car pulls into Jess’s driveway and Beth looks at her carefully.

“Are you sure about this?”

Jess nods.

“Thanks for the ride,” she mumbles.

Beth doesn’t bother to disguise her sadness.

“Merry Christmas, Jess.”

“Yeah. Merry Christmas,” Jess whispers, and gets out of the car.

When Jess gets into the house, she hears a door slam. She freezes. Into the foyer stumbles Richard, clearly drunk, and undisguised fury in his eyes.

“I should’ve known you’d wander off the moment I turned my back,” he tells her. “You filthy whore. Who was it? Jerry? Tom? It was Tom, wasn’t it? That bastard. He’s had his eyes on you since I brought you here.”

“I wasn’t—I was just seeing a girlfriend,” Jess stutters as Richard stumbles toward her. He spits at her.

“Girlfriend. Sure. Like you have any friends.”

“Richard, please—”

There’s a loud clap sound as Richard strikes her across the face. Jess staggers back from the force of the blow, nursing her stinging cheek.


“Richard. Please, I love you, I do, I would never—”
He hits her again. Grabs her shoulder and looks deep into her eyes. Richard’s eyes are baby blue, the color of a clear summer sky. Jess remembers spending countless hours staring into them, looking for the answers to the world in them.

Richard’s eyes are hardened chips of ice now. Jess can smell the whiskey on his breath.

“Oh I’m gonna fuck you up, babydoll.”

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Through the haze of pain and the ringing of her ears, Jess hears a knock. Someone pounding hard on the front door.


Jess’s head is throbbing. A trickle of blood oozes down from one nostril. She can’t fully open one eye. Slowly, painfully, she picks herself up off the floor, trying to ignore the way her battered stomach and shoulders scream in protest. Everything hurts. It’s all her fault.

Her head spins as she gets to her feet and she wonders why Richard hasn’t shooed the knocker away yet. Must be asleep by now. How long has she been unconscious? She staggers to the door, leaning on it and staring through the door’s opaque window. Through the glass she can see a familiar face.

“Beth…go home.”

“Please, Jess,” Beth mouths. “Let me in.”

“This…this is your fucking fault, damn you!” Jess cries. “He hurt me because of you! You—” the yelling sends a wave of sickening pain through her gut. She keels over and dry heaves. Beth doesn’t leave.

“Please, Jess, just for a minute,” Beth says through the door. “One minute, and then I’m gone. I’ll leave you alone.”

“Beth…”

“I’ll keep knocking if you don’t. I’ll yell. Please, Jess. Please.”

“Okay,” Jess sighs. She’s too tired to fight. “Okay. But just for a minute. And then you’ll leave me alone, alright?”

“Oh kay.”

Jess stands back and opens the door. Beth moves inside, and before Jess can move or cry out, Beth has her locked in a tight bear hug. Her lips touch Jess’s neck and she shivers.

“When about this,” Beth says, and what follows is a stabbing pain in her throat. Jess squeaks, surprised, before collapsing weakly to her knees. She can feel her own blood, hot and wet, on her neck. That’s going to take forever to wash out, she thinks absurdly. Beth kneels in front of her and drinks her blood, slow and gentle, and Jess sinks to her knees, too weak and exhausted to even try to resist. She isn’t even really processing what’s happening.

There’s a sound like a soft crunch and then Beth is holding out her palm to her, scratched and leaking dark blood.

“Drink this,” Beth says, gently but firmly, and Jess is too weak to disobey. She wonders if Beth was
planning to do this all along. She’s heard stories from her pastor about strange women who prey on innocent girls and turn them into demons. Maybe, she wonders, as she swallows the disgusting black blood, maybe that’s what she always wanted.

Jess falls backward, feeling her head grow hot and sweaty as the ceiling swirls and contorts in kaleidoscopic patterns above her. Her stomach lurches, and what remains of her blood feels like it’s burning. She remembers strange images, floating into and out of her head. Her little white church dresses. Her first time at a diner, watching the waitresses on roller skates. The feeling of Richard’s lips on hers.

The feeling of a fist on her jaw.

*You talk too damn much, Jessie.*

As her vision blacks out she sees something huge and dark standing over her, its shape shifting and changing as her body temperature plummets, and she knows with a terrible certainty that she’s meeting the devil.

*For before the Lord casts the wicked into the fiery pits of Hell, the sinners will see the dark angel to whom they sold their soul.*

*And they shall be the slaves of Satan.*

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She wakes to find her wounds are gone, fresh skin growing over cuts, her eye no longer blackened. Her stomach still hurts, but it’s not the dull ache of bruising. It’s something deeper, emptier. She feels like she could eat the world for breakfast and still be starving by noon.

The room she’s in is big, cavernous, and half-lit. Like a cathedral, buts smaller. She can see a row of chairs above her, but can’t make out the occupants. She hears a whimper nearby and turns to find someone cowering in the shadows stretching across the half-lit space. Suddenly, another light fills the space. Jess looks around, sees a band of about twenty women watching her. She sees a dark haired girl with a sharp, pretty face, grinning from ear to ear. She sees another girl with fair hair and freckles, looking away from the pit where she and the man stand with a troubled expression. She sees Beth, and a girl who looks exactly like her, only with long dark hair and glasses, staring daggers down at the man in the shadows.

When Jess gets closer, she can see it’s Richard.

Whoever has brought him down here has roughed him up considerably. There are scratch marks all over his skin, and bruises on his throat. His sharp clothes have been traded for a simple white gown, stained with blood. When he tries to speak, it comes out in a pitiful, unintelligible rasp. When he opens his mouth, Jess can see he’s missing teeth.

She should feel pity or fear, looking down at her tortured husband, but all she feels is a quiet, simmering rage.

A beautiful woman in the center of the crowd smiles down upon her.

“Merry Christmas, Jessica. I see my charge Bethany has given you a great gift.”

Jess sees Beth looking down at her with apprehension.

“It’s one not everyone appreciates. Our dearly departed Willa decided she’s rather burn in the sun
than live her true life as a superior creature, so it’s important to understand the gravity of your privilege.”

She gives some spiel about immortality and the tyranny of mortal man, but Jess is only half listening. There’s an ache inside of her telling her to stalk forward and grab her husband by the throat and split him open from neck to dick.

Dick. That’s a shortening for Richard, isn’t it? It’s fitting, really.

Jess grabs her husband by the hair and drags him to his feet, staring at him, right into his cold blue eyes. They’re watering now with crocodile tears.

“J—Jessica…please…p-please…you wouldn’t…I’m…we…I love you…I love you…!” Richard begs pathetically. “You wouldn’t hurt me, r-right?”

Jess lets the rage of whatever demon is inside of her take her over as she puts one thumb on Richard’s chin, two fingers on his lips. She opens his mouth.

“Dicky,” Jess sing-songs, “Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?”

She tightens her grip and twists. There’s a crunch and the sound of tearing flesh as a meaty smile crawls across Richard’s face. Jess yanks down and Richard’s face splits in half, his lower jaw yanked away, his tongue lolling freely in his sundered mouth. He splutters and falls, his eyes staring off at nothing, glazing over.

Jess sucks the blood from her trophy and sighs as her screaming stomach begins to fill.

She’s wicked. She’s a monster.

She’s free.

Chapter End Notes

That was one of the darkest things I’ve written in a long time. The 1950’s were not a great time.
On the other hand, that’s another straight white guy down for the count. Chris better watch his back.
I hope you liked the chapter! Be sure to leave a comment if you did. We always appreciate it!
Next chapter or two is probably going to be a short interlude depicting everyday "life" for the vampire girls. I hope you enjoy that as well!
Thanks, as always, for reading!
Interlude: Endless Sleep

Chapter Notes

Here’s the deal with interludes, guys. They are shortish chapters outlining a certain scene or scenes we think are important but don't quite fit into the relevant chapters. These interludes are not integral to the story but they certainly add to the world the characters inhabit (yes, I'm a wanker, I know). You can absolutely skip over them if you please. There will be a few interludes throughout the story.

March, 1958.

Even vampires grapple with their own mortality.

Beth has seen enough fledgling vamps burn to know that true immortality is a charade. Vampires die. Often in a visceral, disgusting ways. A human can be dispatched quietly. When a vamp goes out, it’s loud. And messy.

Only a few have longevity. Like Cass. Like her, Sam, Hannah and (hopefully) Jess.

Still, hanging off a cliff face somewhere in the bowels of Yosemite National Park, Beth can’t shake the feeling she’s at risk of becoming a pile of black goo if she stays out here much longer. It’s not like she can get a tan these days.

She’s stuck at a tricky point on this goddam cliff face. She pauses. Her muscles are aching and it feels like all the chalk has worn off her hands. If she were a human she wouldn’t have been able to make it this far. Still, there’s a limit even to vampire strength.

“Beth?”

She looks up. It’s pitch black but Beth can see Sam clearly. Her girlfriend smiles down at her.

Little minx. Of course, she managed to navigate this part with ease.

“I’m okay.”

“Need some advice…?”

“No, I’m good, thanks,” Beth says, her tone curt. Most girls would be offended by her tone. But Sam doesn’t take it personally, not like Hannah or Jess would. Instead she just ‘mms’ skeptically.

When Beth finally gets up there, she’s going to kiss that smirk right off her gorgeous, smug face.

“Right,” Beth growls, gritting her teeth. She can’t let Sam win. She straightens her arms up, making sure her legs take the brunt of her weight.

She shifts her weight onto her left leg before reaching with her right arm as her fingers latch onto a
small ledge. She swings her right leg up, foot landing softly sideways on a ledge, before lifting off from her left and reaching up, up and up, past the difficult bit, climbing with purpose and momentum until suddenly Sam is looming over her, a broad, warm smile etched across her face.

She offers Beth her hand but she doesn’t need it, scaling the final meter of the cliff with ease. When she does reach the summit, Beth sinks to her knees. She’s shaking, too tired to even attempt to take her harness off. Her muscles feel stretched and worn and her hands feel rubbed raw. But she’s done it. This was the hardest route so far and she’s done it.

“You all right there, hon? Does the big bad vampire need a widdle hug?”

“Huh?” Beth opens her eyes and sees Sam standing over her with a gleeful look in her eyes.

“I was getting worried. If we waited much longer we would’ve been taking a nice, short, sunbath together.”

“Ugh. Please. I don’t know what you were watching, but I had that covered.”

“That’s your definition of covered? Funny. I’d hate to see what uncovered looks like.”

“You’ve never complained about me being uncovered before.”

“Oh shush, you,” Sam says, looking away. Beth can’t help but feel smug when she sees a faint blush coloring her cheeks. She offers Beth her hand, pulling her up from the ground. Beth’s legs are shaking but thankfully they don’t give out. Sam would never let her live it down if they did.

“Don’t worry. You did a good job. You’re absolutely the second-best rock climbing vampire in all of California.”

“Thanks, smartass.” Beth grins, knocking her shoulder against Sam’s. She starts to undo the harness, trying not to blush herself when Sam winks lewdly at her.

“Rock climbing vamps. Huh. That should be our band name.”

“Oh god, can you imagine? You and Hannah better do it. I have the musical skills of a wet rock.”

“That’s not true. I’ve seen you play the tambourine. You’re excellent. Hey!” Beth pretends to cringe as Sam hits her. As their laughter dies down Beth casts one final, lingering look down.

“This was fun though. Are you sure we’ve done all the routes? I’ve loved coming out here.”

“I think we have. There are a few more over at the east part of the park but we’d need to scout it out beforehand. I don’t actually want get stuck up on a cliff face.”

“Agreed,” Beth says, dropping the harness into her bag. She reaches for Sam’s hand and they both proceed to walk down the trail.

Yosemite National Park is massive. They’ve been visiting it for years, off and on, and Beth still doesn’t think she’s seen everything the place offers. They’ve spend hours here, gawking at the wildlife and hiking along unmarked trails. They usually arrive past nine in the evening, eager to avoid humans.

It's so tranquil. Sometimes they stop and sit together for hours, taking in the majestic beauty
surrounding them. Other times, though, the mountains loom over them almost ominously, making Beth feel small and exposed. She doesn't anything when she feels like this, but Sam, of course, notices. She never mocks Beth, or accuse her of being soft like a human. Instead she wraps her arms around her and holds Beth close.

They stay quiet for a while as they descend from where they came from, quickly and silently navigating their way through the underbrush. Soon they’ll be on the tourist trail on their way out of here.

But…. Beth doesn’t want to leave yet. It’s too lovely here. She has so many responsibilities back home. Here she has none. They can do whatever they want, together in the dead of night. It’s liberating. Actually liberating: unlike the stupid ‘free love’ movement the hippies keep nattering about.

“Can’t we stay a bit?” she asks, slowing down. Sam looks at her, confused, but doesn’t drop her hand.

“Why?”

“Well, it’s just so beautiful. There are so many animals out tonight and I just…I want to stop and take it all in, you know?”

Sam smiles faintly. “I know. I get it, I do. But if we hang around too long it’ll be dawn and we’ll be stuck out here. And we don’t want that.”

Beth shudders. If dawn does creep up on them, they’d have to try their luck in finding a cave to shelter in. She doesn’t want to find out if a vampire could survive a day only partially covered.

“I don’t want to burn either, but, Sam, it’s…. we only left a few hours ago. The moon is bright. We’d have hours, c’mon…” Beth whines. Sometimes she wishes Sam wasn’t so cautious. It feels way too early to go home. Sam just rolls her eyes and squeezes Beth’s hand.

“Beth. I want you to listen. Listen to your instincts. What do you feel?”

This game again. Beth sighs, but stays quiet, not moving, ears straining to hear to what Sam does.

When Beth listens, really listens, she realizes the mountain isn’t quiet. Instead it’s teeming with life. She hears rodents scratching around in the dirt, hears bats screeching off in the distance. There are other animals too, snuffling in the undergrowth. They’re all hunting, gathering food like they always do…

Just before dawn…

Beth’s eyes shoot open, glancing up at the moon in alarm. Sam squeezes her hand.

“It’s okay. From the sounds of the animals and how high the moon is, I’d say this is, what, between three and four in the morning? We have time, but I’d prefer to cautious. I don’t really feel burning to a crisp today.”

“Yeah…” Beth looks down at Sam with awe. “How do you—”

“Don’t look at me like that, Beth. It’s not magic,” Sam laughs. “I just pay attention to my surroundings. I don’t like relying on watches. That’s what happened to…”

“Yeah,” Beth says grimly. A faulty watch is how they lost Susan. Her sire didn’t warn her about the
risks of losing track of time.

When she gets back home she’s going double check that Jess understands the risks of staying out too late.

“C’mon,” Sam starts dragging them down the slope again. “It’s freezing out here and I have a date with a hot bath.”

“Do you…. need some help with that?”

“Sure. I always appreciate your helping hands.”

They share a grin. They’re on the tourist trail now and Beth spots a sign pointing them in the direction of where they parked the car. It’s a few miles away but with their speed they’ll be out of here in no time.

She hears a twig snap behind them. She stops. The sound is too heavy for an animal.

“Sam, wait.”

They pause, ears straining. Then they hear the noise again, four heavy feet trundling across the ground.

“Human….” Sam mutters.

Beth drops Sam’s hand, pushing her away a little, quietly moving towards the noise. She peers into the gloom and that’s when she sees them, two boys, maybe twenty, twenty-one, heading straight towards them.

“Hey laddiiiiiiies,” the older, bulkier one says. He glances at his smaller, fairer friend. The pair of them are wearing matching shit-eating grins.

“What are you two gals doing out so late? You look like a pair of thieves,” the blonde man says, stumbling towards them.

“We’re just out for a walk….,” Sam says quietly.

“What’s in the bag?” the blonde boy asks. He moves towards Sam, like he’s entitled to reach out and touch her. Beth steps out in front of her, shielding Sam and staring the boy down.

“C’mon now, don’t look at me like that,” he says to Beth. “I’m just curious. What’s in the bag?”

“A severed head.”

A pause. The two boys look at each other. Then—

They burst out laughing. They’re laughing so hysterically the smaller one leans against his taller, bulkier friend.

“You’re a hoot,” the taller one says. “A severed head. That’s a good one!”

“Oooh, that’s real spooky. She’s being spooky, Gene!”

Beth rolls her eyes. These children are annoying her now.

“Hey, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” the blonde one says. He pokes his friend, Gene, in the gut. “We’re not
being gentlemen here. We apologize. But, uh, me and some friends are having a bash nearby. You
ladies should join us. We’ve got hooch and cigarettes.”

“I stole some of my dad’s Cuban cigars. You try should them,” the other boy chimes in.

“No really,” Sam says. She reaches for Beth’s hand, tugging her away from the boys. “We should
get going.”

“Aw, come on,” the blonde boy says. “Look, my name’s Paul and this big lug is Gene. You ladies
really shouldn’t be out here so late at night. There are some bad people out there. Let us take care of
you until morning.”

“Paul, that’s a real sweet offer, but my friend and I should be off. Like you said, it’s late.” Beth says,
trying to keep her temper in check. Paul just grins. He’s barely looking at her. He’s far too focused
on Sam.

“Your friend’s being real quiet. What’s your name, beautiful?”

“…Sam.”

“A beautiful name for a beautiful girl! Now, come on, Sam. Why don’t you talk some sense into
your friend? You both look like you’ve run a marathon. If you’re lost, you can just shoot the breeze
with me and my friend here. We’re real gentlemen, I promise.”

Gentlemen? Beth tries not to scoff. This boy is like all the others. Entitled and arrogant and
comfortable in his place in the world.

She suppresses a growl. Paul’s looking at Sam like she’s a juicy slice of meat. He assumes because
she doesn’t have a man by her side she’s common property. There for the taking. Beth may as well
be invisible.

Idiot. She’ll show him who’s a piece of meat.

“Actually, she doesn’t need to convince me. I think it’s a great idea. Why don’t you take us back to
where you’re camping out and we can start a real party?”

“Beth…” Sam says.

“Hey, whoa now, that’s the spirit, Beth!” Paul says. Behind him, Gene grunts like a Neanderthal.

Beth smiles. The boys are already starting to walk down to the path. Towards where their camp is.
She thinks she’ll get them before they arrive. There may be others. If there are she’ll need them to
shoulder the blame if their bodies are ever found.

What a perfect way to end the night.

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Sam says, surprising Beth. She hasn’t moved. She looks at the
boys anxiously.

“Come on, Sam,” Paul says. He sounds impatient. A lock of greasy blonde hair has fallen across his
face. Beth suppresses the urge to yank it out.

“Don’t be a square, Sam,” Gene pipes up.

“Well, I guess I’m a big old square then,” Sam retorts. She reaches for Beth’s arm, pulling her back.
“Beth, we should go.”

“Sam, this will only take a second.” Beth whispers. What’s her problem? Beth will be careful. She’ll protect them both, like she always does. She’ll make them disappear and even if they’re found their own mothers won’t recognize them.

Her words don’t appease Sam. She doesn’t look relieved, instead she looks anxious. She keeps tugging Beth away.

“Ladies…”

“Sam…” Beth tries to squirm out of Sam’s grip but she doesn’t let go.

“Listen, our camp site’s only a little way away…”

“Do you idiots have a death wish?” Sam snarls. She bares her teeth at them. Moonlight glints off her fangs. The boys still.

“Leave. Now!”

The boys shriek in horror. Beth can hear them whimpering and squealing pathetically as they turn and run.

They stay still for a long time, watching the retreating figures. If Beth decided to, she could catch them.

She doesn’t.

They’re finally alone. The silence is thick and heavy and lingers between them. Sam isn’t looking at her.

“Why…”

“Why? How about, why do we have to kill them? We ate yesterday…”

“So?” Beth snaps. It scares her when Sam gets like this. “Are you kidding me? You heard them. The disgusting way they talked about you. That guy was practically salivating. You know what they wanted.” Beth’s lips curl into a sneer. “The world’s better off without them.”

“Are you sure about that? What gives you the right to be judge, jury and executioner?”

“We’re vampires, Sam! Or have you forgotten?”

“How could I?” Sam says bitterly.

Her eyes look dull and resigned. Beth feels fear surge through her chest.

She hates it when Sam gets that look in her eyes. Like she’s pulling away from her. Like the thread between them is unravelling, strand by strand.

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry.” Beth hopes an apology will diffuse the tension. She takes her girlfriend’s hands and holds them tight.

“Do you…think that maybe,” Sam says slowly. “Maybe we should go?”

“Go? Go where?”
“Anywhere! But away from Cassandra and the rest of her little minions.”

“Sam!” She’s aghast. Beth looks around, checking again that they’re alone.

Talk like that is treason.

“What the hell, Beth?” Sam pulls her hands away. “Is Cassandra invincible now? Has she got spies everywhere? Are the birds in cahoots with her?”

“I’m not saying that,” Beth snarls. Sam flinches, taking a step away from her and wraps her arms around herself.

“I’m just…” Beth shakes her head. She can’t get angry. This is all her fault. She coddled Sam. Like Cass did with her, she was supposed teach Sam how to be detached. To embrace her vampiric nature and look at humanity with steady, unflinching eyes.

Beth’s failed her.

“Where would we go? Even if we left…I mean, I’m not leaving without Hannah. And Jess. They’re my responsibility.”

“We could take them! The four of us, we could get away. Out of California. We could do it.”

“With what money? And you know Cass would look for us. You know she would…”

“Yeah,” Sam’s shoulders sag. She kicks the dirt.

Beth wonders if Cassandra knows she’s a failure as a sire and that’s why she let her turn Jess. To atone for fucking up Sam. Making her weak. Putting her in danger of going off the rails.

Well. That’s not going to happen. Even if it means an eternity covering up for Sam. It’s her fault she’s like this. She needs Beth’s protection.

“You were right though,” Beth tries to coax a smile from Sam. “About not killing those boys. Can you imagine the mess? Would have definitely ruined our plan for an early night.”

“Yeah, what a drag,’ Sam says dully. “Let’s just get out of here.”

They walk up to the car in silence.

They drive back to the town they’re staying in. It’s a little place just outside of San Francisco. It’s pretty but they won’t be there long. Cass just can’t resist the lure of Los Angeles.

Beth switches on the radio and hears the mournful tune of a familiar song.

‘The night was black, rain fallin’ down
Looked for my baby, she’s nowhere around
Traced her footsteps down to the shore
Afraid she's gone for ever more.’

+++ 

When they get back to the manor Sam reaches for her hand. Tells her she’s going for a bath before slipping away from her.

Beth hopes Sam doesn’t decide to stay in her own room today. Beth can barely stand it when they
She’s almost at her door when she hears a familiar voice call out to her.

“Hey, how was your hike, miss lady adventurer?”

“Jess.” Beth is relieved. At last, one fledgling who isn’t mad at her.

Jess skips down the hall. She’s wearing baby blue flannel pajamas with fluffy white socks. It’s cute. She looks like she’s ready for bed but didn’t want to rest without checking in with Beth first.

“It was great. We scaled a cliff and went for a walk. It was beautiful. You would have hated it.”

“How dare you!” Jess cries, putting her hand to her chest and pretending to be wounded. “I love nature and all that…junk.”

“You like nature as much as a stake to the heart. So, what did you actually get up to? Or do I want to know?”

“I went out with Hannah,” Jess says, devilish glint in her eyes.

“Okay,” Beth raises her hand. Hannah has a reputation of being a very particular kind of killer. “Then I definitely don’t want to know. Alright, I’m exhausted so I’m going to bed. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Beth,” Jess calls. She sounds uncertain.

Beth wearily leans against the door. “Yeah?”

“It’s just…if you ever want a perspective that isn’t Sam…I’m right here. Only a few doors away, in fact. Always.”

“Thanks,” Beth’s surprised Jess is so perceptive. But talking doesn’t sound appealing. All she wants to do is in sink into bed with Sam in her arms.

She showers quickly then lies in bed with her eyes wide open. She counts the minutes. Minutes turn into an hour. That turn into another hour. She’s almost given up hope Sam will join her when she hears the door creak open and two familiar feet come padding into the room.

“M’cold,” Sam mumbles, getting into bed and burrowing her head against Beth’s chest. Beth wraps her arms around her, pulling her tight, tangling their legs together, wanting to feel her, skin to skin.

Beth nestles her nose into hair. She smells like lilacs and sandalwood.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” Sam whispers against her neck.

Beth smiles sleepily. It’s ok now. Sam is warm and safe and here. Where she belongs.

Beth feels fuzzy as sleep starts to take hold.

As she drifts off she hears a nagging voice, one that she’s heard for years now…

They’re both sorry. This is true.
But are they sorry for the same thing?

Beth doesn’t know.

Chapter End Notes

The lyrics quoted in this story is from the 1958 song Endless Sleep by Jody Reynolds.

Chapter six is on its way at some point soon (ish) but in the meantime my co-author extraordinaire will post the next interlude which will be set in the swinging sixties and feature everyone’s favourite frenemies, Sam and Jess.
June, 1965.

The California heat is a brutal.

When she was alive, everyone called Hannah a summer girl, but truthfully, she never liked the heat. Even as a child she was reluctant to go outside, hating how her stupid pasty skin would crack and peel in the sun. Her mother would chide her the minute she let her skin burn, saying no man wants a blotchy bride. Her mother was usually so gentle so her words stung like welts on her skin. So, she stayed inside and mostly bided her time reading books or going shopping with Sam until the cooler weather set in. As soon as winter arrived she would beg her father to take them up to their holiday house in Colorado, where she would spend hours skiing down the most dangerous slopes she could find before finding Beth and Josh and throwing snow balls at them while they played baseball near the lodge.

“Bet you can’t catch me, Joshy.”

Hannah scolds herself. Cassandra said it’s maudlin to reminisce about her human life. She said what went before her immortal embrace is an insipid shadow. Her clan is her family now.

Hannah’s heard that lecture a thousand times.

She hopes one day she’ll believed it.

“Oh my god, this so good.”

Hannah glances over at Sam who is practically devouring her bloodiscle. It’s dripping down her chin and onto the carpet, but given how many bloodstains that carpet has seen, it probably isn’t a big deal. The bloodiscle is an invention Hannah is particularly proud of. Cassandra allocates all of them a certain amount of blood wine each month. Most of the time, Hannah warms it up on the stove or if she’s feeling particularly lazy she’ll drink it room temperature. However, the thought of slaving over a stove in 90-degree heat is too intolerable to even contemplate. But blood is always delicious, and just as satisfying even when frozen.

(She tried not to feel a little hurt when Jess found a way to one-up her and turn blood into a lollypop. Everyone loved it, because everyone loves Jess. She just wished the others would remember that she came up with the idea of blood-food first.)

Sam is lapping at the bloodiscle, her bright pink tongue sliding over the sides before she takes it deep inside her mouth. She sucks on it, relishing every morsel. Hannah smirks.

The bloodiscle makes a wet popping noise as Sam removes it from her mouth.
“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just…it’s a shame you don’t like boys, Sam. You have amazing technique.”

Sam’s eyes widen comically before she leans back and kicks at Hannah. Hannah giggles while takes a seat next to her friend.

“You know,” Sam says thoughtfully as Hannah settles next to her. “It’s not so surprising I have…what did you say? An amazing technique? I know I’m pretty good with my tongue. Just ask your sister.”

Hannah splutters, as some very, very disturbing images race through her head. She smacks her friend on the arm.

“Sam!”

Sam practically cackles, low and deep and even though Hannah didn’t appreciate the visual, it’s still lovely to hear Sam laugh. It doesn’t happen enough these days.

The other vamps gossip about Sam. They say she’s starving herself because she’s weak. Soft, like a human. While Hannah always snaps at anyone who sneers at Sam behind her back, even she has to concede her best friend is looking worse for wear these days.

Everyone else has a healthy glow about them now. Jess looks particularly radiant, so different from the ashen-faced girl she was when she first joined the clan. But Sam’s gone the opposite way. She diminishes every year. Hannah’s afraid one day she’ll look up and see her friend has shriveled up into nothing.

“You all right, Han?” Sam asks. “You look serious all of a sudden.”

Hannah winces. Sam’s the one who looks like a wrinkled prune, but she’s the one looking out for Hannah? Hannah feels like a lousy friend when Sam gets all selfless like this.

Hannah’s starting to realize that Sam isn’t going to do anything to help herself. She could hunt if she wanted to but instead she’s starving herself for some stupid supposedly noble cause until she wastes away.

Well. Not if Hannah has anything to do with it.

“So, I, uh…had an idea…”

“Oh?” she knew that would pique Sam’s interest.

“Well, you know, hunting is all well and good, but something you can’t find the right human, and you and I don’t like to feed on just anyone…” Sam looks downcast and Hannah mentally curses herself for being so tactless. “So, I mean, I thought…what’s a good way to eat without the trouble of a finding a suitable human…”

“I don’t know…” Despite herself, Hannah can tell Sam was intrigued.

“Well…” she pauses for effect. “Why don’t we rob a blood bank?”

“You…you can’t be serious?”

“I’m SO serious!” Hannah folds her legs underneath her as she sits cross-legged on the floor. She can barely contain her excitement. “Come on, it’ll be easy. I even scoped one out for us.”
“What?” Sam asks, slowly.

“I have, it’s super close by and basically has no security, and we can do it the day before the blood delivery, so they will have a fresh supply in the morning.”

“You’ve…really thought this through, haven’t you?”

“Of course, silly. I’m not going to let us walk into a blood bank blind and risk missing out on all that delicious food. I like to be a girl with a plan.”

“So…” Sam’s looking at her, a hint of a smile tugging on her lips. “If I’m thinking of doing this… and I am not saying I am…when is blood delivery day?”

“Tuesday night.”

Sam’s eyes light up. “Wait, you mean, tomorrow night?”

“The very one…”

Sam grins. It brightens her whole face, lifting the bags underneath her eyes. For a second, she looks as bright and carefree as the girl Hannah used to know.

“So, Han…what’s fashionable to wear to a blood heist?”

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“Are ski masks necessary?” Hannah whines.

“Yes. Do you want there to be wanted posters all over town? That’ll earn us a week-long holiday in the pit.”

The two of them are lingering outside the FieldCare clinic in a nondescript part of the city. The blood bank is in a small business complex. As she predicted, the security was laughable. The pair of them has scaled the wire fence with ease (Hannah felt a bit guilty when she instinctively challenged Sam to a race. It was more like a rout. Sam’s barely faster than a human these days). They were now huddled together in the gloom across from the side entrance. They can’t return home too late. Sam barely goes out these days, and when she does it’s usually with Beth or Hannah to see a movie. If they linger too long out here they’ll attract unwanted attention.

And Hannah just can’t lie to Cassandra.

Still, Hannah felt excitement crackle through her as she pulls on the mask. She feels like the protagonist in one of those heist films she and Beth always watch. They’re the heroes about to embark upon a daring, improbable raid. And they have a very distinctive bounty in mind.

Who knew you had to be dead to feel so alive?

“Hannah. When did you say the guard comes out for a smoke?”

“2 am. Always.”

Hannah can’t help but feel a little offended when Sam looks so impressed with her preparation. If Sam were… less troubled, she would invite her out to go hunting. She would tell her about her conquests. Sam would see how Hannah builds an intricate web, leaving strands behind her, waiting as her prey blunders towards her, following the trail, not realizing he’s being tied up in knots until those delicious few seconds before she sinks her fangs into his neck.
Maybe if Sam saw that she’d show her more respect.

“Oh, oh, I hear something.” Sam grips her arm, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Hannah grins. Her enthusiasm is infectious.

“Shhh.” She motions to Sam to step back. She snaps her head towards the door. She hears it creak as someone pushes it open.

The man looks like he’s approaching middle age. His brown uniform is crumpled and his shoulders are slumped, like he wishes he could be anywhere but here. He takes a huge drag of his cigarette, inhaling the fumes like it’s the best thing he’s ever tasted. It probably is. Geez, how pathetic.

Hannah pulls off her ski mask and straightens her hair. She takes a moment to compose herself, like an actor about to stride onto the stage.

“Well, hi there, mister, can I bum a smoke?”

The man starts, almost drops his flashlight in shock. He blinks at Hannah, as if he thinks she’ll disappear if he keeps opening and shutting his eyes.

“What are you doing here, miss?”

“My friends and I skipped out from our dorm room and I’m so silly because now I’m a little lost. I’d really like a smoke to calm my nerves.”

“Well, uh,” the man relaxes, although Hannah can tell he’s a little nervous. She opens her eyes and blinks innocently, trying to assuage his unease. She walks towards him, making sure to sway her hips ever so slightly as she approaches.

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, miss, but this is private property. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Even through his crumpled uniform Hannah can tell his body is large and muscular but time is about to be unkind to him. Still. He doesn’t look bad on second glance. He has powerful looking hips and the beginnings of a paunch. Through the gloom she can see a tan line where a ring would be. Divorced. Recently divorced.

“Pllllllllllplease can I bum a smoke? All my friends are such jerks, leaving me behind so they can suck face with their boyfriends. They don’t even care that I’m out here alone.”

He relaxes, moving his hand away from his walkie talkie. He smiles at Hannah, as if they’re kindred spirits. Handsome idiot.

“People sure can be selfish sometimes. Here, have a cigarette on me and then I’ll call one of my friends from the force and they can take you back to your dorm…”

Hannah smiles, reaching out to take the cigarette, brushing her fingers across his. His fingers are calloused, like a man whose worked with his hands all his life.

Hannah sees his pupils dilate as she leans his close. Even in her all black get-up she looks young. He doesn’t want to notice her. But his own body is betraying him.

“Hey mister!”

He snaps his head around to see Sam stepping out from the shadows. Hannah seizes the opportunity,
hitting him hard on the back of the skull. He keels over, knocked out cold. Sam darts forward and catches him before he hits the ground.

“Goodnight,” Sam checks his name badge. “Daryl.”

“I hope I didn’t hit him too hard.” Hannah frets. She swears she went easy on him. “He was kinda cute.”

“Really, Hannah?”

“Hey, I like muscles on my men. Can’t blame a gal for looking.”

Sam rolls her eyes, but Hannah can tell it’s without malice. Now that Daryl is out for the count, Hannah’s starting to feel a little giddy again. She pulls on her disguise again as Sam takes the security pass.

“Ok,” Sam says. Her green eyes look even more vivid when peering out from a ski mask. “Let’s go find some snacks.”

+++ They both guessed the blood would be kept up the back near where the laboratories were. Most of the building was office space and what looked like doctors’ rooms where patients give blood. The place is a little run down though, with grime on the walls and a thin film of dust under their feet. It’s not as clean as a laboratory should be. It’s a little spooky, in fact. Hannah shudders, and wraps her arms around herself.

If the atmosphere is eerie to Sam, she doesn’t show it. She’s going from room to room with a look of steely determination in her eyes. Beth usually teases her when she gets this look in her eyes but Hannah’s always been a bit in awe of her when she gets single-minded like this.

Sam stops suddenly, making Hannah almost run into her. She takes a deep sniff.

“There!” Sam says. She practically runs to the door at the end of the hallway.

They don’t say a word as Sam’s shaking hands swipe Daryl’s security card over the door. They wait for an excruciating second before the door clicks open, both their bodies sagging in relief.

There are huge, industrial sized fridges lining the sides of the room. The air is still and frigid and Hannah shudders. In between the fridges are benches lined with science equipment. She picks up a beaker and idly plays with it.

Sam’s all business though. She opens a fridge, wincing as a plume of cold air hits her in the face. She motions Hannah to come forward.

“Pass me the bag, Han.”

“What type of blood is that?”

“O Positive. It’s the most common sort so that’s what we should take.” Suddenly Sam looks anxious. “Wait, what if they need this? Isn’t this the one they give to everyone?”

“Uh…it should be Okay,” Hannah pushes past Sam and grabs a couple of blood bags and stores them away into the bag Sam is carrying. “We won’t take much. What’s the next most popular? We can take more of that, right?”
“I suppose,” Sam opens the next freezer. Then the next. Hannah winces and glances towards the door. She hopes they aren’t making a racket.

“Finally. There you are, delicious, delicious A positive.”

Sam starts shoving more and more supplies of blood into their carry bag. Hannah almost wants to tell her to stop, except this is good. The more blood they steal the better it is for Sam.

Sam may be stubborn and cleave onto her humanity like a child. She may deny her own nature. Hannah knows the truth though. Looking at her now, she can see her desperation, the wanton craving, deep in her eyes as she shoves more blood bags away. She needs to drink, just like the rest of them. If this escapade can remind her of that, then Hannah’s done good work.

Sam’s too busy grabbing blood bags by the handful to hear the light footsteps down the hall. Hannah strains her ears. She can pick up the hushed tones of humans whispering to each other.

Humans. Plural.

“Sam,” Hannah hisses. “Sam, stop.”

“Why?”

“Listen.”

Sam immediately stops. Even though she’s malnourished, Sam still has exceptional senses and hears the men approaching straight away. She glances at the windows. They’re locked with bars over them.

“Think we could break out?”

“We could. It would take a couple of minutes though.”

“Crap,” Sam mutters. They both know they don’t have a couple of minutes.

Hannah starts to shake. Sure, unless there’s hopelessly outnumbered, they can subdue armed humans. But not without causing some carnage first. Cassandra always warned them never to kill anyone who will be missed without seeking permission first, and it’s hard to cover up a police massacre.

They’ll be down in the pit for a month.

“Hannah,” Sam grips her hand. It feels clammy. “We can make a run for it. But we gotta clear out quick.”

“Okay. Okay.”

Hannah lets herself be dragged out by Sam. She opens the door, sneaks a look around. It’s too late. They spot a group of four men striding towards them.

“There, I think that’s them,” Daryl shouts.

Hannah groans. This is what she gets for not wanting to mess up a handsome face.

They turn to their left and run as fast as they can, leaving the men gasping and yelling in their wake.

They see another exit clearly down the hall. Less than a minute away. Hannah’s euphoria is
punctured when she sees a beam of flashlight through a window on the door.

It seems like Daryl called a few of his friends.

“Fuck,” Sam gasps. She glances towards a flight of stairs to their left. “Hannah, up here.”

“Wait…”

“Don’t be a slowpoke. C’mon.”

Sam’s already sprinting up a flight of stairs with Hannah trailing in her wake. They go up one level. Then another. Hannah feels adrenaline surge through her veins. The net is closing in.

“Sam, why…”

“I’ll show you. Follow me.”

It’s at least four flights of stairs before the stairs stop. Sam barrels through the locked door, yelping a little as it gives way. They’re up on the roof. It’s a flat, sparse space, with only a smattering of air vents on top. Hannah frantically glances around. She can see the lights from the city center flickering in the distance.

They’re very, very high up.

Tears start to sting Hannah’s eyes. They’re trapped. Now she’s endangered Sam. This was a terrible idea. She’s so stupid. Such an idiot. Stupid. Stupid.

They hear the voices of the men behind them but they’re a minute or two away. Vampire speed has gifted them a brief reprieve.

“Sam,” Hannah says, a sob escaping from her chest. “I’m sorry.”

Her friend isn’t listening. She’s walked to the edge of the roof. She peers down. Then she glances at the next building. It’s at least twenty feet away.

“Okay, I’m going to do this,” Sam says. She’s taken off her mask and hitches the bag full of blood onto her back. “If I don’t make it don’t come after me. Do what you have to do to escape.”

“Sam,” her voice sounds strained, high, even to her own ears. “Sam no.”

She might as well be a ghost. Sam takes a few steps back, eyes glinting in the dark, mouth set in a hard line. Hannah tries to reach for her but fear has clogged her limbs and makes her clumsy. Useless.

“Sam!”

It’s no use. Her friend takes a run up and then soars through the air, higher and higher, until she lands on the roof of the other building with a loud thud. She rolls, her body taking the impact with grace and steel.

Hannah gapes at her. Dimly in the background she hears their pursuers ascending the stairs.

“Hannah,” Sam calls out. She’s dusting herself off, reaching out to her. “It’s not that far. If I can do it, so can you. Jump.”

“Are you insane?”
“I’m serious, you can make it. Easy.”

Hannah feels her entire body shake at the words. She’s plays a little tennis, but she’s not a pure athlete, like Sam. She won’t make it. She’ll smash into the ground below and dissolve into festering pile of black goo. There she’ll stay. Unmourned and unloved.

“Hannah,” Sam’s voice breaks into her thoughts. She sounds strong. Hannah wishes she was that strong.

“Hannah. Do you trust me?”

Hannah licks her lips. She can hear the men on the stairs. They’re a flight away.

“Y-yes. Yes.”

“Then jump. Jump for me.”

Hannah sets her jaw and swallows hard. Then she sets off, her feet hitting the asphalt hard with every step. Soon she’s at the edge but instead of slowing down she sets her legs and springs up, up, soaring gracelessly through the air.

Sam catches her, the two of them stumbling a backwards before Hannah regains her footing. She looks back and sees the men on the roof, torchlights zooming around, voices raised in alarm.

“Gotcha,” Sam’s voice is hot in her ear. “There’s one more jump. Then hopefully we can get down the fire escape then get the hell out of here.”

Hannah wants to object but her brain is seized by fear. Like a child, she takes Sam’s hand, lets her friend lead her to the edge of the building.

The distance between this building and the next is only fifteen feet or so. They should be fine. But Hannah’s limbs feel weak, like the tendons have been teased and stretched too far.

Sam squeezes her hand.

“Let’s do this one together. Ready?”

Hannah nods meekly, follows Sam as the pair of them walk back a few feet. She glances at Sam, who sends her a small, determined smile.

“We can do this.”

She nods. They wait for a second before taking off together, the sounds of their feet reverberating in Hannah’s ears. They run before pushing up, Hannah clutching Sam’s hand as they soar once more through the air. When they hit the ground Hannah stumbles, falls, hits the ground with a heavy thud.

She’s on her back. Her shoulder aches but nothing’s broken. She stares up at the sky, resplendent with stars.

Her view is blocked out as Sam looks down at her, face screwed up with concern.

“Han?”

“I don’t think I’m cut out for heists Sam…”

Sam balks, before grinning and then the two of them are laughing hysterically, gripping each other while their bodies shake. Hannah grips Sam as she laughs, feeling grateful that she’s here, warm and
(sort of) alive.

“Ok,” Sam wipes a tear from her eye. “Come on, Wonder Woman, let’s get out of here.”

Hannah’s never heard a better suggestion in her life.

+++ 

Sam knows she’s supposed to savor the blood. She doesn’t tell the twins, but Cassandra allocates her far less blood wine than the rest of them. She’s not sure if it’s because she wants to encourage her to hunt more or if she enjoys seeing Sam slowly starve.

She probably enjoys it either way.

After their exertions, they had come straight back to the mansion with their illicit cargo. Hannah seemed particularly jazzed, adrenalin still sloshing around her veins. Sam struggles to say no to her at the best of times, so they end up gorging on half their bounty.

For once she’s sated that gnawing ache at the base of her belly. She feels full. And warm.

Hannah does too, because soon her head is lolling on her shoulder, blood beginning to cake on her lips. She looks she messily applied a vivid shade of lip stick. Sam chuckles and pulls out a wipe from her draw, dabs it on Hannah’s mouth carefully, before reaching down and taking off her shoes.

Hannah mumbles a sleepy assent. Sam tugs off her black jacket until she’s just in a tank top and jeans. Sam thinks about getting her friend’s pajamas but she’ll probably be asleep before she gets back. This will have to do.

Hannah falls into Sam’s bed without complaint, snuggling into her puffy pillows. Sam rolls her eyes affectionately and changes on the other side of the room before getting into the bed and wrapping her arms around Hannah, pulling her close and nuzzling her hair.

Hannah mumbles something sleepily back to her Sam doesn’t quite catch.

“What was that, Han?”

“Tonight was fun.”

“It was. Maybe a little less…risk of being flattened next time though, all right?”

“Mmmm,” Hannah mumbles. There’s a heavy pause. Then –

“Sammy. What’s it like… being in love?”

“Oh!” that catches Sam off guard. “Well…it’s. What can I say.” She thinks of Beth. The thought of her makes her feel warm, stokes a fire within Sam that even blood can’t match. “It’s lovely. It’s infuriating. Sometimes it hurts. But usually it’s the most…amazing feeling in the world.”

“Oh,” Hannah says softly. Her voice is thick with sleep.

“Do you…do you think I will ever fall in love?”

“Oh.” There’s a lump, as hard as coal, lodged in Sam’s throat. There’s a sad sort of yearning in Hannah’s voice that makes Sam blink back tears.

“I think you can, Hannah. I know you can. And if you do,” she leans forward until her mouth is next
to Hannah’s ear. “And if you do, I’ll protect you.”

Hannah makes a small pleased noise at the back of her throat before body stills as sleep finally takes hold. Sam isn’t sure if she wants her to remember this conversation. She shouldn’t be putting ideas like that in her head. Sam can love freely here. For Hannah, though, love is steeped in danger.

Sam’s taken away from her thoughts and Beth pushes the door open, looking weary from what was probably a night doing Cassandra’s bidding. Having a high place in the household is not without considerable drawbacks. Beth starts to undo the buttons on her top, staring off into the distance until Sam pointedly clears her throat.

“Hey puppy,” Beth says. She blinks a few times when she sees Hannah.

“Sam… I think you have the wrong twin.”

Hannah groans sleepily.

“Shush. Keep your voice down. You’ll wake her. She’s fast asleep.”

Beth’s eyes light up.

“If you try and draw on her face I’ll bite your hand off.”

“Sorry,” Beth mocks quietly, grinning when Sam huffs in response. She walks over to what is usually her side of the bed and looking down at Hannah fondly. “What did you two get up to, then?”

“We robbed a blood bank.”

Beth’s eyes bug out, and Sam suppresses a laugh.

“I’m sorry, what did you just say?”

“Are you deaf, old girl? I said we robbed a blood bank.”

“Okay, okay, just checking I didn’t go temporarily insane and hear you say that my sister robbed a blood bank.”

“It was her idea, actually.”

“Of course,” Beth chuckles softly. “You think you know your own twin…”

They both giggle a bit before the mirth leaves Beth’s eyes.

“Maybe don’t do that again though, okay. Cass won’t like you guys getting blood from other means.”

Outside of hunting, you mean, Sam thinks. But she nods. She doesn’t think she could stand another night like this one anyway.

Beth starts to do up her shirt. Sam lets out a disappointed sigh.

“Our bed is huge. You can definitely fit.”

“Thanks, but I’m beat. I’ll just enjoy Hannah’s bed alllllllllll to myself.”

“Ok,” Sam says. She knows she’s a bit pathetic for feeling a tiny ache at the thought of going bed
without her. Beth walks over and pecks Sam on the cheek.

“Thanks for taking care of my sister. I never worry about her when she’s with you. You have no idea what a relief that is.”

“Of course,” Sam says, smiling drowsily. The blood is starting to slow her down too. “Love you.”

She hears Beth laugh fondly as she closes the door. “Love you too, Sammy. Always.”

Sam snuggles into Hannah’s back and smiles as she sinks into her deathly deep sleep.

Chapter End Notes

OK! So I know I SAAAAAID the next interlude was going to be Jess and Sam having a sass off and that was the plan, however this story suffered from a regrettable lack of Hannah and Sam goodness so I had to write this interlude. Thank you all for indulging me.

The next interlude WILL revolve around Jess and Sam and their somewhat fraught relationship. Chapter six is in the works. Small spoiler, we'll meet two more of the gang. And there's a special place in my wizened, black heart for those who not ONLY press kudos, but also, you know, review (just saying....)

Thanks, as always, for reading.
August 1967

“Can’t buy me loooooove, looo-ove—”

“Will you please stop singing that garbage?” Sam interjects, earning her a cross look from Jess. They’re walking down the not-quite-deserted streets of San Francisco, their home for the time being. It’s a Sunday night; most people are at home with their families or preparing for another long workweek. The only people out now are street cleaners, bar hoppers, and a couple of flower children smoking grass. Sam’s impressed by their audacity. Tensions between the subversive types and their conservative elders are rising all the time now, especially with the war in Vietnam getting increasingly bloody and infamous.

There seems to be a new war every decade. Japan, Korea, Vietnam. The agitation of Cuba and the growing threat of the USSR. The world is quickly catching fire and everyone is afraid, even Cassandra. Not even a vampire could survive nuclear annihilation.

“For your information, Debbie Downer, the Beatles are not garbage,” Jess tells her. “They’re musical geniuses. Way better than the druggie hippie crap records you listen to.”

“You just like them because they’re good-looking,” Sam says. “Their music is terrible.”

“Oh, so I’m some shallow bimbo just because I like something popular?” Jess snaps back.

“That’s not what I’m saying—”

“And what are your bearded dopey guitarists going on about between bong hits? ‘War is bad, you guys,’ boo hoo. Everyone knows war is bad. We don’t need a fucking song about it.”

“I like the Grateful Dead!” one of the stoners calls to them.

“Nobody cares, dick-brain!” Jess shouts back. Sam sighs and drags Jess away before somebody gets killed.

Since she’s joined the group Jess has been nothing but a pernicious thorn in Sam’s side. She’s loud, rude, base, violent—everything Cassandra adores in her little crop of killers. Jess will stay up until sunrise blasting music and gorging herself on blood from god knows where. And, to make matters worse, Sam is almost a hundred percent sure she’s got a crush on Beth.

So of course Cassandra decided it would be a lovely bonding experience for them to go out and kill together.
Their target isn’t human this time. Their newest fledgling, Amy, messed up and got hurt during an attack and a boy walked away with vampire blood in his system. She told her sire, who told Cass, who sent Amy to the pit for three days and Jess and Sam to go clean up her mess. Rogue vampires are dangerous, unpredictable. Their group can’t afford any loose ends.

“A dumb loser says ‘what.’”

“What?” Sam says, snapping out of her reverie. Jess giggles like a little kid. Sam fights the urge to smack that shit-eating grin off her face. “Nice one,” she grumbles. “What are you, five?”

“Not as old as you, Depression baby.”

“That’s right,” Sam scolds her. “I’m older than you. And I know way more than you ever will if you keep this up. So you better—”

“What, mom. You don’t even know how to get a drink without crying about it,” Jess leers. “You’re pathetic. Thirty years at this and you’re still a fragile little puppy. Beth coddled you.”

“At least I didn’t turn into a bloodthirsty maniac,” Sam shoots back, feeling a hot, sticky rage blossoming in her chest. “You don’t even kill people who deserve it. You’d butcher a five-year-old if he looked at you funny.”

Jess’s eyes go cold and hateful.

“I’d never hurt a kid and you know that,” she hisses. “They’re the only good ones anyway. All the others are killers and racists and thieves and whores. They deserve to die. Just ask the skinhead Tamika and I dismembered last night. While you’re busy being a stuffy old hypocrite and wasting Beth’s time, I’m taking out the trash.”

Sam looks away, doesn’t dignify her with a response. Skinheads and rapists are one thing, but Cassandra sends them after everyone. She says she wants to bring justice to the world but all she does is move her pawns around and let them slaughter whoever the hell they want. It quickly goes from people who actually deserve it to anyone who pisses you off.

Jess is a model vampire, a good little killer who ate up Cassandra’s bullshit like it was a three-layer cake. Cassandra twisted Jessica’s mind effortlessly. She made her see her monstrous husband and repressive family in every man, woman, and child outside of their clan. All that repression and bitterness and hate melded together until she turned into, well…

What Sam probably would have been, if not for Anna.

Jess tilts her head up a little and sniffs the air. She’s got exceptional senses, even for a vampire. She’s quickly becoming Cassandra’s favorite bloodhound. Jess turns to Sam.

“I smell him. He’s close. Try to keep up, yeah?”

Jess is off like a shot, moving down the street so fast that even with her vampiric speed Sam has trouble keeping up. She wonders how much of Jess’s power is innate and how much comes from her being a blood glutton. Meanwhile, Sam’s been almost starving herself lately, feeding only on the worst of the worst, and it’s been making her fuzzy-headed and frail. Beth has told her she looks sick. Hannah’s been slipping her bottles of blood wine when no one is looking.

Jess leads her down the adjacent street and through a tight, dirty alleyway, avoiding fallen beer bottles and cardboard boxes with eerie grace. Sam follows along, stopping briefly to catch her reflection in a dirty windowpane. In all the books and movies, vampires have no reflections. They’re
warded off with crosses and garlic and silver. They’re demonic creatures with no soul and no conscience.

Sometimes Sam thinks that they really are demons, just like in the books. But then she’ll spend time with Hannah, talking and laughing like they used to before Cassandra. They’ll go out and buy clothes and Hannah will do girlish pirouettes in cute skirts while Sam applauds and laughs. Or maybe she’ll go to the drive in theater with Beth and they’ll hold hands and watch *The Dirty Dozen* and Beth won’t talk about Cassandra or hunting or anything. They just cuddle, feeling a little scandalous and a little afraid but utterly blissful that they’re together.

Those moments, the moments she looks into the eyes of her friends and sees the few shreds of humanity Cassandra hasn’t destroyed, are why Sam stays. She can save them. Hell, maybe she can even save Jess.

Speaking of.

“Hurry up, slowpoke! We got a vampire to kill!”

Sam sighs and trails after Jess, finally coming upon a little brick townhouse with all the lights out. It’s noiseless, bleak, and seemingly empty. But when Sam closes her eyes and focuses, she can hear the faint whisper of footsteps, most likely feet in socks moving on carpet. Whoever is in there is trying very, very hard to be invisible. Sam takes a whiff, and faintly, she can smell blood.

“Looks like we have our man,” Jess whispers. “Let’s get him.”

“Hold on,” Sam says. “He technically is still the owner of that house. We can’t go in unless he invites us.”

Jess groans.

“Fuck, are you serious? How the hell are we supposed to get him to do that?”

Sam sighs. She looks straight at Jess.

“I need you to mess me up a bit.”

Jess’s eyes light up.

“A bit!” Sam repeats.

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Sam knocks three times, soft and polite. No answer. Jess rolls her eyes and shoves Sam out of the way. Even when knocking on a door she’s weak.

She slams her fists on the door, over and over again, screaming at the top of her lungs.

“PLEASE! SOMEONE! ANYONE! MY FRIEND IS HURT! WE NEED TO CALL A DOCTOR! PLEASE!” She throws in a couple of loud, theatrical sobs for good measure. Sam, covered in blood and already healing cuts, shakes her head and sighs. Jess starts kicking the door when, finally, the boy opens it, looking shaky and afraid. His eyes dart around, looking for backup or traps.

“Who are you?” he whispers.

“Help…” Sam croaks, in the perfect imitation of a dying woman. Jess sobs again, and even manages
to force herself to cry a little.

“My friend, she got hurt…somebody…” Jess brings her hand to her face and wipes the tears away with a little too much flourish. “Someone hurt her. Please, we just need to come in and use your phone. Please!”

The boy sighs and steps back from the doorway, gesturing at them to come in.

“Make it quick, okay? Follow me.”

He leads them into a dark, stuffy hallway and the smell of the place, rancid and stagnant, nearly makes Jess puke. Sam limps behind her, weary determination in her eyes. As Sam moves past her Jess veers off into another room, following the scent of congealing blood. She enters a living room with the windows all drawn and the TV tuned to static. Snowy grey light flickers across the small room, highlighting an overstuffed armchair and a raggedy sofa. On a coffee table sits an open box of moldy pizza, surrounded by a cloud of flies. One of them buzzes by Jess and she watches it with mild interest as it buzzes by the TV, past a poster of a pretty girl in a bikini, and lands on the open eye of a young man’s corpse.

There are three bodies; two men, and a woman; they’re cold and covered in dark, sticky blood. It smells like they’re just beginning to putrify. They’ve probably been dead for about two days. Jess snorts at the audacity of it. He didn’t even bother to try and hide them.

“Fuck.”

Jess turns to see the boy staring at her like she’s the Grim Reaper. Sam appears behind him, her injuries completely healed and a stern look on her face. Jess raises an eyebrow.

“These your roommates?”

The boy sighs.

“Who are you, cops?”

Jess grins.

“Nah. We’re like you, kid.”

The boy’s eyes widen.

“Wait. There are…there are more of us?”

“Oh yeah, one big happy family,” Jess tells him. The boy swallows, his eyes darting around again. He honestly thinks he has a way out of this. It’s adorable. “Unfortunately, we’re not looking for new recruits right now. So, we’re just here to tie up loose ends.”

The boy backs straight into Sam and holds up his hands.

“Look, I—I didn’t mean to kill them, alright? I just, I felt sick so I went to bed and when I woke up, I was so hungry and they were—they—oh, fuck—”

Sam almost looks sympathetic as the boy natters on. Fucking typical.

“Look, I can help you!” the boy says. “I’m strong now. Really strong. D-don’t you ladies need—”

“Don’t lady me,” Jess spits. “We don’t need men and their shitty opinions in our little band of

Sam’s in the perfect position to rip off his head. Jess practically led him right to her. She waits for Sam to take some action, to finish this before she has to, but then the boy’s face hardens.

“That girl. She was working with you, wasn’t she?”

Come on, Sam, Jess thinks. Finish him.

“Answer me! Was she working with you?!”

Come on, Sam.

“Answer me!”

“Ugh, fine. Yeah, she was with us, panty-waist. You happy?”

The boy stares daggers at her.

“You guys turned me into this…this thing. You ruined my life.”

Jess shrugs.

“Don’t look at me. Amy’s the one who fucked it up. If it were me doing it, you’d already be six feet deep.”

Now, Sam! Do it now!

Sam doesn’t hurt him. The boy lets out an inhuman roar of agony and rage as he runs through the room, charging straight at Jess.

“I’ll rip you apart!”

“Uh-huh,” Jess says as she moves easily out of the way. The kid barrels past her, slipping on the blood and slamming into the armchair. This boy is strong and fast from so much blood, but he has no clue what he’s doing. It’s like she’s a matador dueling a very clumsy bull. The kid gets up, dazed and angry, and charges again. Jess catches him in the neck and throwing him to the floor. The boy lies there, dazed, staring up and Jess with wide, pleading eyes.

“Oh gee, I’m sure feeling ripped apart right now,” Jess says as she straddles the struggling vampire. “Good job, honey.”

“Y-you…you’re a monster…” the boy croaks. Jess giggles.

“That’s me!”

She puts her hands on his neck and begins to twist. The boy whimpers and chokes but his pathetic flailing doesn’t do anything.

“Wait.”

Jess looks up to see Sam walking towards them. In the second she’s distracted, the boy throws her off of him and rams her into the opposite wall. Her head collides with the cheap plaster and drives a hole in the wall. Jess slumps against the wall, dazed, as the boy prepares to attack. Sam catches his arms and wrestles him to the ground. The roll around on the disgusting floor, scratching and snarling until the boy elbows Sam in the diaphragm and throws her into the coffee table, which caves under
the force of the throw.

The boy stands over Sam, pinning her to the ground with his foot. Sam’s too weak, subsisting on subpar blood. Beth would never have let this happen. Beth is better than this.

Beth is better than Sam.

Jess gets to her feet with a mumbled curse and before the boy can react, she’s bridged the gap between them. She rakes her sharpened nails across his eyes and elbows him in the back as he nurses his wounded eyes, screaming. Sam slowly gets to her feet, looking like a defeated old woman. Jess doesn’t look at her as she kneels before the boy, grabbing his head in her hands. The skull provides some resistance as she squeezes, but not nearly enough as she imagined. There’s a sound like crumbling drywall, and then a wet crunch as Jess hands punch through skull and brain tissue and meet in the middle of the sundered remains of the boy’s brain. It feels a little like raw dough.

The boy’s body goes slack without a sound. A little bloody snot drips from his nose before his entire body begins to disintegrate. Flesh and bone darken and liquefy and his clothes rot away to reveal bony flesh melting into greyish tar. The boy sloughs away into a tepid pile of dark grey muck. Some of the boy’s remaining hairs cling to the tar that now coats Jess’s hands.

“Fucking gross,” she whines. “I just did my nails last night!”

Sam gingerly brushes the broken glass off her dress and looks away from the boy’s remains, looking sick. Jess stalks over to the couch and wipes off her hands. She turns and glares at Sam, who glares right back.

“Real big of you to sit back and let me do all the work, Sammy.”

Sam looks away, sighing and tired, and walks out of the room, leaving a trail of bloody footprints on the ruined carpet. By the time the neighbors notice the smell and call the cops, they’ll have three dead bodies, one missing roommate and a pile of stuff that they probably put in cigarettes. It’s pretty easy to get away with murder when you’ve been officially dead for fourteen years.

Jess wonders if her family bothered to give her a funeral. Maybe she’s still technically considered missing. Maybe nobody cared enough to come looking for her.

Well. Who cares. She would have eaten them anyway.

She follows Sam out of the apartment, down the street, and to a deserted bus station, where they wait in stony silence until, at exactly 4:00, a nondescript black car pulls up to meet them.

Their driver, thankfully, is Miriam, who never talks unless forced to, so the drive back to the manor is blessedly devoid of awkward small talk. Jess looks out the window at the parade of city lights that floods past the car. For such an awful, poisoned world, it does have its moments of beauty. She wonders if Cassandra will ever let them go to the mountains, maybe even beyond them. She’d like to get out of California one day. She’s never seen snow.

The car pulls out of the city limits and into a hilly suburb, overlooking the bay. The sky is turning from black to blue, the cold watery color it gets just before dawn. Finally, they come upon the manor, standing proud on one of the highest hills, with a perfect view of the Golden Gate. Of course, they can’t see it quite very well during the hours they’re awake, but it’s still somehow comforting to know it’s there.

They pull into the garage and Sam makes a beeline for Beth, who’s waiting for them. The two of them hug, brief but intimate, and Jess feels a stab of bitter jealousy as she watches them. Sam and
Beth head into the room they share, and Jess rolls her eyes as she walks into the main foyer and up the stairs. She has one more thing she has to do before she goes to bed.

Cassandra’s bedroom is magnificent. A huge, luxurious canopy bed draped in scarlet and gold sits across from a stately writing desk and, next to that, an elaborate vanity. On the walls are paintings worth millions of dollars, and on the soft red carpet is a bear skin rug. A fluffy red armchair sits in the corner, a book lying on the seat. Through the curtained window is a balcony looking over the bay.

Cassandra is sitting at her desk, clacking away at her typewriter. As Jess comes in she looks up with an easy smile.

“Good morning, Jessica. How was the hunt?”

“Uh, yeah, about that,” Jess says. “We got the job done—well, I did.”

Cassandra raised an eyebrow.

“So our little flower child failed her test, then.”

Jess nods.

“She hesitated. Twice. Nearly got both of us killed.”

“I see,” Cassandra says. “If that’s the case, then we’ll have no choice. Send Samantha up here at once. I need to speak with her.”

Jess heads back down the stairs and down the hall to Sam’s room, feeling uncomfortably like a snitch. She doesn’t like Sam but she doesn’t want her to get hurt. But Cassandra isn’t gonna kill her or anything, just throw her in the pit or limit her freedom.

She won’t kill Sam.

Right?

Chapter End Notes

Welp, that was gross.
I hope you enjoyed this interlude! Don't worry, the real, actual Chapter Six will be out very soon. It's a really major chapter, so we're working hard to make sure its our (combined) best work!
Stay tuned and leave a comment if you want!
(I'll get back to pending comments very soon; the past couple weeks have been pretty crazy)
Thanks for reading!
Helter Skelter

Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 1968 song of the same name by the Beatles

See the end of the chapter for more notes

January 1968

“Five…four…three…two…one!”

Sam watches as an aluminum ball drops in a city she’s never seen. The TV quality in the bar isn’t great, but the patrons watching don’t seem to mind. Across the country, the ball’s been dropped for hours now, the celebrators in Times Square already on their way home, but here in San Francisco the festivities are only just beginning. As the cheers sound and 1968 appears on the TV screen, a tipsy man dips his girlfriend and kisses her on the lips, nurse and sailor style, and men and women raise their glasses in celebration.

Everyone’s always so hopeful on New Years’ Day.

Hannah squeezes her arm and points out a pair of men standing near the corner of the room, looking quiet and detached. It doesn’t look like anyone would notice if they were to disappear. Sam wants to say no, but then she looks at the pleading look in Hannah’s eyes and sighs. Cassandra has had Sam on trial since the rogue vampire fiasco; if Sam doesn’t shape up and become as ruthless as the others, she’ll be executed in the sunlight. The twins have been keeping an eye on her since the decree, making sure she doesn’t slip and serving as witnesses to her bloody character to Cassandra.

Hannah pulls her up to the boys and offers her best coy smile to the taller one. She’s cute as a button in a little pink dress and white pumps. She’s mastered the art of seduction and knows just what kind of woman to be to get any man. With this guy she’s the sweet shrinking violet with just the right tremor in her silky voice to seem vulnerable and sweet. The guy is hooked before he even knows what’s happening.

Sam’s strategy with the shorter guy is a lot less graceful. She just sort of smiles in a way she hopes is alluring and gambles on her looks to do most of the talking. Thankfully the guy is blitzed enough to be easily impressed. She leads him into the grungy women’s bathroom, with yellowish stains on the tile floor and ceiling and etched graffiti on the mirrors. Sam gets him into one of the stalls and lets him kiss her shoulder one time before she grabs his neck and wrestles him into a blood choke. The man struggles for a few seconds before passing out.

Sam stares at his sleeping face, almost innocent in its expression of pure peace. Then she bites down hard on his neck and drinks until his pulse quickens, then fades. The man’s limbs twitch once, twice, three times before he goes completely limp and his breath stops. Sam lays him down on the filthy ground; thankful she managed to avoid making much of a mess. If the person who finds him doesn’t notice the tiny bite wound on his neck they might assume he just had a heart attack or died from alcohol poisoning.
Well. She hopes so, anyway.

When Sam walks back into the bar, Hannah is still talking to the tall guy. Hannah looks up at her and turns back to the man.

“Just a second,” she tells him. “I need to go to the ladies room.”

She brushes past Sam with a hopeful smile as she goes to check her work, leaving Sam for an extremely awkward two minutes with Hannah’s prey.

“So, like…did you already get that guy off?” he asks. Sam coughs.

“Uh. Yeah. He didn’t last very long.”

The guy snorts.

“That figures.”

Sam says nothing and instead chooses to focus on the television, still playing New Years celebrations across the country. There’s a cry of jubilation in the bar and Sam turns to see a pretty dark-haired girl letting out a drunken cheer before kissing a tall, fair-haired guy so fiercely it almost looks like an attack. Next to them a chunky blonde boy is holding a little redhead close to him, the pair smiling, their faces flushed from celebration and alcohol.

Hannah comes back with a relieved smile on her face and takes the tall guy’s arm, whispering something in his ear that Sam doesn’t quite catch. The guy nods enthusiastically and the three of them catch a cab to Cassandra’s place. On the way Hannah squeezes Sam’s hand.

“Good job, honey.”

The guy, Mark or Mack or something, is going on about his band and Hannah is smiling and nodding at all the right times. Sam feigns interest until Mack makes it clear that he doesn’t care about her, and she’s free to stare out the window. The trees lining the streets are decked out with twinkling white Christmas lights, and laughing people are spilling out of clubs and bars, holding each other and basking in the mild winter night.

When they get back Hannah leads Mark into the living room to talk more while Sam, not knowing what else to do, tags along. Beth’s out with Jess (Sam tries to suppress the surge of jealousy that fills her heart at the thought) and Hannah’s preoccupied with Mack at the moment. Sometimes Amy or Tamika will talk to her but the longer they stay under the influence of Cassandra and Bev, the more they regard her with contempt and resentment.

Hannah leans in and kisses Mark’s cheek, beaming while he babbles on about radical peace and the mind-expanding powers of acid. In between coquettish looks and flirty giggles Hannah gives Sam looks of exasperated amusement.

_The men I have to deal with_, her eyes seem to say.

As Sam watches the exchange and hopes Hannah will be done in time for them to talk, Amy taps Sam on the shoulder from behind.

“Cassandra wants to see you,” she says with a curt nod. Sam stands and walks past her, trying not to think about the kind, shy girl Amy used to be. Amy’s shaped up since her time in the pit, and now she’s one of the most brutal killers in the gang. Cassandra couldn’t be prouder.
Cassandra’s sitting on her bed, reading a book whose title Sam can’t make out. She thinks it must be German or Swedish or something. Cassandra likes to teach herself languages when there’s no blood to spill. She looks up at Sam and smiles warmly.

“Sam,” she says. “I heard you had an eventful night.”

Sam doesn’t even bother to ask how Cassandra already knew that. The woman has so many spies that she almost seems omniscient at times.

“Just listening to my instincts, madam,” Sam replies. Cassandra laughs.

“Madam? Sam, you know you don’t have to be that formal with me. I’m not your boss.”

Sam says nothing.

“You know, I’m very proud of you, Sam,” Cassandra says. “I was worried that you were getting depressed in our ranks, and that you were becoming unwilling to do what all vampires are born to do. That kind of self-hatred doesn’t just put you in danger; it endangers all of your friends. Like Jessica when that rogue almost killed you both. To lose someone so promising to her own weakness is a terrible waste.” She looks at Sam very seriously. “I know that you’re quite gifted, even among our kind. Your senses are keener than even your sire’s. I think, if you keep this good work up, you could be something wonderful.”

“Thank you,” Sam says, trying to make herself sound grateful rather than miserable. Cassandra puts her hands on Sam’s shoulders, her eyes almost motherly.

“I think you’re ready to move up in the ranks. You might even surpass the twins one day. But I have to make sure that you’re still loyal to us.”

Sam blinks.

“What do you mean, Cassandra?”

“You have one final test,” Cassandra says. “You have to bring someone else into our ranks. A fledgling of your own.” She frowns when she sees Sam’s eyes widen with fear. “Are you remembering Anna? Poor girl. But you were young back then. I’m sure you won’t make the same mistake.” She squeezes Sam’s shoulders. “To be a sire is a great honor, Sam. I hope you understand the gravity of this opportunity.”

“I do.”

“Good,” Cassandra says. “Choose wisely. But choose soon. If you fail to bring me a viable fledgling within a month, I’ll have to let you go. Do you understand?”

Sam suddenly feels colder than usual.

“I understand, Cassandra.”

“Good,” Cassandra tells her. “Now go have a nice evening with your friend. You’ve earned it.”

By the time Sam heads back into the living room Hannah is walking out of a spare bedroom, licking blood off her fingertips. She watches blithely as a pair of younger vampires carries the still slightly twitching Mack into the pit. Lord knows how long he’ll last down there. Hannah turns to look at Sam and beams.
“Happy New Year, Sammy! Got any resolutions?”

“Get a tan,” Sam jokes. Hannah giggles.

“You always say that!”

“How about you?” Sam says, moving onto a nearby couch. A few seconds later, Hannah joins her.

“Hm. I wanna learn French. Cass is always saying one of these days she’ll take us to see Paris.”

Cassandra has been promising to take them all sorts of places for the past thirty years. Believing she’ll ever take them out of California is like believing in Santa Claus. Sam wonders what it is about the state that keeps Cassandra from ever wanting to leave it.

“I want to see Paris too,” Sam says. “I want to go to the Louvre.”

“Me too!” Hannah says. “Oh, and the Seine is supposed to be beautiful.” She grins. “Just like the men.”

“You’d know better than I would,” Sam teases. Hannah laughs. Then her face falls. She looks like she’s about to say something when they’re interrupted by laughter. They look up to see Beth and Jess staggering in, drunk on blood and whatever weird drugs they got from the hippies they set out to kill. Usually drugs and alcohol have no effect on vampires, but if the crap was already in the hippies’ bloodstream, then it’s possible to get a high off the drugged-up blood. Jess stumbles off to her room, still laughing, while Beth heads over to them.

“Happy New Yeeeaaaarr!” she slurs, planting a sloppy kiss of Sam’s forehead. “Man, those hippies were fucking ripe.”

“Now Beth, haven’t you seen *Reefer Madness*?” Hannah scolds jokingly. “Drugs will rot your brain. Not that you have one.”

“Hey!” Beth says, and smacks Hannah lightly on the shoulder. “I’m like, way smarter than you, sis. You’re just a naïve little doofus without my sage advice.”

“Oh yeah? Well here’s my sage advice,” Hannah fires back. “Check to see if your victim is totally stoned before you drink his blood, ya bozo!”

Beth slumps down beside them and giggles before staring out into space, her eyes as wide as tiny white globes.

“Woah…”

Hannah laughs.

“Hey Sam, how about you get this one to bed before she knocks something over?”

Sam takes Beth’s arm, carefully leading her into the room they share. Hannah waves to them.

“Night, guys! Happy New Year!”

Beth’s way too out of it for New Year’s sex to be an option, so Sam just helps Beth into her pajamas and gets her into bed before changing and joining her, wrapping her arms around her girlfriend and marveling at how warm she feels. Even vampires who overfeed tend to still feel a little clammy after a while, but Beth is like a furnace tonight. Sam basks in it, snuggling up close and squeezing Beth’s lanky body. Beth giggles and peppers Sam’s neck with kisses. Briefly, her lips rest on the bite mark
on Sam’s neck—the one vampire wound that never heals.

“You look so good, Sammy,” Beth sighs. “I was worried…you were so sick…”

“It’s okay, honey,” Sam says. “I’m better now.”

Beth kisses her forehead again and then looks deep into Sam’s eyes.

“Promise me you won’t do that again,” Beth says. “Promise me you’ll eat when you need to and you won’t put some random human’s life above your own.”

“Beth—”

“Promise me. Please.”

Sam doesn’t want to give in and be another one of Cassandra’s murderous pawns, but when she sees the desperation in her girlfriend’s face, that independent resolve suddenly feels less important.

“…Okay. I promise.”

Beth smiles, looking adorably dopey, and kisses her on the lips.

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The first night she sets out too late and doesn’t find anyone interesting. She and the twins go to a movie theater and Sam scouts out the bored ticket girls and moviegoers but doesn’t find anyone who catches her eye. She has to be careful about this. She wants to be sure whoever she curses with vampirism is someone she can care for and help through it.

The next night she wakes early, and heads out just after sunset. The sky is still pinkish as the cold blue night sets in and chases the rest of the light over the horizon. Beth walks beside her, admiring the look of resolve on Sam’s face.

“You look so cute when you’re super determined like that.”

Sam smiles despite herself.

“You always look cute, so touché.”

Beth laughs.

“Okay, seriously, though. What’s got you so single-minded?”

Sam sees no point in lying.

“Cassandra wants me to turn someone.”

Beth’s face lights up.

“A fledgling! Oh, Sam, this is great! You’ll finally get to be a sire. It’s the best thing in the world.” Beth squeezes Sam’s hand. “Do you have someone in mind?”

Sam shrugs.

“Not really. Just someone nice, I guess?”

Beth smirks.
“Well, if you’re looking for a certain kind of person, then I have just the place to start looking.”

Sam has never been to The Castro before now. The streets are crowded with pretty, young people laughing and jostling one another as the pass her by. The buildings look old and small but there’s a definite charm to them. On the hill overlooking the street they’re on Sam can see rows of middle class houses, pink and blue and yellow, peeking out between the trees. A pair of men walks past her, smiling timidly at each other as one man nervously slips his hand into the other’s. Sam feels a mixture of admiration and envy bloom in her chest.

“Things are really changing,” she says.

Beth doesn’t say anything, but follows the couple with her eyes until they walk into a nearby bookstore. Sam follows her gaze and sees it, a tiny little hole-in-the-wall place with a simple wooden sign above the door. Radical Books.

“What a stupid name,” Beth remarks. Sam agrees but says nothing as they walk into the store. Immediately as they open the door Sam is hot by the smell of old books. The shelves in the cramped little store are overstuffed with books, some new bust most of them old, with faded covers and yellowing pages. Where Sam can actually see a bit of the walls, she can see that the paint is light blue, and chipping where it meets the off-white ceiling. Sam doesn’t see where the men ended up. Despite the small size, the store seems easy to get lost in.

The shopkeeper, perched at an old brown counter and reading The Communist Manifesto right out in the open, looks familiar, but Sam can’t immediately place her. She’s small and cute, with a pale face and soft cheeks, like a hamster. Her hair is long and dark red, and her eyes are wide and green as they dart across the words on her book. Sam clears her throat and heads over to the counter.

The woman—a girl, really—smiles and looks up at her.

“Can I help you find something, miss?”

“Yeah. I’m looking for a good birthday gift for my friend Hannah. Got any recommendations?”

“What sort of books does Hannah like?” the girl asks.

“Hm. I suppose she likes romance novels a lot, as long as they’re not too low-brow.”

The girl thinks.

“Well, there’s always the classics. Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, Pride and Prejudice—that last one is my favorite. Jane Austen was an incredible woman. Or maybe your friend would be interested in some books on radical love?”

Sam blushes.

“Uh, no. Probably not.”

“Of course. Maybe Pride and Prejudice then? It’s just over there, under ‘A’”.

Sam thinks back as she walks over to the shelf and searches. She thinks she remembers her from the other night, in the bar maybe. When she finds a dusty copy with a cracked spine, she wrestles it out and takes it over to the counter.
“Say, did you go to a New Years party at Tom’s Pub a few blocks from here?”

The girl blinks and rubs the back of her head.

“I did… I think. I was a little tipsy that night so I don’t remember everything. Uh, why do you ask?”

“Oh, you know. I’m new to the area and I was just hoping to get to know some friendly folks,” Sam lies. “I was wondering if you had… maybe… an evening book club or something?”

The girl’s eyes light up.

“Why yes, we do! Every Sunday night. We’re starting a new book this week, as it happens. *The Mind Parasites*. I’ve already read it, if you want to borrow my copy?”

Sam smiles.

“I’d love to. Is it here?”

“I think it’s at my apartment actually. I hope you don’t mind; I think you’d have to come by my place to get it tomorrow.”

“If it’s okay with you, I’m fine with that.”

The girl nods.

“I’ll have it ready for you then! What time will you come by?”

“After dinner sometime,” Sam tells her. The girl nods.

“Alright then. What’s your name, by the way?”

“Samantha. Call me Sam.”

“Will do,” the girl says. She smiles shyly. “My name’s Ashley.”

The apartment is a dingy little brick building in a run-down corner of the Castro. Inside the paint is peeling and the ceiling is spotted with dry rot. Through the thin wall, Sam can hear blaring rock music, and the unmistakable smell of marijuana permeates the air. Sam knocks on the last door in the hall, apartment 339.

“Hello?” comes a muffled male voice. Sam pauses.

“Um, hello. I’m here for Ashley?”

There’s a pause as the voice calls out to someone in the room. There are footsteps, and then the door opens and a familiar head peeks out.

“Sam?”

“Hi, Ashley,” Sam says. Ashley beams.

“Come in, come in! I’ll introduce you to my friends.” She opens the door wider and Sam walks into the foyer. “Messy” doesn’t even begin to describe the place. There’s books, papers, and pens everywhere, the bookshelves overstuffed, the wallpaper cracked and peeling. On a desk by a
window a bunch of computer parts lie in a pile, surrounded by odds and ends and what looks like an action figure. Standing by the desk is a scruffy-looking man with dark blonde hair and blocky glasses.

“This is Chris!” Ashley says, walking over and giving him a little squeeze. “He’s my boyfriend.” Sam looks him over. Compared to Ashley in her billowy blue shirt and bell-bottom jeans, Chris is far more conservative, almost stuffy. He wears khaki pants and a knit green sweater with a simple white zigzag pattern across the chest. His hair comes up in a sloppy blonde cowlick, and his glasses have been taped. He shoots her a big, broad, cheesy smile.

“Ash said somebody would be coming by. Welcome to our very, very humble abode.”

Sam laughs. “It’s nice. Homey.”

“I think you mean disgusting. But in our defense, our roommates may be actual pigs.”

“Can you shush it, please?” Ashley buts in, rolling her eyes and elbowing Chris gently in the gut. “Sam’s here to pick up a book, remember?”

Chris’s eyes light up.

“The Mind Parasites, right? Ah, that’s a great one. Ash and I got it together and we finished the whole thing in like a month. I love science fiction stuff. Have you seen Star Trek?”

“What’s that?” Sam asks.

“Oh no,” Ashley says. “Don’t get him started.”

Chris takes a deep breath. Too late.

“So, in, like, the distant future, humans are starting to explore the universe. And one ship, The Enterprise, is going even further. The captain is Captain Kirk, and he gets so much alien tail…”

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“And that’s why Spock represents the Freudian concept of the superego. He’s all about logic and reason, unlike the id, which is McCoy, and Kirk, who is the ego. Oh, and don’t even get me started on the Klingons—”

“Sugar,” Ashley says, patting Chris on the shoulder. “Let’s maybe let Sam find out the plot for herself. It’s been five minutes.”

Chris turns the color of a ripe tomato and mumbles something about needing to get back to work. He heads over to his desk and starts tinkering with the electronics piled there. Ashley smiles fondly at him before turning back to Sam.

“Right. The book. I left it in the bedroom, hold on.”

She heads into the bedroom before immediately backing out, a scandalized look on her face.

“CLAIRE! JEREMY!”

A husky voice comes out of the dark, smoky room.

“What is it…?”
“Why are you fucking in my room?!”

“Woah, this is your room? They all look the same on this shit…”

“GET OUT!”

There’s shuffling and grumbling, and then out of the bedroom stumble a shirtless man and a woman in nothing but boyshorts and a skimpy bra. The man is tall and handsome, with hair the color of melted caramel. The girl has long black hair that falls almost to her waist, and as she pushes a lock behind her ear, Sam can see the many piercings in her ears and nose.

“Hey cutie,” the girl says. “Ash, you didn’t tell me you were having friends over.”

“Claire, knock it off.”

“So,” the girl, Claire, ignores Ashley, her dark eyes lingering over Sam’s body. “What's your name?”

She isn’t sure where to look.

“…Sam”

“Well, Sam, wanna join me and my boy here? Ash and Chris are boring. They don’t like to share.”

Sam’s glad she hasn’t had blood yet tonight; if she had, she’d be about the same color as a ripe beet.

“Um, no thank you.”

“Oh. What a drag.”

“This is Claire and Jeremy,” Ashley says through gritted teeth. “They are my roommates.”

“And best friends!” Jeremy chimes in. He walks over to Ashley and ruffles her hair. Ashley makes an adorable frustrated face and weaves away. Jeremy laughs. He has a deep, hearty laugh, like a lumberjack in a fairy tale. “Aw, come on, Ash, don’t be such a square!”

“I thought I was the square,” Chris chimes in, looking up from his work.

“Looks like your square-ness is contagious. We’ll have to quarantine you,” Claire says. “We’ll get a little square box. You’ll fit perfectly.”

The three of them bicker and tease each other while Ashley sheepishly walks into the bedroom again and returns with a dusty copy of *The Mind Parasites*.

“Sorry about my friends. They’re a little weird at first, but I promise they’re good people.”

“Don’t worry,” Sam says. “I can tell they are.”

Ash smiles that same shy smile. “Uh, see you for the book club?”

Sam nods and smiles.

“I’ll be there.”

“Be there or be square!” Chris calls. Ashley giggles.

“Good one, hon. I can tell you worked real hard on that.”
They’re all laughing at jostling one another by the time Sam heads out of the apartment. She sees an easy target on her way out of the building: a homeless guy falling asleep on a street corner. Sam hovers over him, fangs glinting in the pale moonlight. Then she sighs and walks away, heading for the bus stop. She can always sneak herself some blood wine at home.

Beth is waiting for her when she arrives back at the mansion. She smiles and hands her a bottle of blood wine, wrapped up in red ribbon. Beth’s hands feel warm, almost alive.

“Let’s split this,” she says.

The blood warms her up and when the two of them go to bed, wrapped tight in each other’s embrace, Sam almost feels human.

Every week, Sam goes to the book club with Ashley and her friends, and sometimes, they talk after. Ashley’s fond of a little all-night café a few blocks from her apartment. The coffee is nothing special but the people there are lively and joyful. There are book talks, protest meetings, and one night, as Sam and Ashley discovered upon walking in, a drag show. They watch a pair of queens perform a dramatic duet of a song Sam hadn’t heard before, then as an older queen performs “It Must Be Him All The Time”, complete with a curly brown wig and a flowing white dress. After the show is over, Ashley looks at Sam and beams.

“I’ve never seen anything like that before! Man, if my parents knew what I was doing…” She trails off and looks away. Sam frowns.

“You alright?”

“Yeah,” Ashley says after a moment. “It’s just…I haven’t seen my family in years. They’re a bunch of backwards hicks living in Idaho so, like, I never agreed with them much. But still, sometimes I…I guess I miss them. A little.” She hesitates, staring into her cooling coffee like it will tell her what to say. “I ran away when I was fifteen. Never looked back. I don’t know if they ever went looking for me.”

“Ash…”

“It’s okay,” Ashley says with a small smile. “I’m glad I did it. I was homeless for a bit, but then I met Jeremy and Claire, and they showed me how to fight for peace and live a good life.” She brushes a bit of hair behind her neck. “Besides, if I hadn’t run, I would never have met Chris.”

“How did you two meet?” Sam asks. A tiny blush spreads across Ashley’s face.

“Well, he’s this geeky tech guy, right? Came from a whole family like that. Cookie-cutter Eisenhower-voting corporate cogs. But Chris was different. He came here to work for IBM and saw a protest going on and got curious. So, he came down, saw me and my friends marching, and he tagged along. After the march I offered him a joint, and the rest is history.” She smiles. “I mean, he’s still kind of a square, but he makes me laugh.” She looks up at Sam. “Are you seeing anyone?”

Usually when humans ask Sam this question she says “no” and changes the subject, but there’s something warm in Ashley’s eyes that makes her tell the truth.

“Uh, yes. I…have a girlfriend.”

Something about saying it out loud fills her with fear and relief in equal measure. It feels more real somehow, like a declaration. She stares at her coffee mug and waits for questions and insults.
“Groovy!” Ashley says. “You’re fighting the patriarchy with your radical love! That’s super cool. I’ve never known a lesbian before. What’s your girlfriend like?”

Sam wants to cry. She’s never had someone besides Hannah voice approval of her and Beth, and even with Hannah it took a while for her to get used to them. Ashley accepted her immediately, without a second of hesitation.

“She—” Sam starts, pausing when her voice hitches. She wipes her eyes. “She’s beautiful, smart, loves the outdoors even though she’s not a very good hiker. She likes going to the movies and she’s teaching herself to play the cello. And she’s so tall! Like, unfairly tall.” She stops herself when she realizes she’s rambling, and looks up to see Ashley beaming at her.

“I’d love to meet her.”

“You could,” Sam says. “We should….all meet up sometime.”

Ashley grins. “I’d like that.”

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Beth and Sam see Ashley and her friends twice more that week, Beth growing increasingly agitated as the time passes. It isn’t until Sam takes a peek at Ashley’s calendar on the way out of her apartment one night that she sees it’s the 25th. She’s running out of time.

“Sam,” Beth says on the walk to the bus stop. “You…you’ve thought about how to go about turning her, right? Ashley?”

“I…I guess. Why? It’s not like we have a time limit—”

Beth cuts her off with a stern, worried look.

“Cass told me.”

Sam freezes.

“Sam, why didn’t you tell me?” Beth asks, her eyes starting to water. “We tell each other everything!”

“I just…I didn’t want to scare you. I thought I could handle it.” The explanation does little to calm Beth, who looks at Sam like they’re seconds from dawn with no shelter around to save them.

“Sam, I know I didn’t raise you to be hard-hearted, but you have to try, okay? We have to get Ash and make Cass happy and keep you safe. Okay? I’m scared for you.”

“Beth…”

“Sam, please,” Beth begs. “I love you. Please.”

Sam says nothing, but wraps Beth into a protective hug as the bus pulls up to their stop. The ride back to the mansion is quiet, Sam and Beth furtively holding one another’s hand as the bus slowly makes its way back to the mansion. By the time they get there, dawn is only an hour away. They enter the foyer to find Hannah staring listlessly at a glass of slowly congealing blood wine. She looks up as they get closer.

“Sam…?” Hannah says. “Can I talk to you for a second in my room?”
Sam nods, and Hannah takes her by the hand into the adjacent room. Hannah sits them both down on her pretty lavender bed and sniffs, looking hurt.

“There’s a rumor going around…that…that…” she begins, and trails off into noisy sniffles. Sam waits for her to get her breath back, steadily rubbing her best friend’s back. “B-Bev told me that you’re gonna burn if you don’t turn someone by February.”

“Aw, Hannah,” Sam says, gently thumbing away Hannah’s tears. “Bev’s just saying that to upset you. You know how she is.”

“I’m not dumb, Sam!” Hannah says. “I’ve seen how upset Beth’s been lately. You’re both on edge. Please tell me this isn’t real. Please.”

Sam considers lying, but, looking at the earnestness on Hannah’s face, she knows there’s no point.

“It…it’s true. Cassandra wants me to sire someone by the end of the month.”

Hannah grabs Sam by she shoulders, a little too tight, and looks her full in the face, undisguised terror in her eyes.

“Sam, you have to turn someone, okay? Whatever it takes. I can help you. I know plenty of girls who—”

“Han, it’s okay,” Sam says. “I have someone picked out. I just…have to finish it. I’ll be done before you know it.”


Sam sighs, and pulls Hannah into a tight hug.

“I promise.”

As the sun slowly begins to rise behind the blocked and shaded windows, Sam wonders if she’ll be able to keep her word.

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Time barely exists when eternity is stretched out in front of you. But time moves fast when there’s a deadline hanging over your head.

She returns from Ashley’s flat. Again. Her friend is still breathing. Again.

It’s 28th of January.

She passes some of the other girls who are sitting by the hearth in the living room, huddled around the fire even though it’s not cold. Bev is surrounded by three other vamps, all young and impressionable and hanging off her every word.

Their eyes lock across the room. Bev smirks.

“Tick tock,” she mouths.

She’s still shaking when she finds Beth. Whether it’s from fear or anger she doesn’t know. Beth’s in one of the mansion’s many living rooms, sitting alone in the gloom. She’s reading a large book by someone called Thucydides. Reading is perhaps an exaggeration. Her eyes are unfocussed as she stares at one spot on the page.
Sam clears her throat. Beth starts, and when she sees Sam she smiles tightly.

“Hey.”

“Can I…” Sam rushes over and grips Beth’s hands. She feels cold. Absurdly, a small voice in the back of her head wonders whether Beth is eating enough.

“Beth. I need you in the bedroom. Now.”

She practically drags Beth to their room, shutting the door behind them, casting furtive glances around. This is supposed to be her home, but she can’t shake the feeling she is being watched.

“Sam, sorry, I’m really tired so I’m not really in the mood tonight…”

“Listen,” Sam says, talking over Beth. “I’ve organized it with Ashley. We’re both invited over to her apartment tomorrow. So, I’ll do it then.”

Beth lets out a strangled gasp, sinking against the door in palpable relief.

“I’ll do it.” Sam repeats. She steels herself. “On one condition.”

“What…what?”

“We spare Chris. And the other two…”

“Sam, Chris is the logical choice for…”

“I don’t care,” Sam snaps, trying to keep a lid on her anger. “I. Don’t. Care. He loves her. They all do. I’m not…inflicting that on her.”

Beth looks skeptical, like she’s considering trying to talk her out of it. Sam sets her mouth in a line and looks her girlfriend in the eye, needing her to understand the gravity the situation.

“Beth. No exceptions. Either it’s this or I’m out and I’ll…take the consequences.”

“OK,” Beth says, her voice hitching. Her lovely dark eyes are narrowed seriously. Sam can almost hear her weighing up their options, thinking of all the ways it could go awry, crafting a plan that will run like clockwork.

“We can work with this,” she says slowly. “Turn Ashley when she’s alone. We’ll take her boss. She doesn’t like him anyway. Leave Cass to me.”

For the first time, Sam feels a sliver of hope.

“You can convince her? Cassandra?”

Beth gives her weak grin. It’s all bravado but Sam can’t help but smile back.

“I’ll think of something. Don’t worry about it.”

“Promise?” Sam asks, her voice sounding so croaky and small, even to her own ears. Now that she has hope she doesn’t want to let it go. Beth nods, swallowing a whimper of her own as she kisses down Sam’s neck, pressing up against her firmly.

Sam closes her eyes, gives herself over to the familiar feeling of Beth’s mouth. She doesn’t object when Beth backs her towards the bed as they fall together onto the sheets in a frantic haze of lips, tongue and teeth.
Sex isn’t going to solve anything. But it makes her feel better all the same.

Ashley shivers. She pulls up the covers, trying to build herself a make-shift cocoon. It’s no use, she thinks. Their blankets must have holes in them since she can feel cold air swirling her toes.

She cranes her neck and checks the time. She blinks back sleep, trying to bring the numbers into view.

1235 am.

Where’s Chris?

She opens the door in the hallway, hoping her fluffy socks will muffle the sound of her feet. She lets out a relieved sigh when she hears a familiar huff from the kitchen.

When she gets there she spots her boyfriend hunched over a table, furiously working on his latest gadget. She rolls her eyes affectionately. Of course.

“Chris, it’s like…12am can you please come to bed? I’m freezing my buns off here.”

“Huh?” He turns blinks at her, the light from the lamp reflecting off his glasses. His hair is sticking up at odd angles, like he’s run his hands through it a million times. Ashley suppresses the urge to reach out her hand and smooth it back into place.

“Chris. I’m cold.”

“Oh, sorry I just wanted to fix this before I get into work tomorrow.

She walks over and looks at what he’s working on. She doesn’t want to hurt his feelings, but it looks a like a bunch of scrap metal to her.

“This is so rad, Ash.”

“What does this…thingie…even do?”

“A DRAM? Oh, not much, it’s just ushering a new era of mankind, no big,” he grins, waggling his eye brows at her. “These little beauties can store more memory than we ever thought possible. If we can get these things to be massed produced and make them even more powerful…like, it would be incredible. It’ll blow your mind.”

*It’s not my mind I’m planning to blow,* she thinks, smirking. He’s not trying to be sexy right now, but he just is. Maybe it’s because he’s so earnest and passionate about what he loves. Or maybe it’s way his tongue darts out to lick his lips as his nimble fingers glide over his equipment.

Ashley tries to play coy. She picks up his abandoned joint that is still smoking beside him. She raises it to her mouth, catching his eye as she does so. She purses her lips around it, more sensually than necessary, sucking it in as much as possible before blowing the smoke out very, very slowly.

He’s staring at her, his contraption forgotten.

“Chris,” she says. “I’m still cold. I really, really, need you to warm me up, Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he looks down at his workbench, like he doesn’t recognize anything in front of him. “You got a good point. Can’t have you being cold now, can I?”
“Absolutely not.”

“Mhhmm,” he gets up. Then without warning he grabs her, sweeping her of her feet cradling her in his arms like she’s nothing.

“Chris!”

“Beware, simple maiden. You’ve unleashed the beast.”

“Stop it,” she laughs.

“I don’t see you complaining. Speaking of blowing your mind…” he lowers his voice. “Wanna see my intergalactic missile?”

“Oh my god, stop it.”

“I hear it’s very impressive…”

“Oh you need to stop talking.” She smirks. “And do something else with your mouth.”

He finally takes the hint, finally. He slides his mouth over hers, kissing her so firmly it sends shivers right down to her toes.

They’re still laughing as he carries her up to their room, throwing her onto their bed and almost smothering her with kisses.

It doesn’t feel so cold under the covers anymore.

Ashley tries not to obsess over the state of her apartment. It’s just that she doesn’t have guests over for dinner very often.

If left to her own devices she’ll spend hours trying to wipe the grime from every nook and cranny. The house is never clean enough, even when she scrubs so hard it chafes her hands. She gets like this even when it’s just Sam and Beth coming over. Eventually, though, she had to take Chris’ advice and stop obsessing about the state of their apartment. As he says, if they’re going to be friends with her they’re going to have to put up with a bit of a mess.

Today, though, she’s made a bit of an effort to make sure the kitchen is sparkling. Even by her exacting standards, the place looks good. Chris left for work early and Claire and Jeremy woke up at midday then left soon afterwards. Ashley doesn’t like it when the apartment’s empty but at least her chores keep her mind occupied.

She doesn’t like being left alone with her thoughts.

She hears the timer going off, meaning the tomato stew is finally ready. She takes the lid off the pot, already salivating a bit as she inhales the aroma. Claire taught her the basics of cooking when she was a kid but none of the others enjoy it like she does. Food doesn’t taste good unless you care. Apathy makes for a woeful cook.

She tastes the soup, idly wondering if she should add a pinch of turmeric, but she’s probably being stupid again. She’s ruined more than a few dishes by adding an extra ingredient at the last minute. This is the first time she’s cooked for Sam and Beth. She needs to get this right.

When Sam and Beth arrive they both look gorgeous, as usual. Beth looks particularly radiant. On
closer inspection though Ashley can see Sam looks a little worn, like she hasn’t been sleeping well for days. She shoots Ashley a tight smile as she walks in

Beth sits next to her on the couch, a little closer than Ashley would like. Sam takes a seat across from them on the tattered ottoman.

“Are you okay, Sam?”

“I just have a lot on my mind,” Sam says, her voice thicker and hoarser than normal. Next to her she feels Beth stiffen, and the two of them share a look that Ashley can’t decipher.

“Okay,” Ashley says, trying to look nonchalant. She wonders if she’s done something wrong.

“Ash…you know I really like you. We both do. We’ve become fast friends…”

“Of course. You guys are really groovy.”

“Groovy,” Sam grins, although the smile doesn’t reach her eyes. “I like it. That’s the cutest phrase I’ve heard in decades.”

Decades? Ashley shakes her head. Maybe she misheard. Sam looks barely older than her.

“So, because we’re so close, and because…because I know a place where you can spend all your time reading and discussing all the book you like….”

“What’s that noise?” Beth interrupts, standing abruptly.

Sam flinches. Ashley listens carefully but can’t hear anything, but feels her nerves begin to fray when she sees Sam’s horrified expression.

“Oh my god,” Sam whispers.

“What are you guys…”

Suddenly, she hears a key in the lock. Heart pounding, she leaps up, looking for something to grab, something to protect herself, when…

“Hey party people!” Jeremy’s deep voice bounces off the walls.

“Heyyyyy,” another voice, this time a girl’s.

The hallway is full when Ashley wanders in. There’s Jeremy, with Claire hanging off his shoulder, wearing her trademark bored expression. Next to her is a small, exuberant-looking blonde girl, with a cute button nose and the darkest blue eyes Ashley has ever seen.

“Oh my god,” she squeals, running up and throwing her arms around and squeezing so tight she struggles to draw breath. “You must be Ashley.”

“Yeah….hi.”

“Hi,” the girl gives her a broad smile. Her teeth are brilliantly white. She looks like she could be an actress in a toothpaste commercial. The girl, who doesn’t seem to understand the concept of personal space, squishes Ashley’s nose. Ashley blanches. Her fingers are freezing.

“She’s super adorable, Beth. You guys picked really well.”
“Uh…” Ashley stutters, feeling unsettled by this strange, vivacious girl.

But just like that, she’s lost interest in Ashley, practically skipping over the lounge room and rifling through their stuff like its hers.

Ashley wants to tell her off, but she’s distracted when a girl bearing a startling likeness to Beth walks through the door.

“Hi,” she says, adjusting her glasses and giving Ashley an appraising look.

“Hi.”

“I’m Hannah.”

“Hannah, of course. You’re Beth’s twin. Did you end up liking *Pride and Prejudice*?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure I follow…”

“The book Sam and Beth bought you for your birthday...”

“Oh of course,” Hannah says, slapping her hand lightly on her forehead. “How silly of me to forget. Yes, thank you for the recommendation…”

“Sure,” she’s not sure she believes her, but that’s moot when she sees Chris wearily walk in, shutting the door behind him.

“Chris!” She throws her arms around him, pulling him close and breathing him in. “I thought you were going to work late today.”

“Nah, everyone was so impressed with our project we were let out early. And as I was walking home I ran into these jokers.”

“Lou and Reece bailed,” Jeremy explains. “The band sucked and we were about to book it when I saw Hannah. Well, I thought she was Beth. And we got talking and everyone decided to have dinner back here.”

Ashley plays with her the hem of her denim jacket. “I’m not sure if I have enough food for everyone.”

“Don’t worry, me and the girls will just scavenge,” the small blonde calls out from the other room.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” Sam says coldly. Ashley cocks her head, trying to hear more. She’s never heard Sam sound so hostile.

“Piish, Sammy, you should be apologizing to me and Hannah. If we didn’t run into muscle man over there,’ she indicates to Jeremy, who looks flattered. “We would’ve missed out on a real party.”

“That’s Jess,” Hannah whispers into her ear, taking her by the arm and leading her towards the others. Ashley winces and tries to suppress the urge to wriggle out of Hannah’s grip. She’s cold too. It must be freezing outside.

“Alright, I bring the hits!” Jess says, turning on Jeremy’s radio. Everyone is packed into the living room, nodding along to the music. They all look happy enough, but Ashley should be a good host and offer them some refreshment.

She’s heads to the kitchen and finds an old, crumpled packet of Jeremy’s favorite biscuits. This will
have to do. If he complains she’ll remind him that he brought a horde of women back to their apartment without telling her first.

“Ashley.”

It’s Sam. She turns and sees her friend standing behind her, an agitated expression on her face.

“Sam…”

“Tell everyone to leave.”

“What do you mean?”

“Tell everyone to go. Me and Beth will go too. We can…do this another night…”

“Well, everyone’s here already so I would feel a little rude kicking them out…”

“When I can come back and see you? Tomorrow?”

“I’m…busy the next couple of days. Maybe early next month?”

She must have said something wrong because Sam flinches, sinking into a nearby chair and staring off into the distance with a dazed expression on her face. Ashley wants to reach out and comfort her, ask her what’s wrong but she’s distracted when she’s hears Chris’ laughter in the next room.

Although she wants to stay and help Sam, she can’t help but check on the others. Chris, Jess, Beth and Claire are all sitting together around their tiny dining table. She can hear their excited voices over the dull hum of the music.

Hannah is on the couch next to Jeremy. Ashley can already tell just from his body language her friend is chatting Hannah up. She seems receptive to his advances, giggling and wrapping a finger around one of his loose blonde curls. Ashley hopes that if Claire and Jeremy take Hannah up into their room they’ll have the decency to keep the noise down.

When she gets closer she sees they’ve unpacked Claire’s spirit board.

A shiver runs down Ashley’s spine. She always hated that thing.

“So, it says here to communicate with the spirit world you must free your mind of all preconceptions, drop all inhibitions and generally give yourself over entirely to the will of others, sublimating your every desire to the spirit master, which is me…”

“Will you take this seriously, Chris?” Claire snaps. She blows smoke at him. “Don’t mess around with spirits.”

“Hey whoa whoa, mister, why are you the sprit master?” Jess demands.

“Because I’m clearly the one most in touch with other worldly creatures…”

“Oh, somehow I doubt that…”

“Ashley, wanna join us?” Beth asks.

“Oh, er…sure” she would prefer not to, but she’s not keen to interrupt Hannah and Jeremy, and Sam is still brooding in the kitchen so she doesn’t have much choice. She goes to sit by Chris, who reaches out and squeezes her hand.
“Okay, so, let’s get this party started already…”

“Okay”. Jess sounds awfully eager. Impatient, even. Ashley joins everyone else, putting her fingers on the spirit board’s pointer.

“Come on, spirit master, don’t make the ladies wait…” Jess demands.

“Alright,” now that they are seriously doing this, Chris sounds skeptical. He sighs. “Uh….is anyone there?”

The pointer doesn’t move for a beat. She hears Chris draw breath, about to make a wisecrack, when it jerkily moves, faster than Ashley can believe. After a second the pointer rests on the word yes.

Ashley feels her stomach sink to the floor.

“What the….” She whispers.


“I didn’t,” Beth says slowly.

“Don’t look at me.”

“Ashley?”

“Chris? Of course I wouldn’t move it!”

“Guys, stop. Ask what it wants.” Claire demands, her dark eyes glinting as she stares at the board. Ashley swallows thickly, glancing at Chris who just shrugs and rolls his eyes.

“Fine, fine. Who are you? What do you want?”

The pointer jerks to life, gliding swiftly across the board.

“It’s moving again,” Chris cries out gleefully.

Ashley reads the letters out loud, anxiety beginning to churn in her gut.

T-O

“Oh, come on,” Chris scoffs.

K-I-L-L

“What the hell?” Claire breathes.

Y-O-U

“What…” Ashley gasps.

A-L-L

There’s a pause. Then…

Jess upends the dining room table and leaps at Chris, moving so fast Ashley barely has time to blink. She thinks Jess pushes her out of the way, or maybe she fell, because she lands heavily onto the ground, her knees sinking deep into the carpet.
She whirls her head around. Chris. Where is Chris?

Her stomach jolts when she sees him. Chris, her gentle giant, pinned up against the opposite wall. Jess is cackling with glee, her pale forearm pushing up against his neck. He’s spluttering, choking, squirming to get out from her grasp.

*Just push her away, Chris. You’re twice her size. Just push her away.*

“Think you know all about the things that go bump in the night, four eyes? I didn’t think so.” Jess mocks. She takes his glasses off and sneers while he coughs and wheezes.

“Chris!”

“Ashley,” Chris blinks. She can tell he’s struggling to see where she is.

“Ashley, run!”

She wills her body to move but she can’t but she can’t; her muscles are taut and frozen with fear.

There’s carnage everywhere. Beth has pinned Claire to the ground, straddling her friend and not even flinching as Claire punches at her arms. Beth growls, grabs at her neck but Claire spits at her, squirming and wiggling out of her grasp like fish.

“Christ, Claire. Stay still.”

She hears a low cry of pain and the sound of bone shattering to her left.

Jeremy.

He’s cowering into the couch, nursing a wrist that looks broken as Hannah stands over him, smirking as he whimpers and cries.

“How do you like me now, handsome?”

“Ashley…. Ashley, GO.”

Chris’ voice behind her finally spurs Ashley into life. She forces herself to stand, staggering away from the chaos behind her. She takes a few jerky steps before stumbling into the kitchen.

She needs to get away.

Ashley sinks up against the wall, praying her legs don’t give out. In the next room she can hear her friends struggling and crying while the women mock them in high, cruel voices.

Ashley looks around. There are knives in the cabinet across the kitchen but she doesn’t have time to rifle through the draws to find the largest one. The shrieks of pain are becoming less frequent. She thinks maybe she should flee, call the police, but the way the women moved wasn’t natural.

Wasn’t human.

Next to her is a pair of red scissors. She grabs them, weakly curving her fist around the handle. Chris begged her to go. But she can’t leave him. She can’t leave them.

“Ashley.”

Sam. Her friend appears behind her, still wearing the same dazed expression as before.
“Sam, you gotta get out of here, the others, they’re being attacked and…”

Sam looks away, her expression inscrutable.

Ashley shivers.

“Oh god… you’re one of them, aren’t you…?”

Sam looks her in the eye.

“Yes.”

“Oh my god…”

Sam reaches for her, and in a blur Ashley lunges at her, wanting to sink the blades of the scissors into her skin.

Sam nimbly steps out of the way at the last minute, sending Ashley gracelessly stumbling into stove, shrieking as the pan tips over, sending warm tomato soup spilling over her.

“No, no, no, no, no….”

Her legs finally collapse as Ashley sinks into the floor, her limbs slipping and sliding in the mess.

“Ashley,” Sam’s voice is low and urgent. In a flash she bridges the gap between them, squatting in front of her, brows creased with concern.

“Get away. Get away, you monster…”

Sam blanches. Ashley sobs, trying to push this creature away from her.

“Ashley, listen to me,” Sam’s voice is low and urgent. “I know it doesn’t seem like it, but you can trust me. Close your eyes. And breathe. You’re in shock. Close your eyes and breathe in with me.”

Ashley wants to fight back, but her body is shaking, wracked with sobs. She can’t move. She feels soggy and wet all over.

And Sam’s eyes are so kind.

Ashley shuts her eyes.

“I want you to know that I’ll always look after you.”

Ashley cries out and she feels a sharp pinch at the side of her neck. Sam holds her, a cold hand cradling her face. Ashley tries to wriggle away but she can’t break free. Sam’s grip is like iron.

She feels her own warm blood dribble down to mix in with the soup. Ashley wants to laugh. She probably looks like something out of a horror film. Her whole body aches. She closes her eyes, waits for the end, but instead she feels the press of skin against her mouth. Ashley hears someone commanding her to drink, and like a child, she obeys, shuddering as the congealed, cold liquid slides down her throat. As she pulls her mouth away, Ashley feels herself shutting down, like one of Chris’ abandoned contraptions.

Ashley opens her eyes as the world spins and a wave of nausea overcomes her. Her vision blurs form blurs as an awful heat grips her body. She tries to move, but she feels like clay. She sees Chris’s face, then her mother’s, a wild boar, a snake, twirling and twisting in her vision, melding together in
a violent cacophony. In the background, she hears a man laughing. Is it her father? Jeremy? She can’t tell. Ashley tilts her head and vomits, a weak stream of bile that dribbles down her chin. Something cold begins to clean her face, and a distant voice calls out to her in the growing dark.

“I’m so sorry.”

She closes her eyes and gives herself over to the liquid heat in her body.

At least her death is quick, she thinks, as she gives way to darkness.

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The worst thing is, everyone is proud of her.

Cassandra looks like she’s brimming with delight as they return home with their grim bounty. The unconscious boys are being taken to the pit while the girls are dumped on the kitchen floor as their bodies shut down, their humanity being shorn from them, bit by bit.

Beth sends her a relieved smile when everything is done. For the first time, it doesn’t fill her with joy. Instead she feels hollow.

Two new fledglings. Everyone is saying. We haven’t seen that since the twins.

Sam wishes she could rip their tongues out.

She waits with the others, trying not dry heave when a shell-shocked Chris and Jeremy are lead into the arena by Bev and Amy. The girls mock them, pulling roughly at their hair and cheeks, egged on by the other vamps who cheer and stamp their feet.

The boys shrink away from their tormentors, lowering their eyes and blinking back tears as the crowd jeers and laughs. Eventually, after Bev has tired of mocking them, they’re strapped into two chairs. Their wrists are bound onto the table while their ankles are tied to the legs of the chair. They can struggle but can’t move.

Chris tries to comfort Jeremy, who is still shaking and whimpering, his clearly broken wrist chafing against his handcuff. Chris looks worn and frightened, but not cowed, despite spending almost a day in the pit. Sam feels grimly proud of him.

Neither of them have noticed their girlfriend’s corpses lying on the floor.

And while her heart aches for Jeremy and Chris, Sam can’t take her eyes off Ashley as she stirs, whimpering and twitching as she gets used to her new senses. Claire is already more alert but she doesn’t reach for her friend, instead looking around the room with fear and wonder.

The boys call out to their girlfriends, hope and relief shining on their faces, ignoring the loud jeering from the vampires above.

The noise only stops once Cassandra begins to speak. Sam grits her teeth. She can barely stand listening to this charlatan anymore. Cassandra is spouting her usual honey-flavored bullshit. The others are lapping it up; even the twins look at her with wide-eyed wonder.

“…so Claire, I hope you now understand the great gift that has been bestowed upon you. You are now severed from the kingdom of men, free to carve out your own life without humanity’s crude constraints. All I ask, my dear, is for blood in return…”
Ashley curls up into a ball and whimpers. Claire though, stares up at Cassandra, a mutinous glint in her eyes.

“Blood begets blood.”

“No…” Claire growls.

Cassandra laughs. “Oh, my dear, why do you value this brainless boy’s life? Look at him…he’s cowering…. Gone to pieces over a broken bone!”

“… No.”

“You know what to do, Claire… one bite and it’s over. Listen to your instincts.”

Claire sneaks a glance at Jeremy, who shivers and cries and can’t meet her gaze. Sam can practically see her salivating. Her whole body is aching to pierce his skin and drain him dry.

“I am listening. No.”

The gasp is louder this time. Girls turn and whisper openly to one another, staring down at Claire in bloodthirsty wonder.

A girl hasn’t said no during an initiation ceremony in decades.

“You know what the consequences are if you refuse the meal we so diligently provided for you? This world doesn’t need vampires unwilling to do what they are born to do.”

Claire slowly gets to her feet, setting her mouth in a grim line. She casts a final, painful, loving look at Jeremy before turning her gaze back towards Cassandra. She’s shaking, whether from fear or hunger Sam doesn’t know. Sam can’t take her eyes off her, this thin, wispy creature, who stands upright and sneers at Cassandra, ignoring the gasps and jeers from the creatures above.

Cassandra smiles, sweet and pleasant, like a kindergarten teacher.

“So be it.”

There’s uproar as the other girls’ squeal with shock and delight.

Sam stares pleadingly at Beth.

_Claire’s your fledgling. Your blood flows through her. Do something._

Beth’s face is impassive as she stares at the ground, the only inkling Sam has that she’s upset is the slight clench of her jaw.

Bev, Amy and Tamika have raced down to the auditorium. Ashley whimpers and draws closer to the wall but she’s got a reprieve for now. Claire is not so lucky. She hisses at the others, fangs bared, drawing herself up to her full height but she’s a newborn and starved of blood. She’s probably weaker than a human, and with a terrible shriek she is overpowered and, still kicking and screaming, carried outside.

Everyone else races over towards the glass arch window, girls jostling each other for a better view of the ‘show.’ Only Beth hangs back a little, a flicker of what Sam hopes is grief on her face.

Sam doesn’t want to go, doesn’t want to watch this macabre show but she can’t be the only one hanging back. It would draw too much attention to herself. She reluctantly trudges after the other
girls and sees that Claire has already been tied to a tree outside.

It’s dawn already. Bev and the others are beginning to smolder as they race inside. Claire is left completely exposed. She squirms, trying in vain to evade the sun’s rays.

Sam drags her gaze away, feeling sick and weary and horrified all at once. There’s an excited buzz from the other girls as she hears Claire begin to wail, a terrible, strangled sound that reverberates around Sam’s skull. She squeezes her eyes shut but can’t block out Claire’s shrieks or the burning smell of rotting skin. Sam chokes back a sob, as the rest of the girls stamp their feet and cheer as Claire’s screams become even more desperate.

Finally, the noise stops and Sam opens her eyes, blinking back tears. Where Claire once stood is now a steaming pile of black sludge. She gags. The stench of ash is everywhere.

Cassandra’s calling them back and the girls return to their spot overlooking the arena. Jeremy, Chris and Ashley didn’t see what happened to Claire but Sam can tell they know her fate just by the look on their faces. Jeremy keels over, vomit next to his feet but Chris is ignoring his friend, staring at Ashley with a panic stricken expression on his face.

He’s a clever boy. He knows what’s next.

“Let this be a warning to you all. There are no half-measures. Whoever denies their true nature burns.” Sam tries to repress a shudder as it feels like Cassandra’s eyes are burning a hole in the back of her skull.

“Ashley,” Cassandra says, smirking when Ashley glances up, face stained with tears. “My dear, you are in a privileged position. You see the consequences of not acting. If you join us everything will be provided to you and nothing will be denied. All I ask is for you to prove yourself. Take the boy Christopher and drink deep.”

Ashley whimpers.

“Get the hell away from her, you maniac!” Chris snarls. Ashley moans in response, rocking backwards and forwards, mumbling to herself. Chris pushes forward, straining every sinew as he tries to rip open his restraints with all his weak, human, force.

“You’re sweet. It’s almost like you care,” Cassandra laughs. The other girls, those sheep, laugh along with her.

“Ashley, I’ll get you out of this, I won’t let you die!”

“Oh Chris,” Cassandra mocks. “She’s already dead….”

Chris stops moving and stares at Cassandra in shock. The only sound in the auditorium is Jeremy’s quiet sobs. Sam stares at her fledgling. She can almost feel Ashley’s terror pumping through her veins.

Please Ashley. Just do what she says. Please Ashley. I can’t let you burn.

“Ashley,” Cassandra coos. “Ashley, my dear, you know what I’m saying. You’re not like them anymore. You’re more than them. All that matters now is blood. Take his and come join us. We’re all the family you’ll ever need.”

Chris starts yelling at Cassandra again but Sam blocks him out. She closes her eyes, and concentrates
on Ashley. There’s a bond between them, a tiny thread but it’s there. If Sam closes her eyes she can feel what her fledgling feels. And Ashley is terrified. And sickened. And so, so hungry.

But so full of love.

“No….”

The other girls gasp. Cassandra narrows her eyes.

“Ashley…. You know what happens to those who refuse us.”

“I don’t care. I’m not touching him, you can’t make me. Get away. Get AWAY.”

“Ashley…..”

“Are you deaf?” Ashley roars. She lifts her head from her hands and looks at Cassandra. “GET AWAY FROM ME!”


Cassandra cocks her head. For first time ever since Sam’s known her, she looks puzzled.

“Very well,” she says, slowly. “As you wish.”

“No. NO.”

There’s a wail from the others but Sam doesn’t care. She leaps over the banister and lands with a heavy thud on the auditorium’s floor. The shocked voices of the other girls bounce off the walls but Sam doesn’t care, rushing over and taking Ashley’s hands in her own.

“Sam…”

“I’m here Ash. I’m here.”

“Samantha. What are you doing?”

“She said no. She’s doesn’t want to play your little game. So…take me. I’ll burn in her place.”

She hears one of the twins cry out but she can’t hear anyone clearly over the din.

“That isn’t how this works…..”

“Who cares how this works? You just make things up as you go along, you fucking fascist megalomaniac.”

“Sam, no!” Beth cries.

“Come on now, Cass,” Sam goads. “You’ve wanted to do this for a long time. Now’s your chance. Spare Ashley and I’ll walk outside myself.”

“Stupid bitch,” Bev snarls. Sam forgot that Bev, Amy and Tamika were still in the auditorium. Bev advances on her.

“How dare you speak to her like that.”

“Oh, god. I’ve wanted to say this for a long time. Fuck off Bev.”
“I’ll rip your skin off, dyke whore…”

“Enough.” Everyone shuts up as Cassandra strides into the auditorium. Sam doesn’t think she’s ever seen her come down here. She indicates for Beverly to come join her. Bev growls but complies, sending Sam a look of pure venom. Behind her, Sam hears Ashley sniffling.

Sam grits her teeth.

This is it. This is the end.

She thinks her resolve will break if she looks up and sees the twins. She doesn’t want to beg. So, she stares at Cassandra instead, hoping against hope the end will be quick.

Cassandra, that bitch, laughs.

“Well ladies, what a night” she chuckles, looking up to the other girls who laugh nervously in return.

“Sam, I’m so sorry to see that you are still so troubled. I fear we have all been too soft on you. That’s my fault, and your friends too. But I have faith in you.” She pauses. Sam closes her eyes and waits for her death sentence to ring through the air…

“I think enough vampire blood has been spilled for one night.”

Sam’s eyes snap open, right in time to see Cassandra nod at Bev.

“Beverly, if you wouldn’t mind…”

Bev leers at Sam and then in one smooth, terrible movement reaches for Chris’ neck. There’s a meaty, ripping sound as skin and tendons are torn from bone. Chris’ shrieks fill the auditorium.

Bev laughs and twists and pulls and pulls …

Until his head is completely severed from his shoulders.

Sam gasps while Ashley wails.

“CHRIS! NO, NO, NO! NO!”

“Now that’s finally over and done with,” Cassandra says, talking over Ashley and looking at the floor with distaste as some of Chris’ blood oozes towards her. His body slumps on the table, blood still spurting out from where his head should be.

“We’re done. The ceremony is over. Amy, Tamika, take Ashley to the pit. She needs some remedial lessons.”

“No!”

Sam tries to fight them off, but she doesn’t see Bev’s punch coming. She staggers and hits the wall, head ringing. She coughs and feels blood trickling down her chin.

There’s no fight left in Ashley. She lets Amy and Tamika lead her away. She squeezes her eyes shut, as if she’s trying to scrub the image of Chris’ corpse from her brain.

“Ashley…”

“As for you,” Cassandra interrupts. She strides over, looking exultant. Sam wishes she could gouge
her eyes out.

Cassandra leans in close.

“Don’t worry,” she whispers.

“I’ll take care of Ashley. Just like I took care of the twins…”

The thought of her twisting Ashley into one of her goons is too much. She lurches forward, arms out to rip and claw at Cassandra’s skin. She’s stopped only by two strong arms that grab her from behind and wrench her away from Cassandra’s smirking face.

“Sam.” It’s Beth. “Sam, baby, please, stop.”

“Let me go! Ashley! ASHLEY!”

“Bethany. Take your fledgling away.”

She’s screaming, yelling until her throat is raw but somehow, Beth carries her away, grunting in pain as Sam’s legs hit her, again and again.

Finally, Beth lets her go when they get back to their room.

“Sam…”

“Sam, you could have died!” Hannah says, talking over her sister. Her and Jess have followed them. The others have given them a wide berth. “Have you lost your mind?”

“Maybe. Or maybe I’m the only one who’s sane.”

“Okay, she’s definitely cracked,” Jess says.

“Ashley.” Sam pulls at her hair, resists the urge to rip chunks of it out. “She’s got Ashley.”

“Oh my god, you should be thankful,” Jess snaps. “Cassandra would’ve been within her right to burn the both of you. She showed mercy. You could show a little gratitude.”

“Mercy?! You think mercy exists in this place?!”

“Sam, please. I love you. Please calm down.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? Claire was your fledgling. Did you feel anything?”

“Of course,” Beth says, her voice hoarse. “I felt like it was me burning. But we can’t change what happened…”

“We can’t change it because we choose not to.”

“Beth, she’s gone bonkers.”

“Jess. Stop it. Sam. Please. I love you. We love you. Please try and calm down.”

“Get out.” And now that Sam’s said it out loud she realizes she can’t stand to be around any of them. They’re so brainwashed there’s no use even talking to them. Both Beth and Hannah send her identical, wounded looks.

“Get out. I said GET OUT.”
Jess looks relieved, but Beth is rooted to the spot, staring at her with sorrow. Sam growls. She doesn’t want her pity.

“Beth. Go.”

“Come on,” Hannah says, taking her sister’s hand and tugging her towards the door. “Beth, come on.”

Finally, they’ve gone, leaving Sam alone with a room full of beautiful, empty things.

Sam sinks to the floor and cries.

---------

Where is she?

It’s cold and dank here. But even in the gloom all she can see is decomposing corpses. Everywhere. Dozens of them. For what feels like the fifth time, Ashley retches. It reeks of urine, sweat and shit down here.

And blood.

She closes her eyes. Then wishes she hadn’t. Whenever she shuts her eyes she sees her boyfriend’s body slumped over the chair.


This is all her fault.


She’s couldn’t save him.

The door opens, and the woman who calls herself Cassandra walks in. If Ashley wasn’t so afraid she’d laugh. Cassandra looks utterly out of place, in her blood-red dress and fur.

“Well,” she says. She raises her eyebrows at Ashley. Like this is some big joke. “What a night.”

Ashley whimpers.

“You look beautiful, Ashley. You have the prettiest eyes.”

“Please…let me go.”

Cassandra smiles.

“I’ve been alive for almost five hundred years. You see a lot in that time. But you know what I’ve come to realize? There is one trait that I value above others. Do you know what that is?”

*Chris. Chris…please help me.*

“Loyalty,” Cassandra says. “That’s what I value above all. And, you, my dear, have a whole lot of loyalty.”

Ashley shudders, tries to get away from this insane woman but she’s already as far away from her as she can be. She hears a door slam and footsteps slowly descending the metal staircase.
“Now all I need to do is make sure you are loyal to me.”

The door opens and in comes the small dark-haired girl who helped murder Claire. Ashley’s can’t remember her name. Her brain is too foggy with grief and hunger.

The girl isn’t alone.

She dumps Jeremy to the ground. He’s shaking, whimpering, dark blonde hair all lank and greasy.

“Jeremy?”

“Ash- Ashley?”

“Now,” Cassandra smiles. “Let’s get to work.”

------------

She waits for dusk.

Sam packs only the essentials. Quickly writes out a note that’s been etched in her heart for over a decade.

She’s never had the courage to write until now. She folds it and places in her bedside draw. Hopes Beth doesn’t find it until dawn. That’ll give her a good head start.

The mansion is silent. No one in their right mind would leave now. It’s still light out.

But then again, Sam’s lost her mind a long time ago.

She sends one final, lingering look towards Hannah’s bedroom. Beth will be there tonight. She always goes to stay with Hannah when she’s really upset. Even after all this time they’re two peas in a pod.

She’s never loved two people more.

What she’s going to do to them is awful. They’ll hate her forever but at least they’ll have each other. And Beth will have Jess, even if that makes her skin crawl.

Ashley, however, is alone in the pit. Sam’s only been in there once. It’s a tiny, dank, soulless room three stories below ground. Corpses are the only company you have down there. Sometimes a half-dead human is thrown down there to be drained slowly, over the course of weeks. Stripped naked and tortured endlessly for days on end, the broken human is not allowed to die until the vampires get tired of toying with him. Most of the time, however, there’s nothing but dead people and the reek of every awful smell imaginable. When Sam was imprisoned she spent hours staring into the eyes of a boy whose body was decomposing in front of her. She wondered why he was here. Which girl condemned him to this fate.

She hoped it wasn’t Hannah or Beth.

Worst thing of all, though, was as the silence. The walls are reinforced so no one can hear you scream.

If she could, she’d rip the doors from their hinges and take Ashley with her. She’d be traumatized, but still whole. She’s not too far gone like the twins or Jess. But there’s four steel reinforced doors between her and Ashley. It would be suicide.
And she really wants to live.

So, Sam runs.

The sun prickles her skin when she leaves the mansion. It’s bordering on not safe to be outside. She’s too afraid to take one of the cars, scared it’ll trip the alarm. She sprints as fast as her legs will take her, faster and faster until she gets to a bus stop.

She takes a bus to the edge town, using the little money she has to book a bed in the most squalid motel rooms she can find just before daybreak. She hides in the closet, trying to sleep while evading the rays of the sun that peaks through the blinds.

Eventually, she realizes she needs to travel faster. The whole clan will be scouring San Francisco for her. It makes her heart ache when she thinks Beth and Hannah will be looking for her too. What will they do if one of them finds her?

She doesn’t want to know.

She’s on the edge of San Francisco when she finds a truck driver willing to give her a lift. Despite all the horror stories she finds he is kind, and lets her sit in silence and listen to music and it’s such a relief she wants to cry.

When she arrives in Los Angeles she heads west.

Sam almost wants to laugh at herself. Despite not having a plan when she fled, in her heart she knew she was only going one way.

Back to where this nightmare began.

The Washington Manor is still there. Still beautiful and imposing. She’s amazed it hasn’t been bulldozed yet. But despite its beauty and familiarity she doesn’t have the stomach to go inside.

No. Better to head underground.

The Washington Manor is on top of an elaborate set of caves. She and Beth tried exploring it once when they were children but they were too dangerous and cavernous for them. Once you fall, Mr. Washington once warned them, you’re not coming back up.

Well, that’s the plan, Bob.

She climbs down, getting deeper and deeper into the maze of caves. She’s never been more grateful for the hours she spent rock climbing with Beth.

She spends a few hours exploring, trying to navigate her way through the labyrinth. She’s taken some chalk, designed to help her get her bearings, but it’s useless. She’s only been down here for a few hours and she’s already lost.

She’s stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. Cassandra was right. None of them can survive on their own.

She’ll starve in these caves. She wonders if the other vamps will find her corpse. If there’s any mercy in the world, it won’t be Hannah or Beth.

At least when she’s dead she’ll find peace.

Sam stops. This is new. The caves have opened out into a cavernous space. Maybe she’s finally reached the bottom of the cliff.
She must be deep underground because she’s almost choking on the fetid air. Thank god she doesn’t actually need to breathe. She pauses when she feels something crack underneath her foot.

It looks like…a fibula. But not a human’s. An animal of some sort.

“What the hell…”

Now that she’s on alert she can see bones strewn everywhere. Some of them are buried underneath the rubble but some still are stained with blood.

Another large predator lives here.

She tenses. She hears the crunch of gravel behind her.

Great. She’s got company.

She waits for a moment, body tensed, until finally the creature loses its patience and attacks. Sam’s expecting it, and steps aside and sees a large, grey bony thing fly by her.

“Jesus! Fuck.”

The creature shrieks and bares its fangs at her. She’s clearly pissed it off. Sam can’t get a good look at it, but it’s bald and thin as a rake.

“Of course,” she mutters. “Another monster.”

Sam winces as the creature screams. It uses the wall as leverage and lunches for her, eyes glued to her throat.

Despite its size it’s no match for her. She grabs it as it flies by and uses it momentum to throw it up against the wall. Whatever this creature is, it’s not used to prey being this fast. It whimpers as it slides down the wall. Before it can recover Sam charges forward and straddles it, punching it as it writhes and growls underneath her.

She scrabbles around for a weapon. Something. Anything. Finally, she wraps her palm around a rock and rears up, ready to bash its skull.

Then she sees its eyes.

The rock slips from her fingers.

“…J-Josh?”

Chapter End Notes

I should point out that this is as dark as the story is going to get. It's all uphill from here, I promise!
It's always darkest just before the dawn, am I right? *is booed off stage*
A massive shout out to holeybubushka who wrote and edited almost all of this chapter by herself while my computer was getting repaired. She's the best person, honestly.
Leave a comment if you liked it!
Coming up next: Whatever Happened to Joshua Washington?
Thanks for reading!
Don't Leave Me This Way

Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 1976 song of the same name by Thelma Houston.
Note that this story contains graphic depictions of torture and emotional abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

October 1935

“I am not letting you go back to that battered old clip joint full of greaseballs and queers. You hear me?”

“You don’t have any right to tell me what to do!” Josh snaps at her.

“You think I’m really just gonna let you waltz down to that shack and lay with some fruitcake like you did with—”

“Shut up!” Josh barks. “Like you’re one to talk anyway. I see the way you look at Sam. You’re just as much of a queer as me.”

“How dare you—”

“What are you two yelling about?” Melinda’s voice sounds from downstairs. Beth turns to call to her and Josh slips out of his sister’s grip, jumping out the window before Beth can catch him. He makes short work of the mansion’s clay roof, moving carefully until he’s able to drop none-too-gracefully onto the grounds. The club isn’t too far to walk from here, so thankfully, he won’t have too long he’ll have to think about what he just said to Beth before he’s so awash in sex and booze that he can forget it. He can afford to let his sister stew for one night.

He can apologize when he gets home.

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At first, he doesn’t notice anything’s wrong.

He’s surprised to see the lights are still on when, the last time he checked the time, it was well past midnight. A flash of panic runs through him as he realizes that Beth probably told the whole family on him. He imagines them in the living room, Mom, Dad and the twins, all with identical disappointed looks. He considers turning around and making a run for it, wonders how merciful they’ll be after this second embarrassment, this second betrayal.

Then he sees the corpses.

For a moment he wonders if he’s seeing things again, the way he sometimes does (not that he’ll ever tell a soul) but the world still feels terribly, horribly real all around him, and the more he focuses on each and every detail of each and every body, he comes to the conclusion that what he’s looking at is very, very real.
The security guards are strewn across the Washington’s manicured lawn, their throats slashed, their blood painting the green grass red like the roses in *Alice in Wonderland*. Their weapons lie inches from their spread hands, useless pieces of metal and plastic, pathetic and inert. Josh stares down at one of the men, a guy who he must have passed on his way home dozens of times and whose name he can’t for the life of him remember. Then he hears a scream from inside the house, a scream he knows intimately.

Beth. Beth is in danger.

He runs, nearly tripping over the bodies in the dark, tears stinging his eyes. He hears more screams, two girls with identical voices, echoing from the house.

No. No. No. No.

Josh is so focused on getting to the house that he doesn’t see a small shape dragging something large behind it as it exits the front door. He rams headlong into a petite, dark-haired woman who drops what she’s carrying and curses. Josh falls onto his back, the thing the woman was carrying landing behind him. Josh turns to look at it and sees the blank, dull eyes of his dead mother staring back at him.

“No. No! NO!”

The woman who was dragging Melinda’s body smirks down at him. She’s a slight little thing, with a cute, soft face and dark eyes full of malice.

“Ah! You must be the Washingtons’ pet queer. Pleased to meet you.”

Before he can move she has him pinned down. He feels her hands drive his shoulders into the dirt, her nails digging into his flesh. Her smile widens as he struggles.

“Hope you taste as good as you look, honey,” she whispers, before biting down hard on his neck. Josh lets out a choked gasp as he feels the woman suck blood out of his jugular, like a monster in his father’s movies. His heart pounds and his body aches, his fingers and toes going numb.

He’s dying. He’s dying and his sisters are probably dying too.

The woman’s eyes fill with sadistic glee and she looks down at him, relishing his torment. He feels his heart course with hate. With a sudden surge of adrenaline he kicks one of his legs up, hooking around the inside of this monster’s knee and tugging, knocking her knees out. The creature lets out a cry of surprise as she falls forward, and Josh head-butts her with all his might, sending a shock of pain through his skull as his forehead connects with hers. The creature bites her lip from the force of it, cutting it, black-looking blood streaming out from the wound. Josh watches with spinning double-vision as she spits and attacks him again, bits of her blood carelessly dribbling into his open mouth as she attacks him, returning the head-butt and slamming him onto the ground. Josh stares up at the starry sky, suddenly feeling cold and lost, as the world fades to black.

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Bev frowns as the boy stops moving. He smells different than someone dying, his blood pooling on the grass, repeated blows to the head sending him into unconsciousness. For the first time she notices the blood from her split lip and blanches.

Did she…?

“Bev! Where are you?” one of the other vampires calls. Shit. If the others smell a changing human
right by Bev’s feet, it won’t matter if it was an accident or not. Bev panics, grabbing the boy by his collar and hurrying around back to what looks like some sort of pit. She remembers someone saying something about tunnels, old mine shafts. Once you fall in, you never come out.

Good enough for her.

Bev throws Josh down the pit, hoping the fall will kill him or at the very least mask his smell. If the others smell a morphing human beyond the intended target, she’ll be in big trouble.

Frances comes around the back, looking stern. Then again, Frances always looks stern. She looks at Bev, at the pit behind her.

“What are you doing?” she snaps. “Cassandra gave you a direct order. Go back and get the woman’s body. We need it for wine.”

Icy bitch. What makes Frances so much more apt to be Cassandra’s number two anyway? Bev rolls her eyes and shoves past her. One of these days, when they’re hunting together, Bev is going to make sure Frances never comes home.

Then, finally, she can take her rightful place as Cassandra’s second.

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He’s so cold.

He’s alone somewhere deep underground, nothing but the slow drip drip drip of water for company. He can’t see more than a few feet in front of him, and the smell of dust and rot overwhelms him. He can’t get air into his lungs and his stomach coils and collapses in on itself and he’s so fucking hungry. His head throbs and he clutches it with a moan, trying to process what his battered brain is trying so hard to bury. The bodies. The woman. His mother, his sisters, his family screaming, bleeding, dying.

Too late. Always too late. Always disappointing, failing, abandoning.

He thinks of his mother’s empty eyes. The once proud and beautiful socialite turned to an inanimate tangle of meat and bones. His parents, scornful in private and the picture of generosity in public, shattered. He thinks of Hannah in her bed, unaware as those monsters crept up on her and tore the blood from her veins. Of Beth, fighting to the last, dying alone and afraid and hating herself for what Josh had said to her.

“You’re just as much of a queer as me.”

Clutching his empty stomach in the pits of a cold dark hell, Josh lowers his head and sobs.

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November 1935

He’s never been so hungry.

There’s nothing in the caverns but spider webs and pools of stagnant water, and he’s been living off of the dead flies he finds in the webs and the dark, sludge like water. He always vomits what little he’s able to eat back up, the flies emerging as dry, desiccated husks. Sometimes he hears skittering, faint noises in the dark, but he’s never able to find the source. He must really be going insane, just
like his father always said. Just like the doctors in movies say about their patients. Madmen skulking around in the dark, waiting for the kill.

Days pass. The rumbling of his stomach gets louder.

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January 1936

He should be dead, but his body won’t die.

He thinks he’s shutting down slowly. He can’t find a pulse anymore, and his flesh has gone from brown to grey. He’s pretty sure he could count every one of his ribs individually if he put his mind to it.

He hears more skittering, then a squeak.

A rat.

Without thinking, Josh slips into the shadowy cave wall, listening as the creature moves into the open, drinking water from one of the puddles. Josh pounces, reaching for the squealing rat with trembling hands. Finally he slams a fist down on the thing’s back. He hears a crunch, and a whimper, and the rat goes still. He holds it in his hands, marveling at the warmth of his body, before he instinctively sinks his teeth into its neck, draining the blood from the body.

For the first time, he feels slightly better.

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April 1938

He finds rats, sometimes, and frogs, and worms. He caught a bat one time, feeling a surge of guilt at killing such a fragile, misunderstood creature.

Just like him.

Most of the time, though, he finds nothing. He starves and wanders and starves some more. He sleeps rarely, but when he does it’s deep, death like. Josh has tried lying down and waiting for the end, but he just won’t die.

He must already be dead, he supposes, and in hell. He always envisioned a lake of fire and horned devils poking him with spears but this is a thousand times worse. Josh screams to no one in particular. His voice is hoarse.

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August 1941
His nails fall out. Pushed out by something worse. The new nails are long and dark and pointed, like needles emerging from his hands. Josh bites at them as he sits alone in the dark, his clothes rotting away in the fetid, stagnant air.

Josh feels something like a tick on his scalp. He moves a hand up to grab it, and comes away with a thick dark clump of his own hair.

\[------------\]

\textit{March 1945}

He’s fading in and out. He’ll black out one moment and the next he’s lapping up the blood of a raccoon who somehow found its way down here. He relishes the feeling of hot sweet blood in his stomach. It warms him, makes him happy.

The rest of his hair falls out. His clothes rot away. His skin turns blotchy and grey. He passes by his reflection in the stagnant pools and sees a stranger, a boogeyman from his father’s horror stories.

His father.

What’s his father’s name again?

\[------------\]

\textit{June 1950}

More blood, more dead animals.

A pile of bones forms in the center of his home. He grunts with satisfaction as he throws the bloodless body of a mole atop the pile. His only food in months.

He doesn’t remember his name, his face. Everything is a hazy red fog and thinking is beginning to hurt. He can’t afford to waste the precious energy he gets from the blood on thinking.

More blood. He needs more blood.

\[------------\]

\textit{September 1965}

He needs more blood.

He needs more blood.

He needs more blood.

He needs more blood.
February 1968

Footsteps. Careless stumbling, muttered curses, a voice laced with exhaustion and fear.

He’s not alone.

He moves into the shadows behind his bone pile, sniffing the air and savoring the strange taste of something new, and odd. It doesn’t smell like an animal. There’s no fresh, pumping blood or fearful sweat. The thing he stalks smells dead, stagnant almost like a thing incased in ice. Intrigued, it moves closer to the thing, a strange creature of red and pink and yellow. He smells its blood and retches. This thing’s blood is congealed and cold. It won’t warm him at all.

He watches and waits, hoping the thing will leave before it scares off any real prey in his caves. Instead the thing stands around, searching, sensing its being watched.

He lets out an impatient huff and charges, howling as the thing sidesteps him easily. He braces himself on the wall of the cave and snarls at this unnatural creature but it doesn’t leave, just stares at him with wide dark eyes. It’s evil. It must die.

He uses the wall as leverage and charges, but this monster overpowers him with ease and slams him against the opposite wall, straddling him as he whimpers and readying a rock to bash his brains in.

Maybe this is a mercy. Maybe this thing is the Angel of Death, come to end his suffering at last.

Then the rock slips from this monster’s fingers, and it speaks in a painfully familiar voice.

“…J-Josh?”

For an awful moment there’s nothing…then… then… he remembers. His friend, the girl from the slums who stared wide-eyed at his family’s luxury and had played with them as children, who had put bandages on their skinned knees and taught them bird calls.

He remembers. He remembers. He remembers.

“Sssssssssaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa…”

“Josh…” Sam whispers, her dark green eyes filling with tears. “Oh god…Josh…What did they do to you…?”

She pulls him into a hug, and despite how cold the both of them are, Josh feels truly, genuinely warm for the first time in years.

When she was alive, Sam knew what it was like to be poor. Dirt poor. Surviving-on-the-charity-of-neighbors kind of poor. The kind of poor that gets under your nails and makes your teeth ache under
the gums.

But for as poor as she was all those years ago, she’d never had to eat a rat.

She tries to hide her disgust as Josh offers her the dead thing, still warm, in trembling, skeletal hands. Josh is smiling, or something close to it, and she doesn’t exactly have anything else.

She remembers Cassandra’s scoff when Hannah, back when she was still young, once foolishly asked if they could just drink animal blood.

“Come now, Hannah. If we could subsist on animal blood, do you think any of us would be drinking from humans?”

Lies. Lies upon lies upon damned fucking lies. Cassandra had made them think they were demons, creatures separate and opposed to humankind, and that every atrocity was justified. She’d made a bunch of scared teenagers into her own personal army, and all it had taken were the right words in the right order. As much as Sam’s loath to admit it, Cassandra played them all like a fiddle.

Josh looks at her earnestly, and a little apologetically, and finally Sam sighs and bites into the thing’s neck, piercing the jugular and pulling the creature’s blood into her mouth.

If the blood of a human is like red wine, bold and hearty and with just a hint of sweetness, then the blood of a rat is like spoiled milk. Sam gags and spits some out, trying to ignore the wounded look on Josh’s face. She chokes the rest of it down, making what she’s sure to be a comically disgusted face as she does so, and coughs.

Sam looks Josh over. He’s horribly gaunt, like a skeleton with only a clammy patchwork of grey skin holding on, taut across the bones. His eyes are huge against his bald head, and his fangs protrude from his mouth, crusted over with dried blood.

This, Sam supposes, it what happens when you go without blood for too long.

They’ve been down here for at least a week, Sam thinks, and this is the first food either of them has found. The blood wine Sam packed is long gone by now, all given to Josh. If they keep having this kind of luck, it won’t be long before Sam starts to mutate from starvation.

“Josh,” Sam says, “we need to get out of here. Do you know the way out?”

Josh hesitates, his mouth moving soundlessly. It looks like he’s trying to remember how to speak.

“C…C-c-c-cli—imb. Up.” He gestures to the roof of the cave. Sam looks at his massive claws, the way his back arches and his legs hold onto what precious muscle they have left. A vertical climb up the shafts would be incredibly precarious, especially since she’s not sure Josh could hold her weight. She’s climbed steep walls and cliffs before, with Beth, but always with the help of harnesses and chalk.

“Have you tried it before?” she asks, slowly. Josh looks at his gnarled feet. He nods.

“What happened?” Sam asks.

Josh closes his eyes.

“B-burn—ing.”

Sam shudders, wondering how Josh had pieced together what he was during all that time alone.
Burned by the sun just when he thought he could go home, vomiting up everything he tried to eat, trying and trying to starve to death but his body refusing to die.

“We can’t go out when it’s light out,” Sam says. “We’d die. So, we have to figure out how to time it right.”

Josh nods timidly. He looks like hell. Sam has to get some more blood in him. She needs to get them out of this cave before they both go feral.

Sam looks around. There’s not a lick of light anywhere, and even with her superior senses her eyes strain to see Josh in the dark. But when she closes her eyes and smells, she can taste the faintest sign of fresh air, far, far away.

Sam thinks, perhaps with a foolish amount of optimism, that she can trace it.

------------

The climb is long and painful. Sam’s nails chip and break as she digs into the rocky walls of the tunnels, using every ounce of her waning strength to pull herself upwards. Beside her Josh scrambles up the wall, using his claws to stabilize himself and sending her worried looks every few feet. Sam remembers climbing with Beth in Yosemite, chalk on her palms and Beth’s anxious jokes about plummeting to her death the only sound besides the distant calls of night birds. Those times with Beth, far away from Cassandra’s shadow, had been the most peaceful and happy times of her undead existence.

Sam hoists herself onto a ledge, feeling the ache and burn in her arms and the way her hands tremble. She’s not sure how it’s possible for a corpse to get winded, but it seems like she managed it somehow. A few moments later, Josh joins her. He perches, birdlike, on the ledge and looks at her, his head cocked.

“Like me.”

“...Yeah,” Sam says. “I am.”

“What...”

“What happened? Long story,” Sam sighs. She sniffs the air and listens carefully. The smell of fresh air is close now, and distantly Sam can hear the slow footsteps of diurnal creatures moving across the surface, toward burrows and shelters. A few early crickets are beginning to sound.

It’s dusk.

“Let’s get going,” Sam says. “Once we’re out of here I’ll tell you everything. Okay?”

Josh nods, and leaps past her, onto the rock wall. Sam watches him climb, nimble and animalistic but filled with hopeful energy. Sam steels herself, shutting her memories of Yosemite away, and follows him.

------------

The moon is falling by the time they finally hoist themselves onto the surface. Sam and Josh lie on their backs, exhausted, staring up at a sky turned black by light pollution. When Sam focuses she can sense the coming of dawn. She sits up, looking around the grounds. It wasn’t originally her intention to hide in the manor, but something tells her Hannah and Beth won’t dare come back here, and even if they do, seeing Josh might awaken something in them, make them realize everything they’ve lost.
And if it’s one of the others, well.

Sam will do what she has to do to protect her own.

Breaking into the old manor is surprisingly easy. Sam is surprised to find it’s still vacant; no one’s bought the house, and there are no signs in the dusty old rooms that anyone is planning to turn it into a museum or a tourist destination. Instead it just sits, empty and cold like a corpse, slowly rotting away in the oceanic breeze. Sam and Josh pulls the sheets away from some questionable-looking mattresses and drag them into the cellar, flopping down onto them just as the sun’s rays hit the outside walls.

They’re safe, for the moment.

For a while, Sam drifts in and out of sleep, flashes of Ashley’s bloody face filling her mind. She wakes up with a weary, lonely sigh. Somewhere far away an innocent woman is being turned into a monster. Somewhere her best friend and girlfriend are searching for her. Cassandra is probably downright giddy at the prospect of making them all even worse. Sam can’t help but wonder if making her leave, and infuriating all the others with that betrayal, was Cassandra’s plan all along.

Sam’s getting pretty fucking sick of playing into that bitch’s hands.

She rolls over to see Josh staring at her, looking puzzled and anxious. He blinks. She blinks. Then, before she can even ask, she’s telling him the whole story. The disappearance, the notes, Beth spiriting her away the night of her wedding rehearsal. Joining the cult. Watching the twins slowly succumb to Cassandra’s will.

Anna. Jess. Ashley. The night she ran away.

By the time she’s done she’s frazzled and exhausted, tears dripping onto the cracked concrete floor and her bones heavy with the weight of guilt and grief. For a long time, Josh says nothing. Then—

“We—w-we wi—ll. S-save the—em.”

The earnestness in his gaze is painful. Sam looks away with a half hearted shrug.

“I sure hope so.”

------------

Years pass. Sam and Josh stay in the Washington manor for a time, hunting rats and foxes and raccoons that wander onto the property. Sometimes Sam is able to make off with a few packs of blood from careless health clinics, but only when she’s desperate. She kills no humans, and subsists on animal blood. Her stomach burns for it.

Slowly, Josh heals. Sam helps him practice talking and moving as his body slowly returns to normal. She brings blood packs to his bedside on the days he’s too weak to move. On cold and lonely nights in the winter she tells Josh stories about Hannah and Beth. Slowly, Josh gains some weight back, and his claws fall away, replaced by normal, if brittle, fingernails. His hair grows back in greyish patches and Sam needles him, calling him a grandpa. Josh takes it in stride, pretending to limp and yelling at imaginary kids to get off his lawn. His sense of humor has returned, at the very least.

He has moments of what Sam can only call delirium. He talks to people who aren’t there and he wanders off, his head full of strange ideas that hours later he’ll admit he has no idea how they came to his head. It’s worrying and it doesn’t go away as he heals. She supposes this must simply be a part
of him, something he always tried to suppress back when they were human.

Well, there’s no point in repression and shame. Not anymore.

Eventually Sam learns of a proprietor who wants to sell the Washington manor to some morbid movie star. In a panic she and Josh flee, finding some lackluster shelter in abandoned warehouses and dock sheds. As they move, Josh recovers strength, growing his hair back and gaining some color to his skin. One night, hidden among the rotting crates in a forgotten factory, Josh tells Sam what happened to him.

“I heard them screaming and I—I ran but I wasn’t—She got me first.”

Sam blinks, puzzled.

“Who got you?”

Josh looks away, toward the dusty shards of a broken window.

“She was small. Almost girlish. Dark hair and eyes. She was smiling the whole time she tried to kill me.”

Sam feels a coil of anger surge through her bloodstream.

“Beverly.”

“I’m guessing you’re not a fan,” Josh remarks.

“Most of Cassandra’s girls are pretty nasty when they’re on the hunt, but Bev—she relishes pain. She loves watching people, human or vampire, get hurt. She’d be even worse than Cassandra if she weren’t an idiot.”

Josh nods, slowly.

“Sometimes I can feel this…anger, and glee, but it isn’t mine. Is that…is that her?”

Sam nods.

“Beverly is your sire. That’s what Cass calls the person who turns you. You two have a connection, whether you want to or not.”

“So…she knows I’m still around?” Josh asks. Sam considers. If Beverly knows Josh escaped the mines, then she’ll lead Cassandra and the others right to them. But then again, that would mean admitting that she knowingly let a rogue vampire live for years, a violation punishable by death.

“I…don’t know,” Sam admits at last. “I don’t think so. If she were going to get Cassandra to come and find us, she would have already done it by now.” It’s not much of a comfort, but comforts are few and far between when you’re an undead fugitive with no money and little food.

There’s a short pause before Josh speaks up again.

“So…can you sense Beth?”

Sam closes her eyes, sucking in an unnecessary breath.

“No. I shut her out. If I focus I can keep her from feeling what I feel, mostly.”
Josh looks away, looks back.

“How…how bad is it? How far gone are they?” He doesn’t bother to hide the hitch in his voice. Sam sighs.

“They’re…they’re in deep, Josh. Cassandra knew just how to get to them. She turned them into—she—” Her voice breaks. “I don’t know if we can help them, Josh. We can’t even help ourselves.”

Josh looks away, surveying their dingy surroundings. The broken down conveyor belt loaded with rusty broken parts, the assembly line crumbling to dust, the holes in the walls and ceiling.

“Well,” he says, his voice strangely calm, “we could start by scraping up some money.”

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March 1970

She doesn’t know if it’s day or night.

The sun is a far, far, far thing, and the few times she’s seen it since that morning it’s to be punished. When she wouldn’t hurt or kill or say the right thing to Cassandra she’d have her face thrust under sunlight and it hurt hurt hurt hurt—

“Ashley?”

Ashley looks up from the dark set of bones in front of her. She’s picked off every bit of flesh from it, sipping idly at hidden blood vessels but even now her stomach aches. She’s only allowed to eat when she’s good.

“You haven’t eaten for a while now, my sweet girl,” Cassandra says as she walks down the stairs of the pit, prettier than usual against the gore and decay of the room. “Are you hungry?”

“Y-y-yes…”

Cassandra gets to the bottom stair and walks over to her. She frowns and slaps her across the face. Long, manicured nails cut into her flesh.

“Yes what?”

“Y-yes please…”

Cassandra hits her again.

“Yes please what?”

Ashley curls into a ball and whimpers.

“Y-y-yes, please…m-mother…”

Cassandra smiles warmly and pets her hair.

“Good, that’s right, my pet.” She stands and barks an order upstairs. “Amy, bring her in.”

One of the others brings someone down the stairs, grunting with the effort of it. Ashley watches as
an old woman is thrown down into the muck in front of her, smelling weak and bloody and oddly familiar. The woman tries to stand but her hands and feet can't find traction on the slick floor, and she falls back down on her face. Ashley gets closer. The woman looks up. Her face is wrinkled and filled with grief, and her greying hair is dirtied with sweat and blood. She's never hurt someone like this, someone this old and helpless.

"Who...who is she...?"

Cassandra shrugs.

"Some old woman. More importantly, she's your dinner."

"But..."

Cassandra rakes her nails across Ashley's back. Ashley screams and sobs as tracks of pain follow the digging nails.

“Ashley, I’m being very nice to you. I gave you a nice piece of meat. Don’t be impolite. Eat.”

Ashley lurches away and lets out a strangled cry of terror and grief. Cassandra sighs.

“Ashley, do I need to take you out to the sun again?”

The sun. The bright, the hurting, burning and screaming just like—

“No! No! NO! Please, I’ll be good, I’ll be good!” Ashley sobs. Cassandra grabs Ashley’s arm and throws her roughly forward.

“Then eat.”

Ashley looks into the eyes of this woman, a woman she knows nothing about. Every time, every time her meal is alive and begging. She doesn't want to hurt them but she's so, so hungry. There’s a silent plea in the old woman's eyes, tears falling from wizened eyes.

Ashley bites her neck, tearing into flesh and sucking out the blood. The woman screams and writhes but Ashley holds her steady until she stops moving and goes limp and heavy in her arms. The blood fills her up. It’s so warm, the only warm thing in this cold hell.

Ashley slumps back on her knees, feeling utterly empty despite just filling herself with blood. Cassandra walks over to her and kneels, kissing her forehead.

“You did so well, honey. Why don’t we give you a nice bath and spend the evening doing something fun.”

Ashley stares at her.

“What...?”

“That’s right, my dear. You’ve done very, very well. I’m going to let you out.”

Out. Out of the pit. Out of the rank and sterile air and away from the smell. Ashley sobs with relief.

“Th-thank you, thank you...mother.”

Cassandra takes her hand and leads her up the stairs, into the light of the mansion above. Ashley covers her eyes; the brightness hits her eyes and presses down like a thousand tiny weights.
Cassandra leads her up another flight of stairs and into a mercifully dark room at the top. It’s a bathroom, clean and pretty. Cassandra pets her hair.

“Wash up, my dear,” she says. “I’ll have clothes ready for you when you’re done. Remember, dear, your parents, your friends, your ungrateful, traitorous sire, they all left you. But I never will. I will always love you.”

Ashley numbly fills the bath and peels off her rotted, bloody clothes, the same she was wearing on the day that monster turned her into this thing and abandoned her. She left her in that pit to rot and didn’t even look back, didn’t help her, even though she promised she’d look after her, she promised, she promised.

Everyone left her. Everyone but Cassandra. Cassandra calls her sweet things, gives her affection, will talk to her when no one else will. The rest of the world let her rot. She hates them, hates the happy humans who go on without a care, without knowing about the monsters that tear people apart. She hates the other vampires who fear and loathe her and never speak to her. She hates her parents for sending her to this damned city. She hates her friends for dying and abandoning her. She hates herself for being stupid and weak. And she hates, hates, hates Sam, that monster, that bitch, that evil woman, for leaving her like this.

Ashley sinks into the water, watching it run murky and red with the blood of the people she’s killed (it’s another fault she was hungry it’s Sam’s fault for making her like this she hates she hates she hates she hates she hates she hates she hates she hates she hates—) and closes her eyes.

She hopes she’ll see Sam again one day. She thinks she probably will.

And when she does, she’ll kill her.

And she’ll make it slow.

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August 1974

Sometimes Josh likes to imagine the look on his parents’ face if they could see him now.

He smirks at the though as he feels someone stuff a handful of bills into his G-string. Josh winks, admiring the guy’s handsome face as he blushes—clearly a first timer—and then Josh does another series of tricks on the shabby little fishing rod that passes for a dancer’s pole. This club is a shithole, but at least the drinks are alright and the clientele are polite enough, usually. He does another lithe twist around the pole and the little crowd watching him cheers. This work isn’t exactly what his parents had envisioned for him, but he’s having a pretty good time, he must say. He’d spent so long hiding and hating who he was, wallowing in self-hatred until Sam had finally come around and pulled him out of it. Now he’s sure to never waste a single second of his time on repression and regret.

Usually.

After the dance is over, he heads over to the bar and asks the bartender, a handsome guy with a jawbone that could cut iron, for a gin and tonic. The guy makes him the drink for a generously discounted fee, far more discounted than the lowered price usually offered to employees. The man gives Josh a wink as he slides it over to him.
For a while, Josh couldn’t go anywhere near humans without attacking them on sight. Now he’s able to keep human friends and even a boyfriend. But sex is still an unlikely possibility. That kind of intimacy, that passion, that closeness to warm, pumping veins; he doesn’t know if he’d been able to resist hurting them. Sam had said no vampire that she’d ever heard of had managed to have sex with a human without killing them. Josh had thought about asking her if she had personal experience, but even he wasn’t that much of an asshole.

Well. In his own opinion anyway.

He makes his way down the streets, headed toward the shithole apartment he and Sam had finally been able to afford after a year of crappy jobs and petty theft. He doubts Sam will be home yet—her job as a waitress has long, thankless hours. On the way he watches a girl with long dark blonde hair saunter down the street, arm-in-arm with her massive boyfriend. People sure are touchier these days, far more than they were in the thirties. And not nearly as well dressed.

One thing that he likes way better than he did back then are the movies. The Hays Code is, thank god, a thing of the past, and now today’s films are so violent and sexual Josh can’t help but laugh sometimes. Still, the performances are better, not so play-acted, and the clean-cut all-American gentlemen heroes of the past are gone. He feels a slight twinge of sadness when he thinks of Mike, who his dad used to brag was as all-American as they come. Still, someone as pretty as Mike would have flourished during any era.

Since he’s come to his senses he’s seen A Clockwork Orange, The Godfather, The Exorcist, Cabaret—his first major introduction to what had happened in America and Europe while he was in the tunnels, completely ignorant of war—and more schlocky B-movies and spy thrillers than he can count. It’s magnificent.

There are still plenty of times that he feels detached and strange, full of dark impulses and impossible, deluded ideas, a leftover from his time as a human. They didn’t have a name for what he had back then, besides “possessed” and “insane”. According to Sam, who’s been reading up on this kind of thing, he has some sort of bizarre mix of depression and psychosis. Usually he can manage, but there’s only so much he can do on his own. They’re saving up for a therapist to see him.

When he gets to the apartment, he finds a message for him on the answering machine.

“Hey Josh. It’s me. The asshole’s finally resigning. Let’s drink to it tomorrow, yeah? Meet you at the usual place. Love you.”

Josh smirks. Rob is fiercely political, a bona-fide anarchist who wants to start his own free love commune. While Josh doubts he’ll ever have the money to pull that off, there’s no denying that Rob’s earnestness and passion make him very, very attractive. That and he’s got an ass that looks like it was sculpted by Michelangelo, but you know. Details.

Josh sits down on their raggedy couch and turns on the TV. Every channel is playing the same thing: Richard Nixon, haggard and defeated, standing behind his presidential podium.

“To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home,” the president says, looking surprisingly stoic despite having just lost a very pricey gamble. “Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office.”

Good riddance, Josh thinks. About time one of those pigs fell on their ass.
He watches some pundits talk about Watergate for a bit before switching off the TV. Everyone’s loved that word, Watergate. It’s got a nice ring to it. He’s got a friend, Chelsea, who predicts that pretty soon people will be adding “gate” to every scandal’s name. Josh hopes not. That would get real old real fast.

A few hours later Sam comes in, offering Josh a weary smile before flopping down on the couch beside him.

“Long day, huh?”

Sam laughed mirthlessly.

“The longest. I got yelled at by a guy for bringing him food with like one thing of parsley that’s explicitly mentioned on the menu and then he and his wife made fun of my voice and refused to tip me.”

“Wow. I know you’ve served some winners in the past but that guy puts the rest to shame.”

“Seriously.”

She leans against his shoulder. Josh gives her a playful little nudge.

“Kills me to see you this sad, Sammy. You gotta get out more. Meet some people. Get a boyfriend.”

Sam flinches a little at that last one. Josh blinks.

“Uh, I mean…get a girlfriend?”

“I would prefer not to,” Sam says. “Not right now.”

“Why?”

“I just—I don’t like it. I like being by myself,” Sam says, unconvincingly. Josh snorts.

“You’ve been pretty much all alone except for me for what, six years now? Nobody hates people that much.”

“Hermits do,” Sam argues.

“Hermits live in caves, not shitty LA apartments with their gay best friends.”

“We lived in a cave.”

“As gay best friends.”

“I don’t know if I’d call you my best friend,” Sam says.

“I’m your only friend.”

“Still…”

Josh clutches his chest in mock betrayal.

“You wound me, Samantha. You’re tearing this family apart.”

Sam rolls her eyes.
“You’re the most ridiculous person I’ve ever met.”


Sam stops channel surfing for a second. She stares at the screen.

“No.”

“Nobody? Have you ever had sex?”

“…Yes.”

“Who with?”

Sam rolls her eyes again.

“Your mom.”

Josh snorts.

“You’re a strange one, Sammy.”

“You’re the immortal pole-dancing vampire.”

“Yeah but at least I’m not a caveless hermit. C’mon, Sammy, at least come out with me sometime. We can watch a movie or something.”

“You like awful horror movies,” Sam points out. “And besides, every time we go out people mistake us for a couple. It’s embarrassing.”

“Aw come on, sugar pie, don’t you want to go on a hot date with your man, honeybuns? Go out on the town, sweetheart? Baby? Darling? Sugar snap pea—”

Sam throws a pillow at him. Josh laughs and throws it right back, taking her by surprise and smacking her right in the face. Josh hoots with laughter as Sam staggers back, throwing the pillow off her face with a look of surprise and growing mischief.

“Oh you’re dead now, Washington.”

The rest of the night is an escalating prank war, the two of them quickly having to get creative in their tiny living space. Finally it ends in a draw when Josh smears dish soap in Sam’s hair and she responds by filling his shoes with shaving cream. It’s a bit childish, the whole thing, but it reminds him of his little spats with Hannah and Beth, and realizes as the two of them clean up, the sky outside inching towards the pale blue of dawn, that he may have finally found a third sister in Sam.

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November 1975

“Look who I found,” Bev sing-songs as the struts into the foyer, a squirming burlap sack dragged behind her. It’s like something out of a crappy movie, but the sight of the captive make’s Beth’s heart sink. “Our little runaway.”
Beth’s stomach drops. She shivers involuntarily, thinking of her. Beverly grins, relishing the discomfort on her superior’s face. She kicks the bag and chuckles when a muffled sob comes out.

On the couch, Jess, Hannah and Tamika all look up. Tamika’s new fledgling, Sophie, shifts her feet, uncomfortable. She doesn’t like Bev, and Bev returns the animosity with enthusiasm. Bev is always quick to let people know the way she feels about “freaks” like Beth and Jess, and had resolved to make any new vampires who fit that category as miserable as possible.

Tamika glares at Bev, standing up and taking a protective stance in front of her fledgling.

“Are you sure it’s her?” she asks. Bev snorts.

“Of course I’m sure, Tam. I’d recognize that whore from a mile away.” Beth makes a tiny noise and Bev looks over at her, eyebrows raised. “Problem?”

“Look, I’ll take it from here. Give her to me, Beverly.”

“No way!” Bev protests. “I found her. You’re not getting the credit for this.”

“At least let me help you carry her up the stairs,” Beth says. Bev glowers.

“Fine.”

Beth tries to think of nothing as they carry the escapee up the stairs and into the hall outside of Cassandra’s room. Beth drops the sack and knocks three times on the beautiful, mahogany door. Cassandra opens after the third knock, looking over Beth, Bev, and their captive.

“Oh, good,” Cassandra says. “I figured the hunt wouldn’t take long. Bring her in.”

They lug the sack inside and take their seats in front of Cassandra’s mantle. Cass busies herself with untying the sack before pulling the burlap away with a satisfied smile.

“Well. How wonderful to see you again.”

The sack falls away, revealing the trembling figure of—

—Pam, a copycat runaway who’d tried to pull off her stunt last week. Beth breathes out a sigh of relief, careful not to let Cass hear it.


“P-please…” Pam begs. “Please f-forgive me, I—”

“No, that’s fine, I understand,” Cassandra says. “If you don’t want my hospitality then we won’t give it to you.”

“C-Cassandra! I was…I was wrong. I’ll never disobey you again! I—I promise!”

“That’s right,” Cassandra says. “You’ll never disobey me again.” She looks up at Bev. “Go get Ashley.”

Pam screams at the sound of that name, and runs for the door. Beth catches her easily and holds her down. Bev walks out of the room, smirking at Pam and closing the door behind her. Pam screams again.

“No! No! NO! PLEASE!”
“You know what happens to deserters, Pam.”

“NO!”

“I’ve been soft on my girls for too long. I need to put my foot down.” She gives Beth a pointed look. “We all need to be firmer now.”

Pam struggles and screams in Beth’s grasp. Cassandra goes back to her reading, undisturbed, until they hear a faint knock on the door.

“Come in, dear,” Cassandra calls.

The door opens and in comes a thin, waifish girl with long, ragged red hair. She wears a simple white dress that’s already stained with blood and her bare feet pad softly across the carpeted floor. Her wide green eyes are vacant. She cocks her head.

“A runaway…?” Her voice is soft, almost sweet.

“Yes, darling,” Cass says slowly. “And you know what we do with runaways.”

“NO!” Pam screams, again. Ashley looks at her. A slow smile forms on her pale face.

“Let’s play.”

Beth lets Pam go and Ashley catches her with ease, giggling as Pam struggles and screams. Ashley drags Pam out of the room by her hair. Pam’s screams echo through the entire manor for what must be five minutes before they’re cut off by the slamming door of the pit.

Lord knows what will be left of Pam by the time Ashley is done with her.

Cass sighs and shakes her head.

“What a waste. She had such promise.” She looks up at Beth. “You seem shaken, Beth. Everything alright?”

Beth nods silently.

“You’ve been isolating yourself lately. Hannah tells me you barely talk to anyone between hunts.”

“I’m sorry, Cass. There’s been a lot on my mind.”

Cass nods, a kind expression on her face. She walks over to her and gives Beth’s arm a little squeeze.

“I know it hurts to be betrayed. I can’t imagine losing someone you love like that, especially when you find out they were lying to you the whole time. But that doesn’t mean everyone is like that. You have a whole family here, full of loving sisters. You should spend more time with them. That’ll help.”

Beth nods, unsure of what to say.

“I want you to go out with Jess tomorrow. I want to start testing her, see if she’s ready to move up. Can you supervise her for me?”

“Of course, Cass.”
As she leaves and heads back down the stairs she sees that Hannah and Jess are still in the foyer, looking up with concern. Jess gestures for Beth to join them on the couch. Beth does so, leaning against Hannah’s shoulder.

“You look awful,” Hannah says. “Did Cassandra say something to you?”

“Oh, no, it’s alright,” Beth says. “She just wanted to check on me, that’s all. You know how she is.”

“…We saw Ashley taking Pam away,” Jess says. The usual humor is gone from her voice. “Ugh. So fucking creepy.”

“I…don’t like thinking about her,” Hannah admits.

“Me neither,” Beth agrees. She stops herself before thinking further about why. She doesn’t want to think about her. She doesn’t deserve a second thought.

“Amy’s been hiding in her room all day,” Hannah says. “She couldn’t bear to see Pam get brought in.”

“That was her first fledgling, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Christ.”

Jess shakes her head.

“I have to admit, I’ve never understood why some people who are total newbies get fledglings but I still haven’t got one.” She makes a pouty expression, then looks over at Hannah, curious. “Say, Han. Why don’t you have any fledglings?”

Hannah stares at the ground and says nothing.

“Oh,” Jess says. “Aw shit, I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. Happened a long time ago.”

There’s a long, painful silence. Things between the three of them have gotten stranger, more awkward, since she left. After she ran, Hannah cried for days, and Beth had stayed in her room, catatonic from shock and betrayal. Even Jess seemed subdued, almost guilty, keeping her distance from the twins at first and hesitant to crack jokes or propose the crazy schemes she’d once been known for. Even now, all these years later, there’s a hole in Beth’s heart that seemingly nothing could fix. She stands up. It’s early, but she wants to sleep this feeling off. Hannah looks up at her.

“Going to bed?”

Beth nods.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” She starts the long and lonely walk to her room, before Jess runs up to her and touches her shoulder.

“Beth. Wait.”

Beth turns.

“What’s wrong?”
“Can I talk to you?” Jess asks. “Alone?”

Beth blinks, taken aback by the earnestness in Jess’s expression.

“Oh, uh. Sure.”

Beth’s room is the same as it always is, ornate and filled with treasures bought from the finest collections. All signs of her, all gifts and photos and mementos, replaced with useless trinkets, paintings, and little trophies from her more satisfying victims. She would be disgusted. Trophies, honestly. But it makes her feel less human, farther from the weak creature that turned her fledgling against her and her clan, her family.

If she has to kill her heart to survive the pain she inflicted, then so be it.

Jess sits down on the bed, her fingers playing mindlessly with the fraying edges of the blankets. She looks anxious, uncomfortable. Beth sits down beside her.

“Jess? Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, I—” Jess looks away. “I guess, I…there’s something I have to tell you.” She ducks her head, looking uncharacteristically shy. Beth cocks her head.

“What is it?”

“Well, it’s just—ever since…you know…it happened…you’ve been so sad. I know you don’t like to talk about it but I can tell. It kills me to see you like that. And—and I was thinking, you know, maybe there’s something I can do.”

“Jess, I’m fine, really. She was just, you know, a…a concubine. Like Cass said. Sometimes a vampire will take a lover of her own sex but that doesn’t mean—”

“We both know that’s not what she was.”

Beth is thrown by the look of total certainty on Jess’s face.

“How do you know?”

“Because the way she felt about you is the same way I do!” Jess says, her voice suddenly strained. “I…I could tell. She loved you.”

It takes less than a second for Beth to realize what Jess is saying.

“Jess…”

“I know you probably don’t feel the same way, but…You saved me. You gave me everything. I can never—” She breaks off, then laughs. Her voice sounds wet. “T-to be honest, I think I’ve….wanted you since I met you at that stupid supermarket.”

“Jess, I—I don’t know what to say.” There’s a long, painful pause. Jess looks at the door.

“I…I’ll go now I guess—”

“No. Hang on,” Beth says. Jess looks at her in surprise, and, almost experimentally, Beth presses their lips together. It’s a quick, chaste kiss, but there’s no denying that Jess’s lips feel nice. Tender but experienced. Soft but daring. Not a trace of the guilt that had filled every inch of her being.
They break away, Beth caressing Jess’s cheek and looking deep into her pretty grey eyes.

Jess’s mouth quirks into a smile, a lovely pink tongue flitting out to moisten her lips. Beth stares, entranced, not-so-innocent thoughts running through her head.

“You know…Cass says I’m supposed to ‘supervise’ you more from now on.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. She thinks you show a lot of promise.” Beth leans in and presses her lips to Jess’s neck, right over the bite wound that still marred the soft skin there. “So do I.”

“Well then,” Jess whispers, starting to fiddle with the buttons of Beth’s shirt, “why don’t I show you what I can do?”

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June 1983

One night, on a whim, Sam decides to go to the church where she almost married John.

She takes a bus to the corner street and walks the rest of the way, passing yet another street preacher yammering on about how AIDS is going to kill all gay men and lesbians and how God will watch them suffer. Sam stares forward and doesn’t meet the man’s eyes, trying to keep her anger to herself. People are dying and all these “good Christian people” are just patting themselves on the back for watching it happen.

It’s hard not to look at the world and sometimes wonder if Cassandra had a point. The world of humans is ruled by prejudiced, greedy hypocrites who profit off the suffering of others and never pause to think about their actions. Maybe these people don’t deserve to live.

But deep down she knows it’s not her right to determine who lives and who dies. No one has that right.

For all the evil she’s seen in the world, she’s seen some good as well. Protestors decrying the corruption and inaction of Ronald Regan’s government fill the streets whenever they can. The civil rights movement fills her with genuine wonder and the nation’s women are getting bolder, demanding that their voices be heard. For all her talk, Cassandra hasn’t changed much of anything. She’s more interested in ruling and manipulating the downtrodden than making the world a better place for them. But humans, dumb, bumbling, short-lived humans, are making slow, aching progress, every change earned through sweat and blood.

The thought of a few good people slowly making things better, even when they’re surrounded by the indolent and the cruel, gives her some hope.

The church is worn down now, white paint peeling and the windows scratched and faded. It’s far cry from the humble but beautiful place where she saw her family for the very last time. The thought of her parents, worn down with stress and despair but still smiling for their daughter in her white dress, made Sam’s throat feel thick. Her parents were almost certainly dead by now, and her sister, if she’s even still alive, would be a grandmother. She never even got to say goodbye to them.

Without thinking, she wanders into the graveyard behind the church, passing a small family of mourners on their way out. The younger woman, the daughter, Sam supposed, looks so much like
Hannah that it was painful to lay eye on her. Sam stares at her feet as she passes them.

Most of the graves are old. Their granite and limestone markers are crumbling, most of the etched names worn away. Sam wanders around, passing each grave, noting which ones looked tended and which ones looked like mourners had stopped coming years ago. She stops when she sees a familiar name on a nondescript black stone marker near the back of the cemetery, half buried in weeds.

John Parker Collins

Born December 1st, 1914

Died June 18th, 1936

Beloved son, and loving fiancée

Guilt coiled in Sam’s stomach. Forty-seven years and three days ago, she killed an innocent man and let his body be thrown in an industrial furnace, never to be found. Who knows how many more people she killed after all that time. She wondered how many had ever even done anything all that wrong.

She looks at the sorry sight of John’s grave. It’s clear that no one is bothering to tend to it anymore. Hesitantly, she begins brushing dirt and dust off the gravestone, scraping grit and soil out of the etched name with her fingernails. Once that’s done, she starts pulling the weeds out of the earth around the grave.

“Mike’s in the Hollywood cemetery.”

Sam nearly jumps out of her skin. She wheels around to see Josh standing a few feet back, looking apologetic.

“Shit. Sorry, thought you heard me coming. Super senses and whatnot…” he trails off.

“Heh, I was a little, uh, occupied,” Sam mutters. Josh walks forward, curious, and Sam stands aside so he can see what she’s doing.

“John Parker Collins…he was that guy you were dating way back when, right?”

Sam nods.

“We were gonna get married. So my family could be stable and stuff, you know? And I didn’t love him, but he was still a good man. He didn’t deserve—” She inhales suddenly unable to finish her thought. John had been so trusting on the night she took his life. He never thought she’d hurt him.

“Did one of Cassandra’s cronies—”

“No,” Sam cuts him off. “No. I killed him. Drinking his blood was my…initiation.”

“Shit,” Josh breathes. “But, but you had to do it, right? You said anyone who didn’t pass their initiation got burned.”

Sam thinks of Claire, proud and defiant in the face of death. Of Ashley, who loved Chris too much to put her life before his.

“I would’ve died, yeah. But that doesn’t mean I should’ve done it.”
Josh looks at Sam for a second before walking over to her and pulling her into a fierce embrace. Despite the icy chill of his body, Sam welcomes the comfort.

“No one should judge you for what you’ve been through, Sam. Not even you. You made a lot of mistakes, sure, but you were scared and confused, and people took advantage of you.” He rubs her back. “The fact that you’re changing and getting better proves that you’re better than some killer at Cassandra’s beck and call.” He chuckles, though there’s little humor in it. “Besides, if you’d been burned I’d still be eating rats in a cave somewhere.”

“We still eat plenty of rats.”

“But not in a cave. Street rats are much tastier.”

Sam laughs weakly.

“Pet rats must be gourmet then.”

“We’ll have to get our hands on some.”

“Some poor kid with an empty rat cage isn’t going to be terribly happy about that.”

Eventually they break away from the hug. Josh gestures down to the grave.

“Want some help with that?”

Sam smiles.

“I’d love that.”

Once the dirt and weeds are cleared away, the grave looks worn but presentable. Sam makes a mental note to buy a bouquet to lay on its soil. They’re about to leave the place when Josh taps her shoulder and points.

“Look at that.”

She follows his finger to a grave near the middle of the yard, similarly unkempt and rotting away. Sam blinks with surprise as she carefully makes out the headstone.

*Samantha Jean Giddings*

*Born September 9th, 1917*

*Died June 17th, 1936*

*Loving daughter, sister, and fiancée*

“Whoa.”

“You wanna dance on your own grave?” Josh teases. Sam rolls her eyes.

“That…that’s really surreal. Sometimes I forget, you know?”

“You know, there are some perks to being dead,” Josh says. “You get to be whoever you want to be. And since you have no expiration date, you have as long as you want to make up for my mistakes.”

“Yeah, well,” Sam says. “I’m gonna need a long time.”
“Thank god you’re spending that time with god’s gift to men,” Josh says, pointing at himself.

“And the most modest, clearly.”

Josh elbows her lightly on the way out.

“Say,” Sam says as they close the gate. “Can we go see Mike tomorrow night?” She thinks of him, holding her tight and promising to get the twins back. He’d been so naïve but so incredibly brave. Braver than Sam could ever hope to be. She hopes one day she can make him proud.

“Yeah, of course. Remind me to get some flowers.”

“How did you know he was there, by the way?”

“I saw his grave there,” Josh says, looking away from Sam towards the decrepit old church. “It’s right by Hannah and Beth’s.”

November 1998

“Samantha Jean Giddings, do you know what’s a tragedy?”

Josh’s definition of a “tragedy” is pretty broad and includes badly shot movies, bird shit on outdoor tables, people with poor fashion sense, and overly rowdy children. Sam gives him a quizzical look.

“Enlighten me.”

Josh is perched on their worn, depressing couch, the one thing they kept from their old apartment. This new place is nicer, but they had to forge wedding documents to be allowed in, since the landlord only permits those with “traditional wholesome family values” to rent space. If there’s anything more embarrassing than having to pretend to be Josh’s girlfriend, it’s having to pretend to be his wife.

“I’ve been living with you for thirty years now, and in all that time you’ve never so much as held a girl’s hand.”

Sam ignores him and returns her attention to the TV, where Buffy Summers is fighting a small group of generic vampires. It’s a little insulting, the notion of vampires being universally soulless demons devoid of anything akin to a conscience, but there’s no denying that the show is entertaining, hokey as it is. It’s nice to see something where the helpless blonde girl rips the big bad monster a new one.

“I just haven’t met anyone I’ve liked.”

“You’ve never met anyone because you never go looking,” Josh points out. “Meet cutes only happen in bad movies. I had to go looking for all of my boyfriends.”

“I’m just not interested,” Sam protests. Josh gives her a stern look.

“Sammy, come on. I love you, but if the only thing you have in your life is a fake husband, you probably need to branch out a little.”

On the TV, Buffy turns the last remaining vampire to dust and makes a cringeworthy pun. Sam sighs.
“If I humor you for one night and... ugh, go to a club with you or something, just for one night, will you leave me alone about this?”

Josh salutes her solemnly.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Good,” Sam says. “I’m holding you to it.”

Josh’s face breaks into a wide, mischievous grin.

“I’m picking the place.”

“No. No.”

“Too late! We’re going to—”

“—‘The Honey Tunnel?’” Sam makes a face upon seeing the name outside the club. “Nice. Subtle.”

“Hey man, it’s the best lesbian bar I know,” Josh says. “…It’s also the only lesbian bar I know.”

Sam looks at the place, at the neon lights bleeding out through the windows.

“How did you even find this place?”

“Remember Carol? Apparently she’s like super hardcore into ladies. I had no idea. She’s super, what’s the word? Femme?”

“I don’t know about this, Josh.”

“Aw, Sam, come on,” Josh says. “Just because you’re dead doesn’t mean you can’t live a little.” His face softens when he sees her unsure expression. “Hey. If you hate it, we can go home and I’ll never bring it up again. Okay? No commitments. This is just, like, dipping your toe in the pool. Except the pool is hot girls.”

“Oh my god.”

“Come on!” Josh says, giving Sam a brotherly pat on the shoulder. “Just give it a try. I’ll be across the street at the Flagpole if you need anything.”

“The what?!”

Josh mock-salutes her, backing away as fast his nimble legs can take him.

“Godspeed, pilgrim!”

He heads down to the bar across the street and Sam sighs again, heading into the Honey Tunnel and trying not to retch at the smell of booze and tobacco.

Sam’s never seen so many women packed into one place.

The dancefloor is a sea of pretty faces, as women buck and grind up each other clumsily in time with the music. There’s flashing, garish, neon lights everywhere and down near the stage Sam spies
smoke machines. The scent of perfume and sweat hangs in the air. It’s… not as unpleasant as Sam would have thought.

The music is a bit much for her sensitive ears, and she doesn’t really recognize any of the songs anyway. She retreats to a quiet spot in the corner, watching with burgeoning wonder as woman flirt openly with one another around her. Some women are even kissing on the dance floor, but no one pays them any mind. Everyone is acting like it’s… normal.

Sam stands near the wall, nursing a Bloody Mary that isn’t really doing anything for her. The amount of freedom here is almost frightening. People here are unafraid, unashamedly happy. And it’s not that Sam doesn’t want that as well, but having all that freedom thrust upon her at once is a bit overwhelming. It’s a little disheartening honestly, feeling like an outsider in a place that accepts you. She’s about to bail and go find Josh when she catches the eye of a pretty girl with long black hair and perhaps a bit too much makeup. She’s got the wide-eyed look of someone who clearly hasn’t been somewhere like this before.

The girl heads over to Sam, looking a little sheepish. Sam notices the faint blush on the girl’s cheeks as she gets closer. Apparently she’s had a fair amount of liquid courage.

“I like your shirt,” the girl says, gesturing to the simple black top Sam has on. It’s such an obvious attempt to start a conversation without being creepy that Sam almost laughs. This girl is adorably inexperienced.

“Thanks!” Sam replies. “I like your hair. It’s super…uh…nice.”

Nice going, Sam. Hello, pot. I’m kettle.

Well, at least they’re on the same level of bad when it comes to flirting.

“It’s kinda loud in here, huh?” the girl asks.

“Yeah. It’s kinda crazy. I’ve never been to a place like this before. It’s a little much.”

The girl laughs, relieved.

“Oh, thank God!” she says. “I though I was the only one with, like, no experience with this kinda thing.” She moves a little closer. “Everyone here is so pretty. I’m having a tough time keeping it together, ha!”

“Oh, definitely. I’m glad you came over to me, because lord knows I’d never be brave enough to approach anyone here!”

“Hey, no girl as pretty as you should look that lonely in a place like this,” the girl says. “I’m Lexi, by the way. What’s your name?”

“Sam.”

The girl smiles. Her eyes sparkle in the half-light.

“Sam. I like that.” They move a little closer together. Lexi is sweet and good-looking and it’s been so long that Sam has nearly forgotten what it feels like to be this close to a woman, smelling her perfume and looking deep into her eyes. Lexi puts a hand on Sam’s arm before jerking it back, surprised.

“You’re freezing! Are you okay?”
“Oh, yeah, I’m fine,” Sam says. “It’s just, uh, I have this genetic thing that makes my body temperature super low? It’s fine, really.”

“Oh,” Lexi says, a little skeptical. “Okay.”

“Sorry,” Sam says. “I should’ve warned you.”

“No, it’s okay,” Lexi says. “Do you…want to dance?”

Sam can’t wipe the grin from her face.

“Sure.”

Lexi’s adorably awkward, all limbs and arms but eventually the pair of them find a rhythm, moving together in time, sending each other looks that get more heated as the songs go along. She loses track of time, enjoying being close to another woman for the first time in what feels like forever.

After a while, Lexi leans in and asks if they would go somewhere private and Sam feels herself nodding before can stop herself. Her new friend drags her away, into a near deserted hallway by the bathroom. They’re close to the dance floor, but still far enough away from the heaving mass of bodies to have a little privacy.

“Sam…. we’ve been dancing for almost an hour and you still feel a little chilly.”

“Sorry,” she stutters. She thought she drank enough blood to feel human before she came here but evidently not. “It’s just…with my condition.”

“It’s fine,” Lexi laughs, batting away Sam’s concern with a winsome smile. “I, uh, don’t suppose I could…warm you up?”

Sam smirks.

“I think I’d like that.”

Lexi leans in, a little nervous, before pressing her lips to Sam’s. It’s an old, welcome sensation, one Sam hasn’t felt in decades. She tangles a hand in Lexi’s long dark hair and pulls her closer, slipping her tongue in between Lexi’s teeth. Lexi moans softly into Sam’s mouth, and Sam fights the urge to smile. Looks like she’s still got it.

“Mm. Oh, Beth.”

Sam’s eyes snap open at the sound of that voice. Over Lexi’s shoulder she sees a familiar mop of bleached-blonde hair. Its owner has her back to Sam. She’s quite far away, right on the other side of the hallway but if Sam narrows her eyes she can see them both clearly. The woman is busy pinning her partner to the wall, peppering her jaw with lingering kisses. The pinned woman’s eyes are closed and her face is sweaty and flushed, but even from this far away Sam knows exactly who she’s looking at. She looks at them for a few seconds before Beth’s eyes open, and Sam could have sworn Beth looked right at—

Sam panics. She doesn’t mean to run out without saying anything to Lexi, but the thought of Beth recognizing her again after all this time is too much to bear. Sam darts out the door and onto the street, not daring to look back until she’s clear out of the building. She slumps down on a nearby bench, thinking of them, of Beth and Jess, together and happy, moving on, forgetting her. How, even when they’re in the same city, the same goddamn club, she and Beth are always going to be apart, trapped behind a thousand-mile divide that Cassandra dug between them.
She leans forward, burying her head in her hands and feeling the pressure building behind her eyes. She was almost okay. She’d been about to finally move on and be happy and then *they* just had to come in and remind her of everything she’s lost.

And if Beth was able to sense her, even for a second, then she’s just put herself and Josh in terrible danger.

Sam stays out there, crying quietly into her knees until she hears a familiar voice call out to her.

“Sam. You okay?” She looks up. Josh is walking over to her, concerned. “You’re crying.”

She waits until he gets close enough that she can whisper.

“They’re here, Josh.”

“What?”

“Beth. A-and Jess, and probably the rest of them. They’re here. In Los Angeles.”

Josh straightens.

“That—that’s good, isn’t it? It means we can help them, we can try to save them, we—”

“Josh, we can’t,” Sam says. “You don’t get it. Beth and Hannah, they hate me. They fucking hate me for what they did. They will kill me the next time they see me. And they’d probably not want to hurt you if they saw you, but Cassandra definitely would, and anyone who disobeys her dies.”

“Sam.” Josh takes one of Sam’s hands and looks deep into her eyes. “I know you’re scared, but Hannah and Beth are my family. I’m not letting them be used by some manipulative bitch to hurt people anymore. I…I have to help them. No matter what. But I can’t unless you help me.”

Sam looks at him, at the undisguised desperation on his face, and knows that even if she refused he’d try to help them behind her back, even if it cost him his life. He’s a loving guy, a good, kind, thoughtful man but god help them both he could be so *stupid* sometimes.

“Josh, look,” Sam says. “I want to help them too, I do, but we can’t just storm Cassandra’s lair and kidnap them. We’ll watch them, try to see if they ever show any signs of wavering, but I can’t promise they will—”

“The first sign,” Josh says. “The *first* Sign. That either of them is wavering, we move in. Okay? Please, Sam. They’re the only family I have left.”

Sam thinks of them, her best friend, so naïve and kind before Cassandra twisted her into a killer, loyal to the last and still a loving, dreaming girl at heart. Of Beth, her lover for all those years, strong and clever and patient and kind—

Do they even think of her anymore?

Sam sniffles, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. Josh sits down on the bench next to her and squeezes her hand.

“Sam,” Josh says. “Did you…did you see Beth in there? In the club?”

“I…I did, but she—I thought if she saw me, she’d kill me for sure. She, man, of all people, she’s probably the most angry at me.”
“Why?”

“Josh. Beth turned me days before my wedding, took me as her fledgling and spent all of her time that she didn’t spend with Cassandra or Hannah hanging out with me. You do the math.”

Josh blinks.

“Oh. Oh.”

Sam is grateful she doesn’t have enough blood in her to blush.

“…Yeah.”

“…So did you two…you know…”

“Yep.”

“Oh,” Josh says again. “Man, I had a feeling way back then that Beth might’ve had feelings for you, but I never would’ve—oh.”

It’s such an absurd shift in the discussion that Sam almost laughs. Josh rubs her arm, offering her a small, slightly amused smile.

“You and her, huh? I bet she misses you.”

The image of Beth and Jess making out against the wall flashes into her mind.

“I doubt that.”

“We’ll get her back,” Josh says, with more certainty in his voice than Sam thinks is healthy. “She still loves us, deep down. Hannah, too.”

“I don’t know…”

“They’re strong, Sam,” Josh says. “The real Hannah and Beth are in there, somewhere. No vampire can change that.”

Sam chuckles mirthlessly.

“Wherever you’re getting your optimism from, I want to shop.”

It kills her to sit out there, Beth so close to her, to Josh, but she knows they can’t take any chances, even a crowded place like the Honey Tunnel. Beth could easily drag Sam off under the guise of rough flirtation and finish her off with no effort. She and Josh sit there, holding one another, until Beth’s presence slowly fades. Then, with great care, they follow Beth’s faint scent until the trail goes cold, masked by the stench of motor oil and pollution. Tracking will be difficult, but Sam can get creative. Missing person’s bulletins, sudden unsolved deaths, things that go bump in the night; it’s easier now than ever to follow Beth and Hannah’s movements, thanks to the birth of something called the Internet.

Cassandra’s goons have hunted people for generations. It’s about time someone hunted them.

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Lexi frowns, wondering if she should run after Sam. The poor girl looked sick, distraught, and she’d taken off out of the club without saying goodbye.
Is Lexi really that bad of a kisser?

She sighs, feeling inadequate and tired and generally sad, and is about to leave herself when a soft, cool hand taps her on the shoulder. She turns, surprised.

“Hey,” says a woman with long blonde curls and a flirtatious glint in her dark green eyes. Holding her arm is a taller woman with short brown hair and a pretty, if intimidating, face. Lexi swallows. She wonders what kind god gave her all these nice women fawning over her tonight.

“H-hi…” Lexi stammers. “Crazy night, huh?”

“Definitely,” the woman says. “I’m thinking of getting out of this place and going somewhere a little more…quiet. Wanna come?”

Lexi wonders if that little double entendre was intentional. She giggles like a teenager on her first date.

“Oh, heh, r-really? Wow. I—I don’t know what to say.”

“Yes?” The other woman prompts, her voice low and syrupy. Lexi feels her entire face get hot.

“I would love to,” she breathes, Sam momentarily forgotten in the heat of surprise and lust. “I’m Lexi, by the way.”

“My name’s Beth,” the taller woman says. “And this is Jess.” Jess giggles.

“Nice to meet you, Lexi. Wanna come have some fun?”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, that was a lot of decades. Hope it wasn't too long.

This chapter was largely intended to be connective tissue between the unofficial Part One and Part Two of this story. The second half of this story, while still dark, will be comparatively much lighter in tone.

There will be an interlude starring Jess and Beth up next, and then we will (finally!) meet Matt and Emily!

Emily and Matt are my favorite characters so I'm glad we're getting to them soon.

Please leave a comment if you liked it.

Thanks for reading!
September 1977

Beth thinks she’s broken.

There’s an ache in her heart that won’t go away. No matter how many trinkets she buys, how many languages she learns, how many people she kills, nothing dulls it.

Bev calls her weak. Beth hates to admit it, but maybe she’s right. A strong vampire wouldn’t be laid so low by a…weak, treacherous fledgling. Beth’s tried everything to salve the pain, but it still burns, a decade later. And if she can’t get rid of this feeling, then she’s got to learn to live with it.

So, she takes her pleasures where she finds them.

It was only supposed to happen once. Then once turned into twice, then twice turned into three times, then four, then Beth stopped counting because it was starting to feel disrespectful.

Jess is in the shower, singing a pop tune Beth doesn’t recognize. She stretches, scrapes her sweaty fringe out of the way of her eyes and shifts on the bed. Even though they finished ten minutes ago, Beth swears she can still feel Jess’ scratch marks on her back. It’s still so surreal. She casts her mind back, remembering Jess’s clumsy attempt to proposition her last year. She was so nervous. And sweet. But even back then, Jess was an exceptional lover, eager and willing to learn. And now… well. Beth smirks. She’s not so nervous anymore.

Keeping their clandestine relationship a secret came with considerable perks. Sneaking around was fun. They’d peel away when everyone returned from a group hunt, a bit fuzzy and high after gorging on blood. Sometimes they made to the bed. Other times they wouldn’t get that far, fucking up against the wall or on the floor. It was bit exciting, to test the limits, to see what they could get away with. Jess seemed to agree. In retrospect Beth should have realized Jess would make sneaking around a game. Sometimes she’d push Beth into a closet, kissing and grinding up against her even though they could be caught at any moment. Or she’d sneak a hand underneath the blanket when some of the girls were with them watching a film, smirking wickedly as she rubbed her fingers across Beth’s skin. One occasion, Beth woke up at dusk, already on the cusp of orgasm, sparks of pleasure running through her, gasping in shock when she looked down and saw Jess between her thighs.

They’ve been fucking, on and off, for almost a year. She wasn’t sure how the others would take it, considering sires aren’t technically supposed to sleep with their fledglings and Beth is starting to develop a bit of a track record there. Perhaps Cassandra is better off not knowing. It’s nobody’s
else’s business anyway.

(Hannah doesn’t count. Neither of them can keep a secret from each other.)

Beth grabs Jess’s pillow, leans close and breathes in. She can smell Jess everywhere, in sheets, on her clothes, on her skin. She finds she doesn’t mind it.

She glances over at the clock. It’s only eight in the evening. Jess sounds like she’s almost done. After they’ve finished fucking one of them usually makes an excuse to leave. Beth wishes they didn’t have to be so secretive, but they’re already treading a fine line. She swears she’s seen the other vamps giving them knowing looks whenever they leave the room together. So, even though it hurts a little, she tries to keep their dalliances short. No need to give gossips like Mia or Bev any more ammunition.

Tonight, though, Beth finds she doesn’t want to go back to her cold, empty room. Glancing out the window, she can see it’s clear, cool night. She grits her teeth. Just because she’s becoming an older vamp now, doesn’t mean she’s going to become a hermit. She wants to get out of the mansion, stretch her legs, feel the cool Autumn breeze on her face. She wouldn’t mind a bit of an adventure, and who better go on an adventure with than Jess?

Jess comes out of the shower, humming to herself as she dries her hair.

“Jess?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s getting a bit stuffy in here. Wanna go somewhere?”

Jess’ smile couldn’t be wider.

+++ The carnival is on the edge of town, in a dusty, battered showground Jess says used to be reserved for rodeos. The whole place is too cheesy and retro for Beth’s taste but Jess loves it. She can barely contain her excitement as she exits Beth’s battered corvette, all windswept and radiant as she calls for her to hurry up. They have enough cash to try everything twice, so they go on all the rides, the rickety rollercoaster, the dodgem cars, and something called the Loop-O-Plane that makes Beth’s stomach drop to her knees.

Jess’s eyes light up when they stop by some carnival game stalls. Following her gaze, Beth sees one of those old fashioned High Striker machines, the ones where you slam the hammer down to see if you can ring the bell at the top. It sparks an old memory. On the rare occasions he took a break from filming, her father would take Beth and her siblings to carnivals like this one. Beth and Hannah could go on every ride or game. Except one. No matter how many times she protested, her father would only allow Josh to take a turn on the High Striker. Whenever Beth protested, her father would grip her arm and hiss in her ear that she’s making a fuss and not acting like a lady. Beth pretended it didn’t bother her, but inside she was roiling as she watched her brother and father take turns smashing the mallet down, neither of them getting close to ringing the bell.

Beth curses under her breath. This is just like her. She’s supposed to be having fun, but instead she’s brooding. Cass always told her there’s no use dwelling over her mortal past. That life was an insipid shadow. Her father and her brother… they’re gone now. No use crying over that spilt milk.

Determined to banish those memories, Beth strides towards the attendant, who is trying to coax a group of teenage boys to come forward.
“Step right up, step right up! Which one of you wants to test your strength?”

“Howdy!” He’s a young, pock-face, weedy slip of a boy with a terrible faux-southern accent. “I’m not sure this is for you, miss. This hammer is heavy.”

“I know.”

“This is more for… you know, to see if you hit the bell right here. Maybe this is a little more appropriate for your boyfriends?”

“Listen here, pizza face,” Jess snaps, stepping out from behind Beth. “She said she wanted to have a go so why don’t you zip it and give her the hammer.”

Beth bites back a laugh cause the kid looks fucking shocked. Clearly, he’s not used to women talking back. He huffs, scowling at Beth as he hands her the hammer.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you. Good luck.”

“I don’t need luck.”

“Trust me, she’s as strong as an ox,” Jess chimes in.

And Beth could throttle Jess, because the innuendo is obvious and now the kid looks somewhere between intrigued and turned on. She’s encouraging him. Beth doesn’t like the way his eyes linger over Jess. Idiotic, lecherous human. Beth strides forward, and, shooting the kid one last triumphant look, slams down the mallet as hard as she can.

The bell rings so hard people gasp. All around her, everyone stops what they’re doing, whispering and gawking at each other. Satisfied, Beth smirks at the boy.

“Told you I didn’t need any luck.”

The kid tries to collect his jaw from the ground, spluttering and gasping, looking at the other humans, as if to ask, did this really happen? His face is flushed, red as ripe beet, yet somehow, it makes his pimples stand out more.

Jess sidles up next to her, wrapping her fingers around Beth’s arm and pulling her close.

“So, I’m guess we get our pick of prizes?” Beth asks.

“Uh…yeah. Sure. Go ahead.”

“Oooh, ooh,” Jess squeals. She points towards the largest, fluffiest, whitest teddy bear. “That one.”

Beth smirks at the attendant, making sure he sees the way she slips a hand around Jess’s waist and pulls her close. She feels a surge of hot satisfaction curl through her chest. It feels good to rub his face in it, for him to see that Beth’s claimed Jess for herself. “You heard the lady.”

As the euphoria begins to fade as Beth realizes they’ve attracted too much attention. Jess and some of the other girls love a group hunt, but Beth prefers to stalk her prey alone. If possible, she’d go completely unnoticed by humans. Jess, on the hand, relishes the attention, slyly winking at the crowd. But despite their newfound minor celebrity, they don’t want to linger. The bear is too much of a pain to carry around, and it’s starting to get late so the head back towards the car.
“Thank you for my prize,” Jess says, beaming. “This is so amazing. Not only did I get the cutest, fluffiest, widdle bear ever, but we showed that stupid kid. He couldn’t believe how strong you were. Chauvinist pig.”

Beth slides the keys into the ignition. “So. Good night then?”

“The best,” Jess grins. “My only regret is coming here made me realize how much I miss cotton candy.”

“Cotton candy? Wait, you mean that fluffy pink thing people were eating?”

“Fluffly pink thing? Beth! You’ve never eaten cotton candy?”

“No…” Beth frowns. “Or if I did, I don’t remember. There weren’t many carnivals around when I was a human.”

“God, the Depression sounds, well, depressing.” Jess leans forward, batting her eyes coquettishly, making Beth feel warm in the all the right places. “Cotton candy tastes good. Sweet. I liked how it dissolved on my tongue.”

“Oh?” Beth smiles, leaning closer. She can’t keep her eyes off Jess’ lips.

“Yeah,” Jess says, swiftly undoing her seat belt and clambering over, straddling Beth and peppering her face with kisses.

“Don’t worry though,” she whispers, her breath hot in Beth’s ear. “You’re just as sweet.”

+++ 

They carry on. Six months becomes a year. Beth wonders where the time has gone.

Jess stops going hunting with Hannah. When she comes home after dinner, Beth can’t smell the scent of a human on her.

When Jess says she’s her girlfriend, Beth doesn’t stop her.

+++ 

May, 1978

Cassandra likes to keep Beth on her toes.

The first thing she learns when Cassandra takes her into her service is the value of a dollar. It was a rough initiation, since her family never taught her the value of anything, let alone money. Cassandra made it clear she had to learn. And it was a struggle at first, but soon enough she did. As the decades rolled by Beth realized Cassandra was sitting on a goldmine.

The artwork in her bedroom alone was worth millions. Cassandra’s taste runs from J.M.W. Turner, Van Gough to Evelyn De Morgan. All the very best money could buy on the black market. And that’s before Beth earned the right to help Cass with her shares portfolio. She has enough money to fund multiple lifetimes, and Beth is certain she hasn’t even seen everything Cass has.

Most of the time Beth doesn’t have the luxury to gawk at all the pretty things. Cassandra always wants something. Right now, she wants to see the household inventory.
“Hmmm,” Cassandra says, frowning a little. They’re sitting at her desk, Beth’s notes spread out in front of her. “We’re low on blood wine.”

“I know,” Beth agrees. She shuffles through her folders, before finding the second last one in the pile. She thumbs through the pages, before handing Cassandra a collated police report.

“From the police scanners, there’s a turf war going on between two Mexican cartels in Pacoima. I doubt anyone of consequence would notice a few more drug dealers going missing during a war. I can organize some of the girls to accompany me on a recon mission with an eye to…restocking the cellar.”

“What a marvelous idea,” Cassandra muses. “You know, I wish I could lobby the mayor to give us the keys to the city. We practically do the police’s work for them.”

“Yeah,” Beth says, and the pair of them share a smile. Cassandra closes the folder and begins to clean up the remaining documents on her desk. It’s quiet in Cassandra’s room, empty but for the two of them, something Beth is grateful for. Increasingly these days Beth finds Ashley in here, sitting in the corner and watching them with wide, flat eyes. Sometimes she has bits of her human prey with her, dripping blood onto the pristine carpet. Once, after a particularly tense meeting about Amy’s wayward fledgling, Ashley had grabbed Beth by the back of her shirt before she could leave and had handed her part of a human spine. Beth hadn’t known what to say to her, so she just thanked her and left as soon as she could. Beth respects and loves Cass more then anyone else in her unlife, but she just can’t understand why Cass feels so comfortable keeping Ashley in her room like some morbid pet. If Beth were in charge, she would have put the deranged girl out of her misery a long time ago.

Beth readies herself to leave, but before she can, Cassandra puts a hand on hers, a silent command to stay. Her sire gets up, going over to her own personal wine rack. She picks one out from down the bottom, cork coming open with a loud pop. Cass takes out her crystal spirit glasses and carefully pours them both a drink.

“It’s a relief to see the household won’t be burning down on your watch this year.”

“Well, don’t speak too soon. It’s only May.”

Cassandra chuckles, low and rich, and Beth tries not to bask too obviously in it.

“You’re a funny young woman, Beth. You know everything about the household, but you so rarely tell me about the girls within it.”

Beth stiffens. What’s Cassandra playing at? This is a game, or a test. If she wanted gossip, she would go to Jess or Amy.

“Well? Any juicy gossip for you to report?”

“Uh,” Beth says, and it feels like Cass is playing with her, like a cat does with mice. “You know I don’t pay attention to all that.”

“I know, you’re very…scrupulous in that way,” Cass muses. Beth takes a sip of the wine, trying to ignore the adrenalin surging through her veins. She carefully arranges her face, trying to look as impassive as possible under her sire’s searching gaze. There’s a long, agonizing pause, before Cass sighs deeply, like Beth has disappointed her. She slides an envelope over towards her.

“I admit I’m a little rusty, but when it comes to romancing someone, sometimes a big gesture can go a long way.”
“I’m sorry Cass, I don’t follow.”

“I think you do, Beth,” Cassandra says, her tone stern.

Beth’s stomach sinks to the floor.

“Cass…” she tries to keep the panic from her voice. She has to keep it together. For Jess’ sake, as well as hers. “I know you said to monitor Jess…and I am… but I didn’t mean for it to go any further, I swear.”

“I know, I know,” Cass sighs, seemingly surprised by Beth’s reaction. She reaches over, places an almost motherly hand over Beth’s and squeezes tight.

“I know what you are, Beth. I knew it from the moment I saw you all those years ago. And I knew you would have endured a cold, lonely existence if I let you live out your mortal life. I didn’t want that for you. I didn’t want such a brave, clever girl to be so miserable.” Cass leans close, her voice soft and conspiratorial, eyes glinting in the gloom. “The humans may hate you, Beth, but I never will.”

Beth swallows hard, struggling to get a hold of herself. She thinks of how she was back when Cass first found her. A scared, lonely, repressed little girl. Contemptible, really. Now, criminals, bigots, molesters, all are cut down by her hands.

She never would never have been this powerful without Cass.

“So,” Cass says brightly, breaking Beth away from her thoughts. She hands Beth the envelope. “I have it on good authority Jess likes this band…these people who call themselves… Fleetwood Mac.”

“What?” Beth gasps. She rips the envelope open, scarcely believing her own eyes. “Cass… these are front-row tickets…”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

Beth restrains herself from throwing her arms around Cassandra. Her sire is many things, but a hugger is not one of them. “Thank you…. Thank you so much.”

“Yes, yes,” Cassandra says, batting her praise away.

She can barely contain herself as she gets out to leave. Not only has Cass given her tacit approval of her and Jess, but she has front row tickets to one of the hottest bands on the planet. And while they’re not quite to Beth’s taste, Jess is going to freak out when she sees this.

“Beth.” There’s something in Cassandra’s voice that makes Beth stop cold.

“Yes, Cassandra?”

“I think Jess can be good for you.” Cassandra’s voice drops. “But don’t keep something like this away from me again.”

The threat hangs heavily over them before Cass dismisses Beth with a flick of her hand. She scrambles out the door, shaken but strangely elated. Sure, Cassandra just reprimanded her, but for Cass, that was a mild dressing down (Beth wasn’t allowed to touch blood wine for a month after she was unable to conduct a house-hold update in fluent German). This is it, though. Cass has given them her blessing. There’s no reason to hide anymore.
Jess is sitting in the living room, laughing with Tamika and Amy. She shoots Beth a small smile, furtive enough that the other girls don’t pick up on it. Grinning, Beth saunters over, enjoying how Jess’ eyes widen with every step she takes.

“Evening, ladies,” she drawls, sitting down next to Jess and wrapping an arm around her, pulling her close.

“Beth…. What are you doing?”

“Well,” Beth grins, reaching into her pocket and handing Jess the tickets. “I was just going to ask whether you have plans this Saturday?”

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July, 1978

She should’ve known she was walking into an inquisition. Despite her sister love of musicals, forty minutes in and Hannah isn’t watching, every couple of minutes shooting Beth not-at-all subtle disapproving looks.

Beth doesn’t say a word. When Hannah wants to say something, she will. In the meantime, she’ll enjoy the peace and quiet. They’re the only ones here at this midnight screening of the film Grease. This is the kind of thing Hannah loves, watching films then dissecting every scene afterwards. It’s what they both like doing, a hang-over from their human days. Something must be seriously awry for Hannah to ignore a Hollywood blockbuster.

“Why are you being weird?” Hannah finally says.

Beth stops sucking on her straw. “What? I’m not. You’re the one not watching the movie.”

“You’re more glower-y than usual,” Hannah points out. She sighs. “You didn’t break up with Jess…again?”

Beth rolls her eyes. “Why are you whispering? We’re the only ones here.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Beth turns her eyes back to the screen. John Travolta is sliding across the bleachers with his strange posse behind him. She grits her teeth. Why isn’t Hannah watching the movie? Why does she have to pry? Why can’t she ever get any peace?

“Beth?”

“No. We’re fine.”

“Then why are you pouty? You only get this way when Jess has done something to upset you.”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“Beeeeeeeth, please?”

“Fine,” Beth hesitates. “I…may have fucked up.”

“What did you do…”

“It’s more…. what I didn’t do…. ”
“Okay, now you’re scaring me.”

“No,” Beth sighs, closing her eyes. It doesn’t make her feel better. “Jess…told me she loved me…”

There’s a pause. Next to her, she hears her sister take an unnecessary breath. Then….

“You idiot.”

“Ow!”

Hannah is hitting her arm, again and again, belting her with all the force her vampire strength can muster. “God, you didn’t say something as awful as ‘I know’ when she told you, right? Oh my god.”

“Hey, stop, seriously,” Beth snaps, shielding herself. “No. I didn’t say…I know.”

Hannah narrows her eyes and jabs her finger towards Beth’s chest. “You said something stupid. No wonder Jess looked like she wanted to cry when I saw her at dusk.”

Beth swallow a lump in her throat. Hannah glowers at her.

“Well?”

“I said….” Beth pauses. She wonders where the point of no return was. Where her heart became a little larger and she let Jess in. “I said…okay.”

“You said okay. She told you she loved you and you said…. okay…”

“Yeah…”

“Jesus. I have witnessed a lot of ungodly things in my unlife, Beth, but this…. this is the worst.”

“You don’t get it,” Beth snaps, eyes flicking back to the screen. She feels her sister’s eyes boring into her. “I care about Jess. Not just as my fledgling… but more than that. It’s just…”

“What?” and Beth feels relieved as the anger seemed to have drained from Hannah’s voice.

“It’s just… I know I care for her. Really deeply. But it’s not… it’s not what I felt… before.”

“You mean with Sam,” Hannah says bluntly, ignoring when Beth flinches. She rolls her eyes and wraps one of her arms around Beth, leaning over and pulling her into a half-hug.

“Beth, you need to stop thinking like a mortal.”

“What?”

“No, wait, don’t get mad, hear me out, okay?” Hannah says. “Think about it. Humans, they’re not built like us. They only have a short time on this earth. It’s natural for them to feel things very intensely.”

“Go on,” Beth says cautiously. In spite of herself, she’s curious.

“Yeah. So, all the movies that show passionate love affairs? Where people feel like they’d die for one another? It’s not real, Beth. Or, it is for them, but not for us. We’re not like them. We feel deeply, but not passionately. So of course, what you feel for Jess isn’t as intense. But that’s natural. We don’t feel that immature, human-type love.”
Beth frowns. She wants to believe her sister, she really does, but the specter of Sam looms over them both. “But I was a vampire when I was with…her.”

“Yes, but you had feelings for her before, right? Before you were turned. Don’t roll your eyes at me, I know you did.” Hannah reaches for her hand, threading her fingers through Beth’s and squeezing tight. “You loved Sam like a human would. Passionately, deeply, foolishly. That kind of love always fizzles out. We didn’t know it back then, because we were so young.”

Beth swallows the lump in her throat, trying to blink back the hot tears that threaten to dribble down her face. “I suppose…”

“It’s hard to come to terms with it, but you’ve got leave these stupid human impulses behind. Beth. I get it. But you have to move on. Trying to eke out an existence, neither human nor vampire, is no way to live.”

“So…I do love Jess…then?”

“Uh, duh, dingus.” Hannah teases. “It’s obvious by the way you look at her. I thought you were supposed to be the smart one?”

“Shut up,” Beth groans, rolling her eyes.

“You loooooove her.”

“I could stake you right now.”

“Yes, but then who would you go to movies with?” Hannah turns and faces the screen, a wide, knowing grin on her face. “Now shush. I want to admire John Travolta some more.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Beth laughs, but acquiesces to her sister’s request. Hannah’s right. She’s not a human anymore.

She should stop acting like one.

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The next time Jess says she loves her it’s after they’ve fucked for the second time in one night. It’s sticky and humid, and the scent of incense and sex hangs over them. Jess curses under her breath, kicking the blankets off them and laying her head on Beth’s chest, her body all slick from sweat.

“I love you,” she mumbles, lips idly kissing a pattern across her chest.

Beth closes her eyes, holds her tight.

“I love you too,” she replies, only feeling a little guilty when the words slip from her mouth.

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March, 1984

Jess flipped the pages of the latest edition of Cosmo, admiring a photo of Footloose actress Lori Singer practically hanging off co-star Kevin Bacon.

“Guuuuuuurl, I don’t blame you,” Jess says. She looks over at Beth, who is sitting beside her reading a book large enough to be classed as a weapon. “Would you eat Kevin Bacon? I would eat Kevin Bacon. And not just because his name is Mr. Bacon.”
Beth doesn’t look up from her book.

“I think movie stars are off limits. Um. Usually, anyway.”

“Yeah, well, that’s a shame, cause that man is too fiiiiiiine not to eat,” she says, going back to the magazine. She’s going to flip through to the sex advice parts. They’re always hilarious, and absolutely written by someone who has never given a blowjob in her life.

Next to her she feels Beth shift. She feels the bed sag a bit as Beth puts the book down, and Jess can feel her girlfriend’s eyes on her.

“I’ve been thinking—”

“You’re always thinking. You should give it a rest sometime.”

“Yeah, yeah. Good one. No, seriously. I’ve been thinking about the rules we live by, here in the mansion, and the rules that exist out there. They don’t really match up, do they?”

“Oh, derrr.”

“Exactly. And it got me thinking and I realized that…. monogamy…it’s a… human construct.”

Jess puts down the magazine, turning and looking at Beth. “Uh, what did you just say?”

“Well,” Beth says, sounding eager. “Monogamy was first practiced in ancient Greece and Rome, and it’s evolved to underpin the human nuclear family and to shore up things like property rights. And as an expedient way, of course, for men to exploit women…”

“Spare me the lecture, please,” Jess interrupts. She hates it when Beth gets on these tangents. If she wanted to listen to some hairy-legged feminist, she’d go to the nearest college campus.

“What I’m trying to say is, humans invented this form of relationship. And it works for them. Well, kind of. If Hannah’s stories are any indication, no human man ever sticks to it,” Beth snorts.

Jess taps her hands on the table next to their bed, anxious for her to get to her point already.

“But we’re not human. We’re more than human, so it’s obvious that their moral precepts don’t apply to us…”

“Beth, please.”

“Sorry, I’m just saying,” Beth takes a breath, fiddles with the blanket like she does when she’s nervous. Jess feels her stomach drop like a stone.

“You want to see other people,” she says, flatly.

“Yes, that’s it,” Beth says, grinning at her like she’s, of all things, proud. “I don’t see why we should hold onto stupid human morals anyway. It’s not like we have to worry about the afterlife.”

You’re more worried whose pants you’re getting into, Jess thinks. She wonders which slut tempted Beth into this. If it’s one of the other girls, she’ll scratch her eyes out.

“You want to break up? Is that it? Cause if you do, Beth, well, fine, whatever, you could have spared me the fucking lecture about it.”

“Jess, no!” Beth cries, her face falling. Jess looks away. Even now, when she’s so angry she could
scream, she hates seeing anguish on her sire’s face. “I want us to last. Forever. I can’t imagine ever being with anyone else. But forever is a long time. We have to adapt, and this is going to make us stronger.”

“You eating out another girl is going to make us stronger?”

“Not having to rely on each other for the entirety of our emotional and physical needs from now until eternity is what is going to make us stronger.”

“What the actual hell, Beth. If you want to fuck someone else, just say it!” Jess fumes. She gets up, not wanting to be in the same bed as Beth, in the same room. It’s like the walls are closing in. She needs to get out. Maybe find Tamika and go fuck some shit up.

“Jess, Jess!” Beth cries. She’s off the bed to, moving towards her. She looks wounded, dark eyes large and sad. Jess glowers at her but doesn’t move away. She’s still wary of where this conversation is going, can practically see Beth standing in front of, smiling as she cradles Jess’s heart in her hands.

“If you don’t want to do this, we won’t, okay?”

“Why do you want other people? Am I not…am I not enough…?”

“No, Jay, I swear to you,” Beth gasps. She broaches the distance between them, ignoring Jess’ huff of annoyance and takes her in her arms. Jess enjoys the familiarity of her embrace and hates herself a little for snuggling into it, burrowing her face into Beth’s chest and breathing her in.

“You’re all anyone could ever want,” And Beth starts to kiss down her neck, soft mouth lingering on all the spots that make Jess whimper. She wants to put a stop to this, because it’s not like sex is the answer here, but as Beth starts to slide her hands underneath her shirt, she thinks, fuck it. It’ll paper over the cracks. If only for a while.

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Everything is good after that. Beth doesn’t mention the non-monogamy thing and Jess sure as hell isn’t going to raise it. But the problem is, once the idea is out there, you can’t shove it back into a box.

It’s four years since Beth first mentioned opening up their relationship when Jess notices Beth’s eyes straying. Her gaze will linger on girl when they’re out at a club, or she’ll be a little too receptive to the advances of some wannabe anti-Regan hippie. It doesn’t matter how many times it happens, Jess feels the same, bitter stab of jealousy every time.

It’s frustrating because if Jess loses it, she’s the one who looks like an idiot because Beth never acts on it. Even if she wanted to, she’s too loyal, too proud, too decent to betray Jess like that. It’s stupid, because even though it’s all look-but-no touch, the resentment builds up anyway until Jess loses her head and lashes out at Beth, screaming so loud the walls shake.

So, Jess tries a different tactic. If Beth’s eyes are straying, it’s because she’s getting bored, and if she’s getting bored, Jess needs to get more interesting.
If there’s one thing Jess excels at it, it’s sex. Her mother was fond of saying she was a dirty, God-forsaken whore. Well, if she was a dirty, God-forsaken whore as a human, then she’s definitely one as a vamp.

She may not read a lot of books (Hannah gently told her Cosmo doesn’t count) but when it comes to Beth and pleasure, she could write a novel. She’s discovered every way to make her gasp and shake and moan. It still gives her an illicit thrill, sliding her fingers to the apex of Beth’s thighs, groaning when she feels how wet she is. She still loves seeing Beth’s pretty, dark eyes looking up at her while her sire fucks her with her tongue, drawing out their love-making until Jess is begging for release.

But she needs to try harder. So, Jess goes shopping. She considers taking Hannah, who is more liberal about this sort of thing than she lets on, but decides against it due to whole I’ll-be-fucking-your-sister-with-this-dildo thing.

She buys a lot of toys she thinks will come in handy later-on. They’ve already done some light bondage, but nothing too outlandish and Jess thinks it’ll be good for them to push some limits. She buys everything she thinks will pique Beth’s interest, from a double ended dildo, to nipple clamps to a riding crop.

“Beth?” she asks later.

“Mmm?” Beth’s leaving long, lingering kisses across Jess’s stomach.

“I want to…ah… I want to…. try something.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I want you to, oh, oh cripes,” Jess moans, closing her eyes, enjoying how Beth’s fingers bring her undead body to life. “I have something in the draw. Put it on.”

“Well, when you ask so nicely,” Beth drawls, running her palms lightly over the underside of Jess’s breasts. After a moment she leans over and opens the bedside draw, gasping at what she finds

“Is this…a strap on?” Beth grins, pulling it out.

“Got it in one, sweet lips.”

“And you want me to…fuck you with it?”

“Well, a lady would never put it like that…”

“Oh.” Beth grins wolfishly. She looks at Jess with dark, heavy lidden eyes, mouth curved in a playful smile. And just like that, Jess feels a dull ache begin to throb between her thighs. “Well, good thing you’re not a lady.”

“Damn right,” Jess giggles. She wraps her legs Beth’s waist, pulling her warm body close. “Now hurry up and fuck me already.”

Beth, that idiot, mocks salutes her, before scrambling off the bed. She fumbles with her jeans, fingers struggling with the buttons momentarily. Finally, she wiggles out of them, swearing under her breath as she vehemently kicks them away. She pulls her boxer briefs down before grabbing the sex toy. Jess stifles a laugh. Her enthusiasm is adorable.

“Do you need any help?”
“Nah, I got this.”

And she does. Jess feels her stomach clench when she sees how Beth works the strap-on, fingers tightening the straps with practiced ease. Beth, who usually has the grace of a crack-addled giraffe, is putting it on easily.

Like she’s done it before.

Jess feels anger surge through her veins. Of course, of-fucking-course, Saint Sam had to be good at sex too. Not only did she trick Beth into falling in love with her, but she satisfied her as well. Beth never talks about it, so Jess assumed Sam was just as repressed and uptight as she seemed. She was certain they had boring, vanilla sex for forty years and that Beth only stayed because she was blinded by true love or whatever.

If they experimented…If Beth has tried a lot of toys that are already out there…

What does Jess have to offer?

“God, Jess, you look so good,” Beth groans. She hovers over her, leaning down and presses hot, open mouthed kisses down Jess’s neck, gently biting down on her skin. “I’ll go slow.”

“No.”

Beth looks up, dragging her head away from Jess’s nape. “What?”

“No, I,” Jess tries to swallow down her anger. She spreads her legs wide, rutting up against the hard dildo between them. “I want it hard.”

“Jay…”

“Are you listening to me or what?” Anger pulses through her. “Fuck me.”

“Jess…”

“Fuck me or fuck off and I’ll find someone who will.”

Beth blinks. Jess can see her girlfriend is confused, a little worried, maybe, and it makes Jess hiss because she’s never needed her pity. She doesn’t need anyone’s pity.

Jess bares her teeth at Beth, fangs out, digging her heels into the small of Beth’s back, urging her to get on with already. Beth, finally, gets the message, sucking in an unnecessary breath before jerking her hips forward. Jess gasps, feeling the burn as the dildo stretches her open, filling her up. She wasn’t ready for it, not really, but she welcomes the pain, crying out when Beth pushes completely inside her.

Beth cocks her head, and Jess can tell she’s about to say something so she hisses, jerking her hips up. The pain is gone now, replaced by a dull ache that shouldn’t feel good but it does.

Beth is staring at her, eyes dark and serious, and suddenly their mouths are meeting, all wet and messy and desperate as they push against each other, bodies slick with sweat.

Jess feels exposed, vulnerable, used, getting wetter with each coarse thrust. Her hands fly to Beth’s back, nails sinking into her skin, wanting her girlfriend to hurt like she’s hurting. Beth grunts in pain, but doesn’t stop, drawing back then pounding into her so hard that it makes Jess’s whole body shake.

The headboard begins to hit with the wall with a steady thud, in time with every thrust of Beth’s hips.
and the loud slap of skin-meeting-skin. Jess moans openly, loud enough that the others can probably hear them. It doesn’t matter. They think she’s a slut anyway.

Jess closes her eyes, canting her hips up to meet every deep thrust, and tries to forget.

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If she was seeing a shrink, she’s sure they’d tell her she’s committing self-sabotage, but for whatever reason, the next few months she alternates between hot and cold with Beth. When they have sex it’s rough, and usually on the back of an argument. She likes it when it’s a bit feral between them, likes it when Beth cries out when Jess sinks her fangs into her neck when they fuck. Sometimes afterwards she clings to her, doesn’t want to let go, other times it feels too much, like the walls are closing in again, and she can’t get away from her girlfriend fast enough.

Another time they were out at a club, Jess losing herself in the music, feeling the beat of the bass reverberating around her ribs. She attracts the attention of a burly New Zealander, doesn’t stop him when he brings his mouth to hers. Jess only feels a little remorseful when she finally pulls away, just in time to watch her sire leave the club without saying goodbye.

When Beth says they should take a break, Jess picks up her favorite baseball, signed by some guy called Jack Fimple, and hurls it through their window with all her might. Beth bares her fangs and snarls at her to get out, the pair of them hurling barbs at one another until Hannah comes in and forcibly drags Jess away.

When they get to Jess’s old room, she shrugs Hannah off. Hannah’s the last person she wants around right now. Jess doesn’t need to see concern coming from those familiar dark eyes.

Beth cherished that ball. She won’t be able to look for it until dusk at the earliest, and it could be gone by then. Her sire might hate her for it. She probably already does.

It doesn’t matter anymore.
Nothing matters.

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May 1989

Jess wanders the streets of San Francisco, marveling at the tiny houses all clustered together that she still finds charming all these years later. She catches the tram, heads down to the beach, likes the way waters snakes around her ankles, how her feet sink into the earth, smiling as damp sand squeezes through her toes.

It's late. Or really, really, early. The area is deserted, except for an older man sitting on the other side of the beach. He looks homeless.

She could eat. It would be simple, flash a smile at him, coquettishly flutter her eyes lashes, and the minute he lets his guard down she’d get him into a vice-like grip and that would be the end of it. But it’s too easy. It’s no fun when it’s easy.

Everything’s easy.

She doesn’t want to be at the beach anymore. The old vagrant is upsetting her. She dashes forward,
grabbing her shoes and hurriedly leaving the beach.

She keeps walking. Everything starts to blend together. House, house, tree, tree, perfectly manicured yard after perfectly manicured yard. Everything changes. Nothing changes. Will anything change? Will everything be the same: hunt, sleep, hunt, for now until eternity?

When her skin starts to prickle a bit, Jess doesn’t think anything of it, brain too foggy to process anything. When she glances down she sees with a jolt her feet are bruised and bloody; somewhere on her night’s walk she’d left her shoes behind.

Oh. How forgetful of her.

She blinks, momentarily blinded as she sees a black car speeding towards her, tires screeching across the asphalt.

If it’s a serial killer, coming to abduct her, well, joke's on them.

The car pulls up beside her.

“Jess? Oh god, Jess, thank god, thank god, get in.”

“What?”

“It’s almost dawn, get in!”

A familiar figure gets out and is besides her in a flash, bundling her into the backseat.

A thick woolen blanket is thrown over her, cocooning her in darkness.

“Stay under there, Jess. Just in case any the sun decides to show up.”

Beth?

Jess thinks Beth breaks every road rule in the book, driving back to the mansion so fast it makes her stomach churn.

She’s dizzy when Beth leads her through the mansion’s foyer. Dimly, she feels others around her, hears fear in their voices but can’t make out the words. She feels out of it, like she’s marooned underwater.

She needs to get away. In the commotion she slips away, finding herself alone in her room. She strips off her clothes, getting into the shower, welcoming the cold spurt of water that blasts her skin.

She’s so tired.

The hinges of the shower screen creek as someone wrenches it open. Jess opens her eyes.

Beth.

Her sire gets into the shower, fully clothed. If Jess’s mind wasn’t so fuzzy, she’d laugh and her, tell her she’s being ridiculous, that she’s got another thing coming if she expects Jess to pay for a new leather jacket.


She lets herself be pushed back into the stained glass. Her head is light, fuzzy. She isn’t sure of what
Beth wants. Why is she here? Isn’t she mad at her?

She spreads her legs. Maybe this is why Beth’s here. Sex is how they communicate best.

“Jess,” Beth’s breath is hot against her ear. She presses up against her, her leather jacket chafing Jess’s skin a little. “Please...I was so scared. Please. Never do that again. No one is worth burning for. Not me, not... not anyone.”

She doesn’t know why but hot tears slide down Jess’s cheeks. She grabs the labels of Beth’s jacket, buries her face in her chest, tears sliding down her face.

Jess’s legs are shaking when Beth turns off the faucet. She feels worn, like someone has opened her up and scraped out her insides. She hates feeling like this. Like she was as a human. Helpless and stupid and pathetic.

She’s not supposed to be that anymore.

Beth dries her off, puts her in a fluffy dressing gown, before joining her in the bed, wearing a dressing gown of her own.

“I love you,” Beth whispers in her ear. “I love you. Hannah loves you. We all love you.”

Jess closes her eyes and lets sleep take her.

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They start again.

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May, 1992

The problem is, when they’re good, they’re really good.

Beth is leaning up against her Harley Davidson, dark hair slicked back, her tight, white shirt a stark contrast to her black leather jacker, tight dark jeans and weathered boots.

Jess feels achy at the sight of Beth, her languid grace, her lazy smiles. It's like being drunk, everything larger and more beautiful, when she's this close to her.

That, and Beth rides that motorbike like a demon, and looks hot as hell while doing it.

“So, is the standard attire to going to the ballet, now?” Jess says, playing with the hem of her dress, feeling flirty and girlish all of a sudden.

“Oh,” Beth grins at her, making her feel warm all over. “Sorry. My dress is in the wash.”

“Liar.”

Beth smirks before taking a long drag of a cigarette, and if Jess were a human girl, she thinks she’d die on the spot.

“Well, I don’t care what you’re supposed to wear to the ballet, cause your idea is much better,” she steps forward, close to Beth, fiddling with the buttons on her jacket. “You look a little like you first did, when I met you at the supermarket. Do you remember? I thought you were handsome, even back then.”
“Gaaaaaaaay.”

“Cram it, sister.” She smiles fondly at the memory. “Do you remember what I said about your dress sense? Back when we used to meet for dinner.”

“You called me a fream.”

“Beth, come on,” Jess huffs. Trust Beth to take an old jibe to heart. “Don’t you remember? I called you a skinny little beatnik boy.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Yeah,” Jess leans up, teasing smile on her lips. “You were a freaking babe back then and you’re a freaking babe now.”

Beth’s lips are warm and inviting and before either them can blink they’re kissing, Jess standing up on the tips of her toes, melting into her embrace.

Out of nowhere someone jostles them, and they pull apart, just in time to see a middle aged human scowl at them.

“Catch AIDS and die, dykes,” he mutters under his breath.

“What the hell?!” Jess snarls, watching the man scurry away from them. Next to her, she feels Beth stiffen, shoulders rigid and tense, shame clouding her dark eyes.

“Hey, stop that.”

Beth frowns. “What?”

“Taking the words of a bigot to heart. Don’t let that gibbering degenerate get you down. You’re worth a thousand times more than him.”

She doesn’t want Beth to sink into a funk, to get lost inside her head the way she does sometimes. So, Jess pokes her, in the ticklish spot right under her ribs.

“Hey!” Beth yelps.

“We’re early, right? *Giselle* isn’t starting for another forty minutes?”

“That’s right.”

“Awesome,” Jess grins, watching the man as he walks down the street. “Guess I found our dinner plans.”

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November, 1998

The problem is, when they’re bad, they’re really bad.

“She’s here, she’s here.”

“What the hell,” Jess hisses. Her arm is still a little sore from when Beth abruptly pushed her away. “Are you having a really weird stroke?”
Beth’s eyes are wide, unfocussed, sweaty hair clinging to her brow. She has the same bleary, out-of-it expression she does right after feeding on a human who was high on LSD.

“Beth…”

“Sam,” Beth finally chokes out. Jess flinches, the name hitting her square in the face like a slap.

“What?”

“She’s here,” Beth gasps, looming over Jess. “She’s here.”

With that, her sire takes off, striding forward with purpose. They’re away from the rest of the clubbers (Jess is a lady, so chose the end of the corridor, away from everyone else, before deciding to climb Beth like a tree) but within a second Beth is gone.

There are hundreds of women here, all crammed together in a few ramshackle rooms. When Jess gets to the end of the corridor all she can see is a heaving, sweaty mass of waving arms and shaking hips.

Jess’s mouth is still tingling. Less than a minute ago she was pinning Beth up against a wall, kissing her messily while her sire moaned in her ear. Next thing she’s alone and horny, trapped behind a wall of humans while her sire goes on a wild-fucking-goose chase.

Jess has half a mind to leave Beth here. If Beth doesn’t want her, then she can just go fuck herself. Jess is nobody’s sloppy seconds. There are hundreds of willing girls here. She’s sure she could coax one to come home with her.

But, while fucking some stranger is appealing, she can’t stop thinking about the haunted look in Beth’s eyes. She’s never seen her looks so wounded. Not since—

“Stupid bitch,” Jess mutters under breath. Beth is probably tearing this place apart, abandoning the fledgling who loves her to chase after the one who hates her guts. If that isn’t an example of idiotic self-flagellation, then Jess doesn’t know what is.

Still, this kind of behavior is risky and stupid and Beth has saved her from herself more times than she can count so she supposes it’s only right to return the favor.

She closes her eyes, concentrates on Beth. She can sense her. She’s close.

Jess pushes through the crowd, feels herself sagging in relief when she spots Beth by the bar.

“Beth!”

“She’s shut me out, Jess,” Beth says, her voice miserable and small. “She shut me out.”

“What?”

“I felt her…for a split second I felt her. She’s alive, and happy, and here.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jess splutters. “Are you sure you didn’t just mistake her for someone else? There are plenty of tiny, blonde fashion disasters here.”

“It was her. I’ve felt that…connection before. It’s one I haven’t felt in years. So I thought—I don’t know what I thought. I tried not to think about it. About her.”

“Beth, would you just—”
“I can’t feel her anymore. She’s closed herself off to me again. Clever. I wonder where she learned that.” Beth sounds bitter. “But she can’t be far. We should check outside. Come on.”

“Beth, stop it. Okay. Jesus Christ, get a grip. You just…you said you felt it for a split second? How can you be sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“No, you’re not. I can tell. You’re just being stubborn.” Beth looks away, scowling, but Jess can see she’s starting doubt herself. “Maybe you saw someone who looks just like her. And that’s why you sensed her.”

“Maybe,” Beth says sullenly.

“Come on, Beth,” Jess says, sidling up to her girlfriend, layering a heavy dose of flirtation in her voice. “Don’t be a negative nelly. You’re immortal, you’re a babe and you are literally surrounded by hotties.”

Beth’s lip twitch into an almost smile. Jess grins, feeling relieved. She’s coming back to her. Her girlfriend was lost, but she’s coming back.

“Don’t back out on me now, girl,” Jess teases. “You promised me some fun and you better deliver.”

“Oh?” Beth smirks, smiling that languid way that drives Jess crazy.

“Oh huh,” Jess whispers. She leans up, places a long, lingering kiss on Beth’s lips. She feels a surge of vindication pulse through her. Saint Sam can still make Beth lose her mind, but Jess is the one brings her back to earth.

“Let’s go see if we entice someone to get out of here and join our very exclusive, private party.”

She doesn’t have to go searching for long before she sees a dark haired, pretty girl hidden away in the corner of the club. She’s nursing a half-empty drink, hair a bit disheveled and lip gloss smeared. It seems like someone stood her up. She’s probably eager for some company.

Good.

“Come on,” Jess says, nudging Beth and indicating to the girl. “Let’s go introduce ourselves.”

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Jess slides her fingers roughly over Beth’s clit, watching as her girlfriend shudders and shakes beneath her. Lexi, sweet child, is playing her part, sliding her finger in and out of Beth, fucking her sire with awe-struck glee. It doesn’t take long for Beth to fall over the edge, crying out as she comes, Sam’s name falling silently from her lips.

Jess looks away. She had a feeling this would happen. But it still hurts, all the same.

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October, 2000

She can do this.

She can do this. Okay, maybe she needs to throw up first. And then she can do this.
She’s about one second away going to dry heave in her bathroom when, Beth enters their room, looking tired and grim. Looks like whatever urgent chore Cassandra made her do was particularly demanding.

Jess panics. She promised not to draw this out more than she already has, but Beth looks the whole world is on her shoulders.

“Hey,” her sire says, looking tired but pleased to see her. “Isn’t everyone throwing Alex a party for passing her initiation? You didn’t want to go?”

“No.”

“Okay,” Beth smiles warmly, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Well if you want a quiet night in, wanna go steal Hannah’s bootlegged copy of Bring It On?”

“No,” Jess says, her mouth dry. She pats the space on the bed next to her. “Can we talk?”

“Oh,” Beth says cautiously.

Jess grits her teeth as Beth takes a seat next to her, as if nothing is wrong. Jesus. Her sire isn’t stupid. Nothing good has ever come from the words ‘let’s talk’. Why isn’t she getting mad? Why isn’t fighting for them? Fighting for her?

“Jess…”

“I think we should break up,” Jess says bluntly.

Beth doesn’t look surprised, just hangs her head and stares at the floor like some miserable, injured puppy.

“Why?”

“Why…?” There are too many reasons to name. Twenty reasons, probably, built up over twenty years. “Because I’m tired.”

“I’m tired too,” Beth says flatly. “That’s no reason to stop.”

“Yes, it is,” Jess snaps. Because she is tired. She's tired of competing with a ghost, tired of always having to fill holes in them both, tired of talking around the obvious, trying to keep their relationship alive when neither of them truly wants it.

“There’s three people in this relationship,” Jess says. “And, contrary to popular belief, I don’t like to share.”

Beth picks at her bed sheet sullenly.

“What are you even talking about?”

“Oh, you want to be cute now? I’m talking about Sam.”

Beth flinches.

“Oh please,” Jess sneers. She promised herself she wouldn’t lash out, but Beth is making it hard for her. “You scared of saying her name? She’s not freaking Voldemort.”

“Vold-a-who?”
“Beth, I don’t to be second anymore. I want—” Jess licks her lips, tries to blink back the tears she can feel beginning to form in the corner of her eyes. She’s practiced this, maybe a million times already, but she didn’t expect it to hurt this much. “She has this hold over you. I’ve tried to break it. I’ve tried everything, I’ve done everything,” Her voice cracks and she pauses while she tries to push a sob down her throat.

“Jess...”

“You’re going to have to find some way to get over her, Beth. Even if she’s out there, somewhere, she’s not coming back. Obsessing over her, it’s not good for you. But...whatever. That’s not my problem anymore.”

“You’re wrong,” Beth snaps, a spark of anger in her voice. Jess snorts. Of course. Bring up Sam and watch Beth rise to the bait.

“About us? Or about Sam?”

Beth’s expression says everything Jess needs to know.

“Well, whatever. All I know it, I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“You’ve made up your mind, then?”

She pauses. This isn’t the first time they’ve done this. They’ve broken up more times than Jess can count, usually in a fit of rage. Sometimes they stay broken up, for a month, sometimes two. Once they were technically apart for six months.

Then again, are you really broken up if you keep crawling back into each other’s bed?

“I have. This is Groundhog Day and I don’t like it,” Jess swallows thickly. “I’ll resent you if we keep going. I still love you. I never want to hate you.”

“You love me, huh?” Beth smiles weakly. “You’re just not in love with me anymore.”

Jess doesn’t say a word, doesn’t see the point in twisting the knife any further.

Beth stares at her, her lovely dark eyes so sad and full of regret. Jess almost wants to reach out and comfort her. She doesn’t, and it stings. The thought of not being able to touch Beth whenever she wants hurts almost more than she can stand.

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to hate you either. I couldn’t stand it.” Beth sighs. “So, what do we do now?”

“I need space. I can’t see you for a while.”

“Of course,” Beth says her voice heavy with unshed tears. “Whatever you need.”

“Beth?”

“Yeah?”

“I know this blows…but...Thanks. For everything.”

Beth’s smile is soft and full of pain.

“You got it, kid.”
Jess’s laughter dies as soon as Beth leaves the room. The silence is loud, almost oppressive, as she curls up into a ball and lets her body sink into the sheets.

Breaking up with her sire was years in the making, a thousand tiny slights building up into a crescendo. Even if it was the right thing to do, the finality of it is frightening. What does she do now? Her entire undead existence has been defined by Beth. She stopped being the victim when she met Beth. Beth, who encouraged her to be strong. Beth, who let Jess take care of her when Sam reached into her chest and ripped out her heart. Beth, who taught her a million things about love and sex. Who is she, now? Who is she, without Beth constantly by her side?

She supposes it’s about time she finds out.

Chapter End Notes

I love these gay disasters.

I'm sorry this took so long; real life has been kicking my ass and some of this interlude just did not want to get written. Thankfully, progress is being made on chapter eight and it hopefully won't take so long for it to be released. Thanks again to my coauthor, who was so patient and kind and reassured me when I wanted to throw my computer out the window and never write another word again.

In other news, the best way to avoid becoming a delicious, succulent bottle of blood wine is to leave a review. So. I mean, you can risk it.... or.... you could leave a review. Your call ;).

As ever, thank you for reading.
Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 2014 song of the same name by Foster the People. There is some pretty nasty homophobic bullying in this chapter, but it's not explicitly shown.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

November 2001

Bev is pretty sure she’s losing her mind.

The other day while looking for prey in a bar she thought she saw the boy she turned by accident hanging out with a small pack of human friends. He left with them before she could get a good look at him. Of course, him being there would be impossible. He would’ve starved to death in those caverns by now, surely.

Unless he got out.

That can’t be, she tells herself. She can’t sense him anymore, so that either means he’s dead or someone taught him how to shut out a sire, and given that rogue vampires tend to be lone wolves, that wouldn’t make any sense.

Sometimes she dreams about him finding her. Of Cassandra learning the truth and sending her to the pit with that crazy freak Ashley to be flayed alive. Of Frances’ ghost, burning and melting, dragging her into hell once Cassandra is done punishing her for sparing a rogue.

Bev spits. How pathetic. Only children are scared by nightmares.

If Tamika were around she’d wax poetic about nightmares like them having nightmares, but Tamika’s been ignoring her lately, doting on her stupid fledgling and being all soft, as if they hadn’t all learned their lesson about what being soft with a fledgling would do. Bev smiles at the memory of Beth’s pained face when Cassandra told them the news of Sam’s flight. Served her right. Beth’s too spineless to be Cassandra’s second, just as Frances was too rigid. She doesn’t know why Cassandra hasn’t had Beth executed yet for her weakness.

It’s so fucking unfair. Bev has been by Cassandra’s side since the old days, but she’s never been rewarded for her service. Meanwhile Beth broke a half a dozen rules for her little girlfriend over the years and she gets respect, attention, adoration; everything that should be hers, damn it. Bev’s worked too hard to have to play second fiddle to some bleeding-heart traitor-fucking queer; she doesn’t care how smart Beth is.

Bev hears a little girl’s laugh and looks up. She’s been strolling through some cutesy outdoor mall, looking for shoppers whose loot she can make off with after she’s done draining them dry. She follows the sound of the girl’s voice, keeping to the shadows until she sees a young father and his little tyke walking out of the cinema in the center of the mall. Bev hides behind a potted palm and
listens as the two make their way across the plaza, flanked by other families heading for their cars. The little brat this guy has with him laughs at the ducks in the central plaza fountain, and throws them some popcorn crumbs, which miss pretty spectacularly.

“What was your favorite part of the movie, honey?” The dad, a yuppie by the looks of his dark blue blazer, white shirt and dark slacks, had a handsome face with a tiny amount of stubble that she could make out as he got closer. She wouldn’t mind having a dance with him before cutting his throat. The only problem is the kid, who’s wearing some stupid t-shirt with a dog on the front and holding hands with her father.

“I liked the, the lizard guy!”

“Randall? But he was the bad guy!”

“But he was cool!”

The dad laughs at that and lifts the girl onto his shoulders. The girl squeals with delighted laughter. She’s small and light, with some of her baby fat still on her bones, and Bev guesses she’s around four or five years old.

Her stubby little legs won’t carry her away fast enough once she finishes her dad.

Bev walks out from her hiding place, rounding the fountain and giving herself enough time to conjure up some crocodile tears before facing the man and his daughter.

“P-please,” Bev sobs, “you have to help me! My son… I can’t find my son!” The man’s face softens in concern while the girl gives her a suspicious look. Little brat. Bev can’t wait to wipe that look off her little face.

“It’s alright, ma’am, just slow down,” the father says calmly. “Where did you last see your son? If he’s on foot, he can’t have gone far.”

“I, uh—oh, god, I—we were down by the alley between the Gap and the Old Spaghetti Factory. He must h-have seen somebody’s dog or—I turned, I turned around for one second and he was gone…” She adds a couple of panicked sobs for good measure.

“Don’t worry, ma’am, I’m sure we’ll find him,” the father says, a kind smile on his face. “Let’s start at the alley then.”

She leads them to the alley, trying to hide a smile as they walk into this quiet, under populated area. Most of the shoppers are gone by now, back in their cars. The man and his daughter head into the alley after her.

“Is this where you last saw your son?” The man asks.

“Yes,” Bev says slowly. The little girl hides behind her father, looking at her with wide eyes. Bev rounds on them, taking the father’s wrist in a flash and twisting it. He cries out. “And it will be the last place you see your daughter.”

The little girl screams. Bev knees the father in the groin and throws him aside, diving for the girl. She runs, but Bev catches her with ease, lifting her by the arm.

“Heard you were watching that movie about monsters, little girl,” Bev mocks, bearing her fangs. “Well, I am a monster.” She grins with delight when the little girl squeals in horror. Bev is about to tear into the brat’s throat when the man barrels into her with all his strength, causing Bev to drop the
kid to the ground. She curses and grabs the man by the throat, digging her nails into the thin flesh. The man struggles while the girl curls into a ball, letting out strangled sobs.

“S-sweetie—run,” the father says. Beads of blood form around the place where Bev’s nails dig in. Bev turns on the kid, still frozen with fear, and the father breaks free and tries to wrestle her to the ground. “Please, run…” Bev growls with frustration and slams him into the wall, slicing his jugular with a slash of her manicured nails. “E—E—Emily, run!”

Bev snarls and tears out the man’s throat with her teeth. He struggles and gurgles as hot, hearty blood fills Bev's aching stomach. He tastes divine; so much so that she loses herself in devouring him and forgets the child is even there. By the time he stops moving, the kid, Emily, has already taken off, and is probably screaming her head off. Chasing her would almost certainly lead her into a crowd full of too many witnesses to silence.

What a shame.

Bev licks her lips, savoring the taste of this would-be Good Samaritan, and heads off into the darkness before the girl can lead the police to her papa’s corpse. It’s probably for the best that she doesn’t eat the kid. Cassandra’s always been touchy about hurting kids. If someone catches you drinking a child’s blood, the very best you can hope for is a month in the pit.

Well. What Cassandra doesn’t know won’t hurt her.

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September 2014

For a full year after Emily’s father was murdered, Emily did not speak to anyone, not even her mother. Most of her father’s life insurance money was split between going toward paying bills and sending Emily from therapist to therapist, each one trying and failing to get through to her. When she finally did start speaking again, it was slowly, first to her mother, and then to the doctor at the children’s hospital who’d been the only one able to finally sift through the grief, trauma and unusually high intelligence to find the girl mired in the middle. In an attempt to preserve her sanity, Emily had managed to repress those terrible memories, recalling only vague, blurred shadows of chaos when she thought of her father’s death.

Emily missed a year of school because of her trauma. She had to take kindergarten again, keeping shyly to the corners for most of the year and coming home to her mother’s pale face and worry lines as bills piled up. The day they had to move into the city neighborhoods, Emily’s mother tried to make it a game. She read her Goodbye House and carried Emily on her back as she moved boxes of furniture into the moving truck. Their new apartment was cramped and tiny, with peeling paint and the faint skittering of rats. The sounds and the smell made her nightmares worse, and her mother couldn’t afford to take her to a therapist. The only solace she had for years were the books she borrowed from the school library. When she read about boy wizards and demigods and talking animals, she wasn’t some damaged little girl; she could live in fantastical worlds and have magical powers and be anyone, anyone, except herself.

As it turns out, all that throwing herself into school and academia turned out to be a pretty good thing, since it earned her a slew of scholarships to one of the nicer private schools in the area. Emily’s mother was ecstatic about the whole thing, even volunteering to drive her the long commute
to the Palos Verdes Academy. Ever since then, she and her mother have gotten up at ungodly hours of the morning to get her to school and then drive to her job across town. Emily doesn’t love it here, this place full of old money and adolescent entitlement, but seeing her mother work so hard to make her life a little better makes her want to try as hard as she can to make the most of her time here.

Thankfully, she’d hardly the only scholarship student. There’s Matt, a cheerful middle class boy with a generous sports scholarship. There’s Jason, the sweet level-headed kid who’s always paired with her for exams. There’s another girl too, Katie, though she hardly needed the scholarships she got. She and Emily have only spoken a few times, but Emily can’t seem to find the end of things about her she admires. She’s beautiful, intelligent, eloquent and quick with a witty comeback. She’s got long auburn hair and hazel eyes that Emily kind of wants to get lost in. It’s the kind of thing you don’t talk about around here if you can avoid it, but she’s managed to let her crush slip to Matt and to Jason, and they, at least, have been pretty good about it.

As long as no one else here knows, she’ll be okay. These rich fucks hunt down anyone different and publicly flay them, but she’s gotten pretty good at keeping her head down.

They won’t be due for another three months, but Emily has already started writing her college essays in earnest. She’s aiming as high as circumstances allow; it would be great to get into an Ivy, but it’s more likely that less reputable schools will be willing to offer the sort of generous scholarships she needs to get in and not bury her family in debt. She’s busy emailing a copy of one of her college drafts to herself from a computer in the school’s library when Jason plunks down on the chair beside her. Emily looks up.

“Jason?”

“So. Homecoming's coming right up.”

“It is.”

“You...gonna ask anyone?”

Emily shrugs.

“I guess maybe I’ll go with Matt. As friends, you know.”

Jason raises an eyebrow.

“You don’t think people would be weird about it? After what happened with...”


“I mean,” Jason says. “You could always ask Katie.”

Emily feels her face get hot.

“I...n-no. There’s no way. She’s super straight, right?”

“I dunno,” Jason says. “Only one way to find out, right? I know she’s not with anyone right now, so why not just ask her? The worst she could say is no.”

“Jason. There are a lot worse things she could say than ‘no’.”

Jason just laughs.
“Aw, come on, Em. It’s the twenty-first century. What are you so afraid of?”

“I...Jason, look. It’s senior year. I’m so close. We’ll all be out of here and then, and then I can be whoever I want but right now, I don’t want to stand out any more than I already do. Alright?”

“Okay,” Jason sighs. “Just...keep it in mind. You shouldn’t feel like you have to hide anymore.”

“I wouldn’t have to if the world wasn’t full of assholes.”

Jason laughed.

“Good point.” He pats her back. “It’ll get better. Most colleges are pretty liberal, yeah? You’ll be surrounded by gays. It’ll be your own little lesbian heaven.”

Emily snorts.

“Not sure about that. But thanks.” She turns to look at him. “You still good for Friday?”

Jason pulls a guilty face.

“Uh, yeah. About that…” He looks away. “My friend’s got a piano solo thing that night and she only just told me.”

“Jason, we’ve been planning this for months!”

“Yeah, but she sprung it on me! And we’ve been friends for years and this is like a major thing and —”

“It’s fine, I get it,” Emily says, feeling dejected and a little anxious. The place she and Jason were planning to go is not a place you’d want to go without backup. “I...I guess I won’t go either then.”

“What? But you’ve been wanting this so long,” Jason says. “Don’t let me stop you. You should go. Have a good time. Lord knows you deserve one given how hard you work.”

“Do you...do you think it’ll be safe?”

“Of course,” Jason says. “As long as you’re smart. Which you always are.” The way he says that, almost reverently, makes Emily a little uncomfortable, but she appreciates the compliment all the same.

“Okay. I’ll try not to die,” she tells him. “If I do, lay my body on the front steps of Harvard and demand they accept me posthumously.”

“Your ghost will be valedictorian.”

“Damn straight.”

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The party is in a warehouse in a run down part of the port district. Emily gets there on a ramshackle city bus, sitting alone while old women and bored young men look anywhere but at each other. By the time the bus finally pulls up to the stop, she feels nervous and cranky despite the alcohol already in her bloodstream. She has a feeling there’s going to be plenty of booze and drugs at this party, some of it so illegal that being caught with it will earn you an instant life sentence. If her mother
knew where she was right now, she’d die on her feet. But Emily’s mother will be asleep for most of tomorrow, exhausted from a long week of work, so Emily can’t say she’s particularly worried. Besides, she’s been working so hard lately, busy with college applications and homework and honor society and band. She deserves to let go for a little while.

Right?

She’s pregamed and is nursing a pleasant buzz as she heads to the grimy side door, where a bored looking woman with short hair so blonde it’s almost white stands waiting for guests. She gives Emily a once-over.

“You lost?”

Emily bites back a retort and instead replies, calmly and clearly:

“Cassandra wants to see me.”

The woman nods.

“Alright. Come on in, then.”

The heavy door opens and Emily is immediately assaulted with bright lights and thrumming music, too distorted with vibrations and drowned out by drunken yelling to tell what the song actually is. Emily slips inside, feeling like a kitten in a den full of lions. She grasps at her necklace, a little silver locket her father left her in his will, and rubs the back of the pendant with her thumb for good luck, the way she always does before a test or an interview. The woman closes the door behind her and Emily blinks, slowly adjusting to the assault on her senses.

The warehouse is smaller than it looked on the outside. All of the crates and boxes have been cleared away to make a dance floor, where people dance and grind together. Emily can see at the front, a girl is toying with the sound system, mixing the songs and smirking as the crowd cheers and sings drunkenly along. A little ways away from the floor is a makeshift bar, where a scary-looking butch girl with a sharp bob and an open flannel over a black tank top doles out drinks to men who grin like wolves.

Emily thinks about leaving, but that would just make her a coward. She steels herself and presses forward, heading straight for the bar. At times like this, a little liquid courage is essential.

The bartender gives her a hard look as she approaches. So much for personable service.

“C-can I have a drink?” Emily asks, hating herself for stuttering. The bartender raises and eyebrow.

“Past your bedtime, isn’t it, kid?”

“Ugh, come on, it’s not like any of this is even legal,” Emily whines. “Just gimme a beer.”

The bartender looks her full in the face.

“Go home, kid. This isn’t where people like you should be. It’s dangerous.”

“I know that,” Emily retorts. “Do you think I’d be dumb enough to come here if I didn’t think about the risks?”

“If you thought about the risks and came here anyway that makes you even dumber,” the bartender replies. “Go. Home.”
Emily rolls her eyes and flips her the bird before storming off. She stalks onto the dance floor, watching as a big, brawny man covered in tattoos dances clumsily along with a pretty, bespectacled girl who could have been the bartender’s twin. She gyrates and sways gracefully as he tries to keep up, and then, just as the song ends, she takes off and leaves him looking bitter and confused in the middle of the floor. Emily figures this guy has had enough rejection tonight to give up trying, so she takes a chance and walks up to him, holding out a small wad of cash that she dug out of her wallet.

“Hey,” she says. “Can you buy me a beer?”

The guy sighs like this is the most inconvenient thing anyone has ever asked of him. He snatches the money out of her hand and Emily half suspects that he’s about to walk right off with it, but she’s in no position to stop him. She sighs, feeling a little awkward in the middle of a crowded dance floor, and is about to sit down and wait for the guy when she feels the ghost of a touch on her arm. She turns, surprised, to find a beautiful girl with long blonde curls and a sexy black tube top that gives Emily an almost voyeuristic view of her cleavage. Emily blushes when she sees that, and the pretty girl laughs, a crystal note in the humid air.

“Dance with me!” she says, and takes Emily’s hands in her own. Before Emily can say anything they’re close together, swaying to the beat of the rhythm, the other girl grinding against her and smiling coyly as she and Emily get closer and closer. Timidly, Emily lets the girl get close and plant a kiss to her lips, sweet and seductive, and Emily practically melts into her as the other girl gets more aggressive, hands wandering across her shirt, peppering her neck and jaw in soft kisses. Emily exhales, wondering if she died at some point in this club and now she’s in heaven.

“Jess! Come here for a sec!” she hears someone call, and the girl untangles herself from Emily, looking apologetic. She leans in one last time and whispers in Emily’s ear.

“Stay right there.”

The girl wanders off to talk to her friend and Emily’s left standing there, dazed and happy, genuinely happy, for the first time in a while. The world around her seems a little quieter, a little subtler, and she wonders if she can get this lovely girl’s number.

“Hey.”

The guy’s voice startles her and Emily jumps, seeing the guy standing behind her, holding a red solo cup and staring down at her.

“Got your beer.”

Emily thanks him, taking a swig from the drink and nearly gagging at the taste. To her surprise, the man doesn’t leave. He just watches her for a second before getting closer, his eyes gleaming.

“Well?” he says. “Aren’t you gonna thank me?”

“I did,” Emily says. The guy leans in, grabbing her ass and pulling her close, a crocodile grin on his face.

“That wasn’t the kind of thanks I had in mind, sweetheart.”

Emily feels a mix of surprise and hatred overcome her, and she slams her knee into the guy’s crotch as fast and hard as she can. The guy lets out a grunt of pain and shock, and she wrenches herself out of his grasp, taking advantage of his pain to slam her fist into his jaw. The guy falls backward from the force of it, landing square on his back.
Emily looks up from him to find that the surrounding dancers are staring at her. The creepy men, the eerily beautiful girls, and Jess, lovely Jess, looking right at her, intrigued. Emily backs away from them, feeling exposed and stupid, and walks over to the corner, nursing her drink as the lights and music swell and crash like waves. Her head pounds as she forces more of the vile beer into her system. It’s pretty embarrassing that she’s already starting to feel drunk after one cup of beer. She tries to stare at a fixed point to get her bearings, and finds the point sliding across her vision as the lights burn bright in her eyes and the music thunders in her ears.

Her stomach turns over and she vomits in between her legs, falling on her butt when she tries to back away from the puddle of sick. She sees a dark blur in her vision, and then feels someone tug her roughly up on her feet.

“Alright, kid. I warned you. Out you go.”

“What? F-f-u-uck OFF. I wasn’t the one causing shit. I just finished it.”

The bartender is not amused. She grabs Emily’s shoulders and lifts her as effortlessly as someone carrying a sleeping kitten. For a moment, Emily’s thrown by this girl’s absurd strength. Emily’s not exactly heavy by most people’s standards, but this girl is acting like she’s made of cotton balls. Emily struggles uselessly in the bartender’s grasp until the woman finally throws her out the door of the club, where Emily lands on her ass yet again.

“Go sober up, kid,” the bartender calls.

“SUCK MY DICK!” Emily replies, eloquently and gracefully, like a fucking lady. The bartender rolls her eyes and goes back into the club. The bouncer snorts with amusement and follows her inside.

Emily gets to her feet, dusting herself off and swaying a bit. Her head is killing her, and everything is spinning and swirling a lot more than one drink should make things swirl and spin. Emily fumbles with her phone, trying to text and then giving up when her fingers won’t spell anything coherent, and calls Matt instead.

She hopes he’s not asleep.

---------

Buuuuuuuuuuuuuuu.

“What the…”

Buuuuuuuuuuuuu

“Ah, what the hell?” Matt mumbles, raising his sorry head from the pillow. He blinks back sleep from his eyes, his head all fuzzy and groggy. He looks outside. It’s pitch black out there. Why the hell would he set his alarm when it’s still dark out?

It takes him a good three seconds to realize the noise isn’t an alarm, but his phone. He’s too late though. His phone stops ringing, whoever it was on the other end obviously giving up. Thank god. He likes that he doesn’t have to get up before 7am these days.
His head sinks back into his pillow. He’s about slip back into unconsciousness when…

BUUUUUUUUUZZZZZZZ

“Aw, goddamnit,” he mumbles, fumbling around for his phone. Whoever this is better be dying.

“Uh, hello?”


“What...Em?”

“Oh, finally, what took you so long, you big lug? I’m freezing my ass off here.”

He gets up, head still swimming, but there’s something in Emily’s voice that prods him awake.

“Em, what’s up? Where are you?”

“God, some shit hole,” she says, and in the distance, Matt can hear a truck honk. He frowns, suddenly feeling extremely alert. Why is she out on the street in the middle of the night?

“I was at that party. Jason was meant to come too but he bailed and I went anyway and I was having a really great time before Ellen Degeneres’ evil twin kicked me out. Now I’m stuck.”

“Okay,” he’s already moving, sliding out of bed and looking for his shoes. “Where are you?”

“Uhhhhhhhh….ummmmmm.”

“Em?”

“Jeez, the crapastic part of town, between 52 and 44th street in Lincoln Heights. Ugh. Can you come get me? Please please please please please?”

“Okay, I’m coming,” he says, pulling on his shoes and heading out. It’s not safe to be outside at night at the best of times, but Emily is currently cooling her heels in one the Los Angeles’ shittest suburbs.

Matt grins. Good thing he only lives fifteen minutes away.

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He’s pretty sure he’s guilty of about twenty separate traffic violations but he doesn’t care, speeding down the highway as quickly as he can.

He’s close. He slows down, trying to get his bearings. It’s nothing but old warehouses around here, with a small smattering of shops, a run down area in an unloved part of town that’s definitely seen better days.

He’s about to call Emily again when he spots her, sitting on a bench. Her mouth is moving, but no
one’s around…

Matt blanches. Is Emily talking to a pole?
He speeds towards her.

“Em? Oh thank god, get in.”

“Matt! Oh thank god you’re here, I was majorly bumming out that you weren’t going to come.”

It’s freezing, and he can’t help but notice she’s wearing skin tight jeans, a tight top that exposes her midriff, and a flimsy jacket. Her teeth should be chattering.

He brings the car to a stop and gets out, frowning as he looks at her closely. She’s sweaty, and her pupils are huge.

“Em… did you take something?”

“No! I had one lousy beer. It was disgusting, and so, so strong. It was probably foreign. Jason says you can get really strong beers overseas. Well, if overseas beer tastes like that, give me an all-American brew. Like, how is drinking something that tastes like ass supposed to be sophisticated?”

Matt shoots her a tight smile, trying to stifle his anger. Emily is sweaty, babbling and slurring her words. No beer on the planet would do that. He’d like to get his hands on whoever spiked her drink.

First thing first though. He needs to get Emily out of here.

“Come on,” he says, opening the door and trying to coax her inside. “Let’s go.”

“I’m coming, I’m coming, s’just, the world is just spinning a bit, woah…”

He spots an old man peering out from the doorway of his 24/7 convenience store. He narrows his eyes suspiciously at Matt, as if he’s some criminal.

“Em, you’re making a scene.”

“No, I’m not. You are. Ugh, Matt, when is the last time you cleaned your car? It smells like Old Spice.”

“Come on,” he says, guiding her into the backseat, releasing a breath he didn’t even know he was holding once she was safely inside. “I think this is enough excitement for one night. Let’s go.”

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“Mattyyyyyy, have y’ever looked at a pretty girl and been like, ‘holy cannoli, what a fuckin’ DIAMOND’?”

Matt keeps his eyes on the road as Emily goes on and on about the party, gushing over some pretty girl she met on the dance floor and throwing in the occasional bitter comment about the surly bartender that kicked her out.

“I totally coulda gotten her number, Matt, but then fuckin’ Xena had to throw my ass on the pavement just because I was protecting myself from some dickweed who grabbed my ass.”
Matt’s pulse quickens at the mention of a man trying to hurt his friend like that.

“That guy, did he give you anything?”

“Mmmm. I gave him money to give me a drink and he wanted, like, fucking interest for it. Ass interest. Asstrest.” Emily laughs at her own joke. Matt’s grip tightens on the steering wheel.

“Em, we should get you to the hospital.”

“What? Nononononono. Matt, if people find out where I was my mom’ll kill me! ‘Sides, we don’t have insurance that’ll cover shit like this. I’ll just tough it out.”

“I don’t think this is something you should try to tough out, Em.”

Emily just laughs.

“Matty, have you never been drunk? C’mon.”

“Em—”

“Matt,” Emily cuts him off, “I can’t go to the doctor, okay? It’s too much money. I can’t do that to my mom. I just, just can’t.”

Matt looks at Emily in the rearview mirror. She’s staring at him with wide, pleading eyes. Her face is flushed and her pupils are still huge. He can’t just send her home like this.

“Okay, fine,” Matt sighs. “But I’m keeping you at my place tonight, okay? My parents are nurses, so if worst comes to worse, you know.”

Emily giggles.

“Hehe. Sleepover. C-can we order pizza?”

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As far as lower-middle-class Los Angeles houses go, Matt’s place is pretty standard. He’s pretty lucky, a lot of the kids he grew up live in tiny, decrepit apartments with bullet holes in them. Matt’s house, on the other hand, is a double story, plain brick property on a nondescript street. The only distinguishing feature is a large, gnarled oak tree that’s conveniently situated right outside his window.

Not that he’d trust Emily to climb it in this condition.

“But I mean, you would have loved this girl, Matt. I mean...sheesh.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe she wouldn’t have been my type.”

“Ugh, please. You would’ve been drooling all over her. Especially when you saw her,” she makes a ‘boobs’ gesture, and Matt is so surprised he almost drops her.

“Ow, Matt! Can you hold me up, please?”
“Yikes. Sorry.”

“Why does your house have so many stairs?”

“Em, shhhh.”

Matt carries her, bridal style, up the steps to his room, trying his best to keep his voice down. Emily keeps talking about this mystery girl at full volume and she gets huffy and offended when he asks her to keep her voice down. He prays no one else wakes up. His sister would never let him live it down.

Once they get to his room, Emily quiets, stumbling over to Matt’s bed and flopping down on the mattress, looking utterly drained.

“Mmm...so soft…”

Matt chuckles.

“Guess I’m not gonna have much luck getting you to move from there.”

Emily mumbles something unintelligible in response. She looks peaceful, almost happy, lovestruck and drunk and curled up on his tiny twin bed. She opens one eye and looks up at him.

“Matt, do you think we’ll still be friends after we graduate?”

It’s such a non sequitur that Matt isn’t sure what to say. He blinks at her for a second, surprised by the sudden change of subject. Emily is almost certainly going to college. Some school will take one look at her incredible grades and test scores and essays and give her a full ride, he’s sure of it. Matt’s not so sure about himself. He’d been so sure for so long that he’d get an athletic scholarship somewhere, but then…

“Of course,” Matt says. “Even if you go off to Harvard or wherever, I’ll bother you on Snapchat all the time. There’s no escaping it.” He grins. “I’ll make sure you always have someone to annoy you.”

Emily smiles sleepily.

“You’re so cute, Matt. I wish you could come with me…”

Matt looks away, toward the bulletin board full of pictures of him and his old football team, the dresser where his old trophies sit, gathering dust.

“Me too.”

Emily drifts off to sleep while Matt gets out an old sleeping bag and snuggles into it, listening to the rhythmic sound of Emily’s breathing. In the dark his room feels smaller, stranger, steeped in shadows that he always mistook for monsters as a kid, but Emily’s presence is comforting. They’ve known each other since they started high school, and even now, Emily’s still the only person Matt’s age that he feels he can drop his guard around. She’s smart and dependable and sometimes harsh but always right. And even if she doesn’t admit it, there’s a soft, caring heart under that iron exterior. He feels privileged to know her, even if she pulls stupid stunts like this sometimes.

He’s going to miss her when she leaves. He hopes she’ll still think of him.
“Matt! Matt, have you seen it?”

Emily’s shaking him gently, her voice soft but urgent, Matt grumbles and rubs his eyes with his free hand.

“What?”

He opens his eyes to find Emily, pale but otherwise looking better than last night, kneeling by his sleeping bag. She’s wearing the same clothes she fell asleep in, with Matt’s old letterman jacket thrown haphazardly over her shoulders.

“My necklace! It’s gone! I, I had it last night, I swear!”

Matt sits up, rubbing his temple and cracking his neck. When he glances up at the clock on his bedside table he sees it’s about eight in the morning.

“Em?”

“Matt, it’s not here.”

“Are you sure you were wearing it last night?”

“Of course I’m sure, you think I’m not aware of what clothes I wear?” she snaps.

He winces. He’s all fuzzy and lethargic, a feeling he’s unused to and definitely doesn’t like. He spent an hour hovering over Emily last night, concerned whatever shit she put in her system could suddenly stop her breathing.

“Matt,” Emily says, hovering over him like an enraged wasp. “I have to go back there.”

“Em…”

“You can come with me if you want, but either way, I’m leaving now.”

“Okay,” he sighs, rubbing his face tiredly. They’ll travel quicker there together. “Lemme grab my coat.”

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Unlike last night, Emily doesn’t say a word on the drive over, staring grimly out the window, mouth drawn in a thin, angry line. Matt’s not the most perceptive guy in the world, but even he knows he would risk getting his head bashed in if he tried to make small talk.

He can understand why she’s so angry though. They are probably on a wild goose chase. He’s not sure whether they’ll be able to find one little necklace in a big warehouse, and that’s assuming someone hasn’t found it and taken it already. Although, even if this is futile, he admits he’d like to see this mythical place that serves cheap drinks and where the staff are all young, impossibly good-looking women. He smirks. Maybe next time he can score an invite.

He slows down. They’re close to where he picked up Emily, but the area looks nothing like what he
remembered.

There’s a crowd waiting, cordoned off behind police tape, gawking as dozens of detectives canvass the scene. Matt’s mouth falls open as he sees at least four or five people exit the warehouse, dressed head-to-toe in hazmat suits. Ambulances are there too, but ominously, there lights aren’t flashing.

Matt feels his stomach sink down to his shoes.

“Crap,” he mutters. Growing up on the east side of LA means he’s seen a lot of crime scenes, but nothing like this.

He parks a little ways away, but before he can say anything, Emily has wrenched his door open, running out before his car has even come fully to a stop.

She’s already talking to an older lady he recognises as a customer who comes into the diner where he works.

“How many bodies?” Emily’s voice is high and panicky.

“I’m not sure dear. I overheard they’re all dead.”

“All dead?”

“I’ve heard there’s at least ten bodies in there,” another woman chimes in.

Matt feels a wave of revulsion wash over him as he sees paramedics wheel out two dead bodies, their identities hidden underneath crisp white sheets.

He feels as awful as Emily looks. Two men in handcuffs are led out, looking confused and sickened themselves.

“Em,” he says, noticing the news reporters starting to arrive at the scene. He reaches for her hand “We should…”

“Yeah,” Emily says, trying to sound composed but Matt can hear the tremor in her voice. “Let’s get out of here.”

He takes her to his work, a nearby diner that’s busier than normal. Word of the massacre spreads fast. As soon as he’s sat them down and ordered them both a strong coffee, he’s heard that everyone who was at the illegal, underground party is dead, and two people, rumored to be part of a local gang, have been arrested.

When the coffees arrives Emily just stares at the tiny plume of steam rising up from the mug, looking pale and shellshocked.

His instincts say he should be quiet, let Emily process the trauma, but before he can help it words begin to stumble from his mouth.

“Em….this is so... You were…. that could have been you in there.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Emily says, although her words lack bite. “I’m real lucky.”

“You are… those creeps…. if you hadn’t called me....”

“Yeah? What makes me so special? Just cause I can’t hold my liquor I get to live? And Jess doesn’t?” She closes her eyes. “You have no idea. She was…. glorious. I couldn’t believe
freaking….. Aphrodite was coming to dance with me...and now she’s gone.”

He doesn’t know how to respond. He’s not clever like her. No matter how hard he strives he can never find the right words to say.

“And, say goodbye to the necklace,” Emily snaps, pushing her untouched coffee away. “It’s probably at the bottom of some mangy evidence bag.”

“We could go to the police and retrieve it?’”

“Are you kidding me, Mr Meat-for-Brains? You want to let the police know I was there? So my mother can ground me until now and graduation?’”

“Em…”

“It’s just my luck, I go out one time and this happened. I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“Emily…” he says. She looks tense, angry, reading to explode.

“We could buy you a new necklace? You deserve a sweet-ass present for becoming valedictorian…”

“Are you serious?” she snarls, genuine anger sparking in her eyes. She gets up and glares down at him. She has a remarkable ability to make him feel small. “If I could replace that necklace, you think I’d have thrown a fucking fit over it? Do you really think I’m that shallow?”

“Em….of course not…”

“Whatever,” she snaps. “I’m getting out of here.”

“Hey,” He gets up, wanting desperately now to make amends. “Let me drive you.”

“I’ll take the bus,” and with she turns, head down, striding out of the diner like it’s on fire.

Matt slumps down in his chair. He knows from bitter experience there’s no use trying to reason with Emily when she gets like this. His instinct is to reach out and comfort her, to take her in his arms and protect her, but she’s never wanted that from him. He thinks maybe she doesn’t want that from anyone.

He looks out the window and wonders how strange it is to be sitting in the middle of a busy diner but still feel so utterly alone.

As soon as she gets into class on Monday, Jason grabs her into a fierce hug.

“Emily! Jesus, I was so scared. I heard on the news about the party, I—”

“Relax, loser,” Emily says, returning the hug. “Takes more than that to bring me down.”

“I wish I could have been there,” Jason says. “To protect you.”

Emily laughs. She pulls out of the hug, trying to ignore the disappointed look on Jason’s face.
“I don’t think it would’ve made much difference. The news said the people in there were ripped apart. Whatever the killers were on, neither of us woulda stood a chance against it.”

“Well, still, good to see you’re in one piece,” Jason says warmly. “Would have been awkward if you’d died right after I set up a date for you.”

“What?”

The bell rings and the students around them file to their desks. Jason winks.

“Tell you after class.”

Grumbling, Emily slumps down at her desk and pulls out her binder. After the disaster at the warehouse she doesn’t think she can handle any more surprises in her life. It’s hard to focus as Mr. Milton goes on about Bram Stoker and the rise of gothic fiction in Europe. The events of the weekend are still fresh and loud in her head, the thought of that poor girl Jess getting killed in a drugged-up massacre playing over and over in her head. What gets her, really, is that this terrible story will cycle through the news for one damn week and then everyone will move on to some new crime or atrocity. Some new mass shooting or war crime or political scandal. The world never runs out of awful.

Emily’s never been sure why people clamor so much over vampires and other stupid fictional monsters when the real world is scary enough on its own.

After the bell rings she pulls Jason aside.

“Alright. What ‘date’?”

Jason smirks in the foolhardy, overconfident way that only teenage boys smirk.

“Well, okay. It’s not a ‘date’ date, but I did kind of tell Katie that I was gonna have us all go out for dinner and a movie. As friends. Then halfway through I ‘conveniently’ have to leave, and you can go in for the kill.”

Emily snorts.

“That’s the most ridiculous shit I’ve ever heard,” Emily tells him. “Besides, I’m way too busy, and —”

“Em. She likes you.”

“I—what?”

“We were talking last night, like super late, right? And we were talking about people we were gonna ask to the dance and, well…”

“She mentioned me? But…but she’s not even gay, right?”

“I dunno, Em, she sounded pretty gay to me.”

Emily feels something in her chest seize up. She’s briefly taken by the notion that this could be some kind of cruel trick, but Jason’s never lied to her before, and she doesn’t know why he’d do it now.

“I…I dunno…”

“Think about it,” Jason says, his tone kind, his face his usual dopey, understanding face. He has no
reason to lie. Right? “We’re meeting this Saturday. Lemme know if you can make it.”

The warning bell rings and they run to their classes; Jason to AP Gov and Emily to AP Chemistry. She sits in the front of the class, taking notes on hydrogen bonding and molecular polarity while wondering why life had suddenly decided to throw eight thousand curveballs at once.

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When Jason said “dinner and a movie”, Emily imagined they’d be eating at a restaurant and going to the multiplex. She hates going out to movies normally, hates the dark cavernous theatres and the shitty popcorn and bloated outdoor malls attached to them, but the thought of watching a film with a pretty girl, especially Katie, eases her anxiety a bit.

But, as it turns out, “dinner and a movie” apparently means having some shitty delivery pizza and watching Netflix in Katie’s swanky game room. There’s a pool table, and a playstation, and the kind of sound system you find in upscale nightclubs. Emily has no idea what Katie’s parents do for a living, but apparently it’s enough to fill every room with expensive goodies and then some. The carpet is plush and soft, and the walls are lined with signed posters from rock concerts and Broadway shows. If you either really wanted to impress someone or make them feel like dirt compared to you, this room is where you’d take them, Emily thinks.

They’re watching some bad zombie flick when Jason announces that he has to head home early. Katie seems weirdly okay with being left alone in her basement with a girl she only knows in passing, but hey, maybe Jason was telling the truth after all. Emily watches as Jason walks out of the room, feeling strangely nervous. Not nervous in the way she expected to feel, with butterflies in her stomach and full of halting, stammering words, but nervous like she’s being watched. Evaluated.

Katie stretches out, flexing her toes and showing off her perfectly sculpted nails. Her legs are long and tan, well muscled from years of volleyball. Emily looks away, feeling like a voyeur. On the TV screen, a teenage girl reanimates as a zombie and bites her boyfriend’s face off. Not exactly romantic material.

“Emily? You okay?”

She looks up. Katie is looking at her with concern in her big hazel eyes. Emily finds it hard not to fall into them.

“Yeah, I…” She’s not sure she can hide it much longer. After the awful night at the club and the death of poor Jess, she’s starting to realize how fragile everything is. How everything could end in a second. She could have easily been one of the many killed in that club, having never done all of the many things she’d always figured she’d have time for. Jason’s right, she decides. She needs to live in the now and stop denying herself.

Katie looks at her expectantly.

The worst thing she can say is no.

Right?

“Katie,” Emily begins, “there’s something I have to tell you…”
Matt’s sitting in his darkened room, playing Madden on his half-busted old TV when he hears a knock at his window. He turns around and sees Emily, balancing precariously on the oak branch hanging by his roof, the light from his paused game reflecting strangely on her face. She looks furious and miserable in equal measure, and before he knows what he’s doing he’s opened the window. Emily climbs into his room without a word.

“Emily…?”

Emily doesn’t look at him as she flops down onto his bed. In the ensuing silence, he can hear her choke back a sob. Hesitantly, Matt sits down beside her and waits for her to speak. The silence stretches out in the dark. It’s only nine-thirty, but it feels like the whole world is asleep except for them.

“Emily…what happened? What’s wrong?”

“Wh-what’s wrong…?” Emily echoes, like she doesn’t understand the question. “What’s wrong? Nothing. Nothing’s wrong. Except tomorrow everyone’s gonna wake up and know that I’m a dyke.”

Matt feels the color drain from his face.

“What?”

“They got a video…it’s…it’s on video…”

“Emily, slow down, please. What video? What happened?”

Emily sniffles loudly and sucks in a breath. In the washed-out light of his TV, Matt can see tears starting to fall down Emily’s face. Emily never cries. For her to start crying, and so openly, something horrible must have happened to her.

“I…god, I was such a fucking idiot. They really—they led me right into their fucking—” Emily sighs, her breath hitching and shuddering. “I told Katie how I feel and—and—”

“She turned you down…?”

Emily laughs humorlessly. The sound is ragged and wet.

“Worse. She told me…exactly what she thinks of people like me. And then I hear Jason laughing, like this is the funniest fucking thing in the world, and I turn around and see him with his phone. Filming it.”

“Did…did they…?”

“They posted it everywhere. Every website with more than twelve fucking members got their own copy of ‘Creepy Lesbo Gets Roasted’.” She shakes her head and buries her face in her hands. “Everyone’s gonna know, Matt. Everyone at school, my teachers, everyone I try to get a job or a scholarship from, everyone. My life—my life is fucking over.”

Matt isn’t sure what to say. He never knows what to say, not when it really, truly matters. He puts a careful arm around Emily’s shoulders, relieved when she doesn’t brush it off, and pulls her close.
Emily shakes with sobs. Matt feels a dark coil of rage in his gut. To think that Jason, a boy Emily trusted, cared for as a friend, would hurt her like this, fills him with a fiery anger that makes his heart start to race. In a just world, Jason and Katie would both be expelled for this and the video taken down, but both of those kids are the children of major donors to the school. In all likelihood, they’ll get off scot free, and even if they didn’t, the damage would already be done.

“Em...Em, it’s gonna be okay.” He’s not even convincing himself, but Emily needs to hear it from someone, needs to know that there’s some way, any way, out of this.

“How is this gonna be okay?” Emily gasps. “I-I’m gonna be a l-laughing stock and everyone at school...I’ll never...my mom’s gonna know...”

“Em...”

“I was gonna tell her...one day...on my own terms, you know? B-but now she’s gonna see that her own kid is a—a—”

Emily can’t finish the sentence. She lets out a strangled keening sound and Matt holds her tighter, trying to keep his anger in check. He wants to break something, preferably Jason’s skull, that smug, two-faced sack of shit.

“I hate them,” Emily says, her voice low and raspy. “I never...I thought...what did I ever do to them? Why would Jason...? Fucking.....son of a bitch, I trusted him!”

Matt doesn’t say anything. He has a lot of ideas for getting an explanation out of Jason, none of them peaceful. Emily sighs, and leans her head on his shoulder.

“What do I do...? What do I do now?”

Matt wishes he had a good answer. He has no idea what he’d do in her situation. Then again, he’s already had his future taken away from him, but somehow, he’s still here. Emily’s stronger than he is. Surely she can do the same.

“Well, you can start by showing them that this didn’t beat you. You’re still gonna be valedictorian, and get into Harvard, and come graduation you can rub all that in their faces. Don’t let these assholes think they can break you, you know?”

Emily manages a little huff.

“Pfft, as if those idiots could break anything on purpose. If those bastards think they’re gonna see me lose my shit over their stupid fucking prank, they’ve got another thing coming, let me fucking tell you.”

Matt rubs Emily’s shoulder and listens as her breathing slowly steadies.

“I’ll always be here for you, Em. I’d never let anyone hurt you.”

Emily laughs and squeezes Matt’s free hand.

“I don’t need a knight in shining armor, you dork. I'll have you know I can take care of myself.”

“Oh, I get it, believe me,” Matt chuckles. “But even badass warrior women need friends.”

They hold each other in the dark for a while, Matt humming something tuneless as Emily slowly settles. After a while longer, she untangles herself from their hug and stands, looking sad and shaken.
beyond words, but determined.

“I should go,” Emily says. “Don’t want mom worrying.”

“Text me tomorrow, will ya?” Matt asks. “Just, you know, so I don’t worry.”

Emily rolls her eyes and smiles.

“Of course, big guy. I’m not planning on dying any time soon.”

She walks past him, towards the still-open window. Matt stands and is about to give her a lift when she pulls herself out the window on her own, balancing on the roof outside.

“Um, Matt?”

“Yeah?”

Emily doesn’t turn back to look at him.

“I’m sorry about the other day. I was being...high maintenance.”

Matt shrugs.

“Don’t worry about it, really,” he tells her. “It doesn’t even matter now. I just want you to be okay.”

“Thanks,” Emily says after a moment’s pause. “For everything.”

And with that, she clambers onto the nearby oak branch, down the tree, and out of sight.

While it’s not a long walk to Emily’s place from Matt’s, it’s still long enough for Emily to feel anxious and exposed. Girls like her really shouldn’t be walking alone in a place like this. Especially at night. Emily feels her stomach drop as she makes her way down the largely deserted streets, feeling once again like she’s being watched. She keeps to the streetlights and stares straight ahead, trying to keep as low a profile as possible.

Things only get worse as you move out of Matt’s comparatively less shitty neighborhood and into Emily’s. She moves quickly through the dirty streets, tuning out the sound of barking dogs and men and women screaming at each other in their thin-walled apartments. One day, she and her mom are going to get out of here, go live somewhere peaceful and safe and she’ll make sure her mother never has to work again.

She cuts through her neighborhood’s sad excuse for a park, and is about halfway through when she sees someone on a bench who is far too pretty and well dressed to be a local. When she gets closer, Emily can see the familiar blonde curls and dark, piercing eyes of—

“Jess?” Emily does a double take as she blurts out the name. Jess sits primly on the bench on front of her, smiling up at her like she’s in on a secret. There’s no mistaking it; this is the same girl, right down to the way she smiles, sweet and flirtatious, as Emily draws closer. “How the hell are you still alive?”
Jess ignores the question and instead pulls something small and silver out of her pocket.

“Is this yours?”

Emily stares at the little silver pendant at the end of a thin, delicate chain. A tiny onyx sits in the middle of the pendant. When she gets closer she can see the tiny chip in that onyx; the result of a fall when its owner was eleven. There’s only one necklace in the world like this one.

“My necklace,” she breathes. Jess holds it out and Emily takes it, bringing it close to her chest before carefully clasping it around her neck.

“Found it on the floor right after you got kicked out,” Jess says. “I went outside to look for you, but then—” She stops and looks at her feet. Her flirty confidence wanes, replaced with dulled horror and regret.

“The massacre,” Emily finishes for her.

“It...it was horrible. I could hear the screams from outside.”

Without knowing why she suddenly feels so safe with her, Emily moves onto the bench beside Jess, trying to provide some shred of comfort. Nervously, she touches her hand, and jerks back immediately. Jess’s skin is like ice. Jess looks up at her, a hint of amusement in her still troubled eyes.

“Sorry about that. Shoulda warned you.”

“You’re freezing,” Emily says dumbly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Jess says. “I get like that sometimes. It’s, like, a chronic...thing.” She looks at her.

“What about you? You seem upset.”

*You seem upset* is such a ridiculous understatement that Emily can’t help but laugh, the harsh, angry laugh that’s used when things really aren’t funny at all. She sighs and massages her temple. She definitely doesn’t have it in her to tell her full sob story again, but she has a feeling deflection will only make things worse, so she keeps it short.

“I don’t wanna get into it. Let’s just say some people are major fucking assholes.”

Jess raises her eyebrows, concerned but amused.

“Don’t I know it.”

Emily shrugs, not wanting to get all weepy in front of a relative stranger.

“Whatever. Least I got my necklace back.”


Emily blinks, a bit surprised by Jess’s intuition.

“I—yeah. It is. My dad gave it to me before he—” She stops, wondering why she would be so willing to divulge something so private to some random girl she met at a party, but judging by the look on Jess’s face, she knows exactly what Emily was about to say.

“Oh, Emily, I’m sorry. That sucks. My parents are gone too.”

“Yeah, it—” Emily says, then stops abruptly. “Wait. I never told you my name.”
Jess gives her a funny look, like she’s sizing her up.

“Don’t suppose you’ll believe me if I said it was a lucky guess.”

“How did you know where to find me? And why did you immediately assume this necklace was mine? How did you know I’d be out, taking a shortcut through this park, alone, tonight?” The questions tumble from Emily’s lips, one after another. She doesn’t know why she bothers, really, when every part of her mind is begging her body to run. Jess licks her lips. She gives Emily a look of triumphant, predatory glee. Something about the look on her stirs repressed memories locked deep inside her head, memories of her father’s desperate screams and a monstrous, impossible woman.

“Smart cookie. I like that,” Jess says. She grins, and Emily can see a pair of sharp white fangs where her canines should be. “I like you.”

Chapter End Notes

Here’s a vampiric spectacular, just in time (give or take a few weeks) for Halloween! Emily and Matt are going to be major players in this story now that we’re officially in the second half. That is, if Emily can avoid getting eaten! Emily was able to outwit a wendigo. Will she be able to do the same with a vampire? Tune in next time to find out! I’d like to thank my lovely co-author holeybubushka for writing this chapter with me (literally; we wrote it side by side on a Google doc). I am humbled and honored to work with a writer of her talent, creativity, and generosity.

As always, leave a comment if you liked it, and thanks for reading!
Damsel in Distress

Chapter Notes

(Title comes from the 2014 song of the same name by Neck Deep)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her breath exploding from her lungs, Emily runs for her life. Jess is maybe ten paces behind her, getting closer all the time. Emily ducks into a nearby alley, throwing bits of wood and garbage cans behind her in a feeble attempt to slow Jess down. Emily turns another corner and heads down an obscure back street, only to look behind her and find Jess still hot on her heels, an amused smirk on her face. No matter where Emily goes she can’t shake her. Emily has sore feet and an awful stitch in her side, but Jess doesn’t even look tired. Then again, if her ice cold skin and problematic dental situation are anything to go by, whatever Jess is, she’s definitely not human.

Emily runs to the end of an alley and clambers over a chainlink fence, muttering curses as the chainlinks cut her hands. On the other side is another short alley, and at the end a shallow canal. She doesn’t think she should chance it with those currents, even with a monster on her heels. When Jess gets to the fence, a few steps behind, she just casually rips the fence apart and walks through, as if the bent iron alloy were nothing but paper-mâché. She catches up, drawing close enough for Emily to see the delighted hunger in her dark, dark eyes.

Thinking fast, Emily grabs her phone out of her pocket as she runs, turning around just long enough to switch on the flashlight directly into Jess’s eyes. Jess screams and fumbles, covering her face and Emily doubles back, wheeling around and running past Jess. The light affected Jess more than it would for most people; maybe she has heightened senses or something; she can use that against her. Still, Emily figures her pursuer will only be stunned for a few seconds, so she runs on autopilot to the nearest fire escape and hoists herself up, trying to get as much distance between herself and this monster as possible.

The wrought iron stairs don’t quite reach the the roof but Emily manages to climb up there anyway, using loose bricks and concrete ledges as footholds. She flops onto the roof and is momentarily overwhelmed by the blood rushing to her head. Despite the adrenaline coursing through veins, her muscles ache from the exertion. She can’t keep this up for long.

She hears a sound below her, the sound of footsteps on metal, then feet on stone.

Emily looks over the edge of the building and sees Jessica, still smirking up at her, climbing from the fire escape up the side of the building like an enormous, gleeful spider, making short work on the footrests that had given Emily such trouble. Emily swallows a scream and hurries to the other side of the roof, searching desperately for a way down, or even onto the next roof. There’s a small green awning hanging on the side of the building across the alley, maybe ten feet away from her. It’s a longshot, but Emily did some gymnastics back in the day, before it got too expensive. She could probably manage it if she got a good start.

Probably.
Behind her, she can hear Jess’s voice, calm and steady, without a hint of tiredness in it.

“You look tired, honey. I can hear your heart pounding from all the way over here.”

“Really?” Emily pants. “Can you hear this?”

She grabs her phone again, this time switching on her alarm and turning it up full volume. Emily hurls it at Jess, who winces and staggers back, pressing a finger to her ear. Emily backs up while Jess recoils, getting a running start before charging over the roof, toward the awning on the building across the alley. Cold night air rushes past her face and through her hair as she extends her hands, grabbing for the awning—

—and missing.

Emily plummets to the earth, landing hard on her left leg. She hears the sickening crack before she feels anything. Her body crumples to the earth as her legs break underneath her, her back hitting the pavement, her head landing hard in the middle of a dirty puddle. For a moment, everything is soundless and heavy, her limbs stony and useless, her vision blacking out. Then the pain bleeds into her legs, white-hot and agonizing. It’s like being run through with heated iron and struck with a freezing hammer, all at the same time. Emily would scream if the wind hadn’t been knocked out of her. She doesn’t think she’s ever been in this much agony in her entire life.

Seconds later, out of the corner of her blurring view, she sees a dark shape drop soundlessly from the roof into the alley. The shape hangs over her head, all dark eyes and sharp teeth, and Emily closes her eyes, hiding her tears of pain and fear as best she can.

“That was fun,” Jess says, bending down to whisper in her ear. “We have got to do this again sometime.”

“G-get fucked, bitch,” Emily manages between pained breaths.

“Still feisty,” Jess says, sounding more impressed than anything else. Emily feels cold lips on her neck, soft and delicate, but carrying an unspoken threat within them. They move subtly as Jess speaks again, right up against her throat. “I won’t drag this out.”

Emily feels herself passing out from pain as Jess bites down hard on her neck. She’s grateful for it. The monster’s about to drain her dry, all alone in this dingy alleyway with no one to find her or know what happened to her, but at least she won’t feel it.

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By the time Beth’s sleek little Tesla pulls up beside the alleyway, Emily’s body is already starting to change. The broken bones in her legs are slowly fusing back together as the color drains from Emily’s sweaty face. She hopes Emily is still fully unconscious; turning is a hell of an ordeal, especially if you were injured beforehand. It’s a little perk of the change; almost any injury sustained within twenty-four hours of being turned will heal during the morphing process, even if those wounds would kill or maim you otherwise.

But that doesn’t make the change any less of a bitch to endure.

Beth stops the car and gets out, glancing from Jess to Emily and back to Jess with a growing look of
horror.

“Oh...oh my fucking god. Jess! What the fuck?”

“Uh, surprise?”

“Cass didn’t say you could go out and make a fledgling,” Beth says, staring at Emily like she’s never seen anything quite so terrifying. “We are never allowed to turn people without her explicit consent. Do you have any idea how much shit we’re in?”

“I...okay, so maybe I jumped the gun a bit, but don’t you think I deserve a fledgling after all this time? I mean, you got one after like six months, which is horseshit—”

“JESSICA! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?!”

Beside them, Emily stirs weakly, muttering something incomprehensible. Beth looks at Jess with a mixture of pity and anger.

“Jess, we have to kill her. Now.”

“No!” Jess begs. “Please, Beth. Please. She’s special. She’s...she needs someone right now. She needs us. She’s...she’s like us.”

That stops Beth cold. She of all people should know what it’s like to be shunned and hated for something she can’t control.

“Jess...I-I’m sorry, but—”

“Just give me a chance,” Jess says. “I can do this. I’m ready. Let me prove myself to Cassandra.”

“She’s not gonna like this, Jess.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” Jess says. “But if anyone can convince her, to, you know, bend the rules a bit, it’s you. She listens to you. She trusts your judgement.”

Beth shakes her head, but judging by that familiar furrowing of her eyebrows, Jess is winning her over.

“I can’t abuse my position just to do you a favor. You know that.”

Jess gives her the pleading, puppy-dog look she perfected during their time together. Even all these years later, Beth still isn't completely immune to it.

“Beth, please? Just this once? For me?”

Beth looks away, looks back, looks at her car, at Jess, at Emily. Then she sighs, and pinches the bridge of her nose.

“...Ugh. Fine. But you owe me for-fucking-ever. Got it?”

Jess grins and gives Beth a little mock salute.

“I owe you my unlife.”

“And I’ll remind you of it every day,” Beth grumbles, walking over to Emily and looking her over. “You know, when you wanted her kicked out of the kill party the other day, I figured you were just
“Pfft, come on, Bethany, you know me better than that. I’m only ‘generous’ in very...specific...circumstances.” She winks and wishes that Beth had some more blood in her so she could see her face flush. Making people stammer and blush is a favorite pastime of hers, especially when that person is Beth.

They load Emily into the back of the car, careful not to put too much pressure on her still-healing legs. Jess feels a rush of affection as she looks down at the semiconscious girl. In this state, Emily looks vulnerable and small. Tender, almost, like a baby bird. Jess feels the urge to hold her close and keep her safe from all the terrible things in this world.

“Jess, get in,” Beth urges, cutting Jess out of her reverie. “We have to move.”

“Oh, uh, right,” Jess says, feeling a little embarrassed at herself. She’d never been one to fawn over people. Admire, sure, but she hasn’t felt this giddy and fuzzy-hearted around someone since Beth. She gets into the backseat, holding Emily in her arms, as Beth speeds back to the manor, looking ten thousand different flavors of pissed off.

“If—no, when Cass has us skinned for this, I’m not talking to you in hell.”

“Loving the optimism, babe.”

Emily stirs in Jess’s lap, her hands wrapping around herself.

“...M-mom, I’m so...cold…” She whispers.

Jess pets Emily’s hair, mumbling soothing nonsense into the girl’s ear. Emily shivers.

Out of the corner of her eye, Jess can see Beth looking at her in the rearview mirror with a mixture of pity and grave understanding.

They spend the rest of the drive in uneasy silence.

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Hannah has her headphones in when someone starts knocking at her door. It isn’t until they start pounding that she can hear the sound over the weepy soundtrack and melodramatic dialogue of The Notebook. She closes the lid of her laptop and gets up off the bed, a little cranky that her solitary Netflix time had been violated for the second time that night. First Mia and Wren wanting to share stupid gossip again, and now this.

“Coming,” she sighs as she walks to the door and pulls it open. Waiting for her on the other side is her sister, looking tired and annoyed, standing beside a nervously smiling Jess and an unconscious girl that Hannah can tell from just one look is turning into a vampire.

“Uh, hey, Han,” Jess says.

“Who is she?” Hannah asks, pointing to the girl. “When did Cassandra say you could—are you even allowed to—”

Beth shushes her.
“Hannah, please, please be quiet. I need to call in a favor.”

Hannah snorts.

“What favor?”

“1960. Chinatown.”

“Oh, that one doesn’t count—”

“Hannah, please.”

The girl twitches in Jess’s arms. Hannah looks at her.

“I can’t hide a rogue, if that’s what you’re suggesting.”

“What if we ask nicely?” Jess chimes in.

“No! We’re all gonna get into so much trouble! We should just kill her.”

“Hannah,” Beth begs. “Han, please, please help us hide her. I know this is bad, but I promise it’ll be okay. No one’s gonna get hurt.”

Hannah looks at Beth’s face, and the open desperation written there. She sighs and gestures to the changing girl.

“Where’s her victim?”

“What?” Jess asks.

“Her initiation victim,” Hannah says, then gasps. “Don’t tell me you forgot to find one!”

Jess’s cheeks go slightly pink.

“Uh. Whoops.”

Beth lets out a short groan of frustration.

“Fuck! I can’t believe we—ugh, alright, we still have a couple hours of darkness. Let’s go get someone, fast.”

Jess’s eyes light up.

“I know just the right person.”

She shoves the girl into Hannah’s arms and takes off running before Hannah can stop her, Beth bolting behind her. Hannah sighs and drags the girl into her room, closing and locking the door behind her. With all the commotion those two made, she’s surprised they haven’t been found out already.

She lays the girl down on her bed and looks her over. Her whole body is covered in dirt and mud, her hair wet with dirty water. Judging by the quality of her clothes, she’s not someone who came from money. That’s good. No one cares when someone poor goes missing in a bad neighborhood.

Odds are, no one’s going to come looking for her.

“Matt…” the girl mumbles in her sleep. Hannah snorts.
“Who’s that, your boyfriend?”

The girl whimpers and clutches at a delicate silver pendant around her neck. If Hannah wanted to, she could stake her and end things before anyone gets hurt. Beth and Jess would be furious, sure, but it would be for the best.

And yet—

Something about this girl’s utter helplessness gives her pause. Breaking men, especially the ones that are openly arrogant and cruel, is fun. Nothing can compare to the rush of tearing into the veins of a man who had it coming. But when it comes to women, young ones in particular, she has a lot more trouble. Beth calls her a picky eater, but Hannah can’t help it. Every time she has a girl cornered, she thinks of herself in 1935, sobbing and fragile and so, so afraid.

Hannah sighs and sits down on the bed beside the girl. In their rush, Jess and Beth hadn’t even told her the girl’s name.

“Well, whoever you are,” Hannah says, picking up her laptop, “I hope you like chick flicks.”

Emily feels like hell.

Her head hurts, her stomach hurts, her limbs hurt, everything fucking hurts. Emily tries to take in several gulps of air, only to find breathing painful, and, when she stops, unnecessary. She mutters raspy curses to herself as she slowly gets to her feet, swaying as she stands on her miraculously healed legs. The room she’s in is dark and cavernous, and the familiar feeling of being watched creeps under her skin.

She turns around, looking for some sort of exit, when she hears a groan. A very, very familiar groan.

Emily wheels around, a flash of anger filling her chest as she follows the sound to a swaying young woman in a simple white gown, looking confused and annoyed and a little afraid.

“What the…? What is this?” Katie barks. Emily tries to say something but all that comes out is a ragged, choking cough. Katie looks up at her.

“W-what? Emily…?”

Emily says nothing and stalks towards her, feeling her stomach twist with hunger. Katie backs away, unsteady on her feet. She laughs, nervously, humorlessly.

“H-hey, Em. So, uh, about earlier. You knew we were just joking around, right?”

Emily doesn’t answer her. She moves closer, listening to the sound of blood thundering through Katie’s veins. Emily remembers the smirk on Katie’s face as she buried Emily’s heart in insults, relishing the look of betrayal and misery on her face.

“Emily, I’m sorry, really,” Katie begs, tears starting to glisten in her eyes. “I’ll take the video down, I swear I will. Just don’t hurt me, please, please.”

Emily closes the gap between them and grabs Katie’s head with both hands, squeezing. Katie
screams.

“Emily, please! Please stop! You don’t want to do this—AGH, you, you can’t!”

Emily looks straight into her eyes. She doesn’t dignify Katie’s groveling with a response.

“Emily, please! It was just a joke! It wasn’t—it—IT WAS JUST A PRA—”

Emily twists Katie’s head back until she hears a crunching sound. Katie lets out a rattling groan and goes limp. Blood oozes from a fresh wound in her broken neck. Before Emily fully knows why, she’s drinking from the wound, desperately and enthusiastically, blood dribbling down her chin and onto her clothes.

“Well,” a low, syrupy voice cuts through the darkness. “That was fast. You didn’t even give me time for a speech.”

The room lights up and Emily covers her eyes. She hears voices all around her, some curious, others anxious, talking amongst themselves. Emily opens her eyes and blinks twice, staring up at a small gathering of women seated above her. In their center is a beautifully-dressed woman with long, dark hair and the most insufferably smug expression that Emily has ever seen on a mammal.

“We were not expecting you, Emily,” the woman says. “Well, most of us weren’t.” She gives someone in the audience a pointed glare, and Emily follows her gaze to find Jess in the audience, looking anxious and uncomfortable. “Still, I sense extraordinary potential in you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone that ruthless straight out of the gate. So I’m giving you the chance to prove your...unexpected arrival wasn’t a mistake.”

“I—I’m not sure I follow,” Emily rasps. Her throat is sore from the effort of forcing air through her vocal chords. She notices there’s still some blood on her chin, and she wipes it away with the back of her hand, feeling oddly embarrassed for someone who’s probably about the get eaten alive by a bunch of monster women.

“I want you to join me, Emily. Join us and be free of human weakness. You will be more than low-income trash, more than the target of bullies and bigots. You could become someone magnificent.”

Emily looks at this woman, at the way the women around her look at her with reverence, love, even. All of them have the same dark eyes and glinting fangs, and they all wear the same doting expression as their leader speaks.

Either Emily is in the middle of some fucked up vampire cult, or she’s having a very, very strange dream.

“So, you want me to, what? Join your little cult, or whatever?”

The woman looks a bit taken aback by her tone.

“Well, ‘cult’ isn’t the word I would use, but—”

“If it’s got weird initiation shit, a creepy leader and a bunch of sheep following her around, it’s a cult,” Emily says. “Not interested.”

“Are you quite sure about that?” the leader asks, the hint of danger lurking under every syllable.

“As sure as I think you’re crazy, Charles-Manson-In-Vuitton.”

“I see,” the woman says. “Let me rephrase. You’ll join us, or you’ll burn to death. Take your pick.”
Emily stares at her for a second, then turns to the other women there.

“Does she do this to all of you? Make you do whatever she wants and threaten to hurt you if you don’t? She might make you all feel powerful but you’re still her little bitch—”

“Emily, stop!” Jess cries. “Please, just come with us. It’s not as bad as it sounds, really.”

“You would do well to listen to your sire,” the leader says.

“I’m not listening to some sociopathic bimbo with dental issues,” Emily spits. She gestures at the leader. “And you, just because you dress like a fancy prostitute doesn’t mean you’re some super impressive vampire queen. I’m not scared of you. Do your fucking worst.”

The leader glares at her.

“It would be my pleasure.”

“Emily, please! I can help you! We can figure this out together. Just trust me, okay? I wanna help you.”

Emily looks straight into Jess’s eyes.

“I would rather die.”

“So be it,” the dark-haired woman says. “Mia, Wren, you know what to do.”

A pair of girls jump down from the stands and advance on Emily.

“NO!” Jess screams. “No, please! Don’t do this!”

“This is her decision, Jessica,” the woman says. “Not yours.”

“Beth, please!” Jess says to a familiar-looking girl standing by the leader’s side. “Please help her! Please!”

The girl, who Emily realizes after a moment is the same surly bartender that kicked her out of the club, suddenly grabs her leader’s arm. The leader raises her eyebrows at her and motions for her minions to stop.

“Do you have something to say, Beth?”

“Cassandra, I know how this looks,” Beth says carefully. “Jess has made a grave mistake. She must take responsibility for it in a way that will force her to mature.”

“Oh?”

“This fledgling is obstinate and defiant,” Beth continues, “but if tamed, she could be an invaluable asset to us. If Jess is so desperate to have a fledgling, let her prove that she’s worthy of having one. Give her six months to turn this wild girl into a loyal member of our group.”

“And if she fails?”

“Then the fledgling dies. By Jessica’s hand,” Beth finishes. Jess whimpers. Emily suddenly feels strange, full of panic and sadness that is not her own. It’s almost like reading Jess’s mind, but far too intimate and intense to be comfortable. The leader, Cassandra, cocks her head, considering.
“An amusing idea. I’ve had success with breaking down defiance in the past, it’s true. Ashley was once like this wild girl, but now she’s more loyal than anyone else here.” She smiles. “Very well. I’ll allow this little test. I’ll give Jessica...five months to straighten her little fledgling out. If she’s really ready for this challenge, it shouldn’t take long, right Jessica?” She smirks at Jess, who flinches, then gives Beth a critical look. “I hope your intentions are genuine, Beth. Your leniency with your fledglings is far from cute.” She gestures to Emily. “Take the girl to the pit. A few nights down there with no food or light should teach her some humility.”

Cassandra’s lackeys grab Emily’s arms and drag her away from the audience. Emily struggles against them but they don’t even flinch. Jess looks at her as Emily is dragged away. Even as they’re brought apart, Emily can still feel their connection, forged in thought and blood, whether she wants to or not.

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Matt pretends he isn’t nervous when his phone doesn’t ring at all on Sunday. Initially he thinks Emily’s sleeping in, or going for a vigorous workout and she’ll text him the afternoon. But the longer the day drags on, the more anxious he becomes. By the time Sunday evening rolls around, he feels like a sweaty, nervous wreck. It takes every inch of his resolve not to text her, just to check in. Sure, it wasn’t late at night when she left him, but she lives in an even shitter suburb than he does. Who knows what sort of unscrupulous characters Emily could have come across on her walk home.

In retrospect he was so stupid. He shouldn’t have taken no for an answer. He should have insisted on driving her home. Then again, he thinks, attempting to make Emily do anything against her will never works out well. Especially for him.

“I don’t need a knight in shining armor, you dork,” he remembers her saying. “I can take care of myself.”

He snorts. Emily's made of steel. Like she would ever need someone to rescue her.

She’s probably too busy to text him because she’s plotting her revenge. Jason and Katie better watch out. He’s seen it with his own eyes; Emily on a warpath is not pretty.

Whatever she has planned, though, he hopes it’s good. After the stunt they pulled, they deserve everything that’s coming to them.

He spends the rest of the evening trying to ignore the queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He hits the gym, pushing himself so hard that when he comes home he barely has the energy to shower, sinking into his bed and falling asleep, the faint smell of Emily’s perfume still clinging to his pillow.

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He’s barely in the school gates when he sees him.

Jason.
He’s by the stairs to the main foyer entrance, laughing with some of his friends, looking every inch the smug, pseudo intellectual. Matt never liked the guy. He always talked down to him, sending him pitying looks after class, like he thinks Matt is stupid. He only put up with Jason for Emily’s sake. Now that dislike has soured into loathing. He hates his weedy, rat-like face, his stupid, not-at-all ironic tee-shirts and his obnoxiously tight pants. He can’t believe Emily ever trusted this arrogant piece of shit.

Jason’s in the center of the group, snickering as he shows his friends something on his phone. The group laugh, like whatever Jason’s showing them is the funniest thing they’ve ever seen.

Matt doubts that weedy piece of shit is showing his friends the latest viral cat video.

“Hey!”

“Matty!” Jason says, grinning ear to ear. “How you going, man?”

“How am I going? You’re lucky I don’t clock you.”

“Whoa, easy now, big guy. That’s not a very congenial way to greet a friend on this fine Monday morning.”

“You’re not my friend. I know what you did. You better step off, Jason.”

“What did I do, exactly?” Jason asks, his shit-eating grin never leaving his face.

“You know what you did,” Matt fumes, not wanting to spell it out in front of the other guys. He tries to take a deep breath, desperate to keep his rage to bay. “Stay the hell away from Emily.”

“Ooooh, I see, you’re referring to the prank I helped orchestrate. That was a joke. Emily will understand.”

“A prank? That’s your idea of a joke? That’s freaking sick.”

“Oh, come on, she deserved it. She was practically slobbering over Katie. Even though Katie never, *ever*, led her on. It was...sad, really.”

“Quit being such a—”

“And in any case,” Jason says, talking over Matt like he’s not even there. “You think this is going to hold her back when she gets to college? All those lesbians are going to see how desperate she is and move in for the kill.”

“Now that’s a video I’d like to see,” one of Jason’s friends says. The other boys whoop and holler, and Matt grits his teeth, struggling against the white-hot anger that surges through his veins.

Before he can help it, Matt walks over to Jason, staring down at his feeble face. Matt knows he could crush him in one fell swoop. Jason doesn’t back away, however, puffing his chest out, trying to look like the big man in front of his friends.

“I don’t care why you did it. Stay the hell away from Emily. I’m not going to tell you again.”

“Maybe you should’ve stayed away from Emily,” Jason challenges, standing so close Matt can smell his cologne. “I mean, she wasn’t gay until she started fucking you. Then you had to go and turn her, ruining it for the rest of us.”

Matt’s fist smacks into Jason’s face before he knows it, knuckles slamming against bone.
Jason squeals, staggering back, hands flying to his cheekbone.

“Ow, fuck!”

“You son of a bitch,” Matt snarls, throwing another punch, then another, relishing the sound of his fists sinking into skin. It’s not a contest; by the time the others pull Matt away, Jason is on the floor, whimpering pitifully, droplets blood seeping through his fingers.

“Get off me!” Matt yells, struggling, almost managing to break the other boys’ hold.

“Hey!”

They look all look up. The assistant principal is standing at the doorway, looking more furious than Matt has ever seen her.

As the red mist clears Matt realizes he is very, very fucked.

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It could’ve gone worse. At first, there’s threats to sue, and even talk of expulsion, but it only takes Matt a moment to find the video and after that, the hard questions start being directed towards Jason. The video is shown to Jason’s father as a nurse ushers Matt out of the room. He can’t help but feel a bit vindicated as he hears Jason whimpering when Principal Williams starts to openly berate him.

As he waits for his punishment, Matt thinks about his parents. They’re going to horrified. The school has probably tried to call them by now. They’re both emergency nurses. Unlike Jason’s family, it’s not like they have the time to drop everything to bail him out.

Matt buries his face between his hands, thinking about their stricken faces. He doesn’t know what he’s going to do if he’s expelled. His parents have sacrificed so much to send him to this school; and this, this, is how he’s repaid them.

Finally, after the most excruciating hour Matt has ever endured, there’s no more talk of suing Matt’s family, or the school, or even expulsion. Instead, Jason gets one day of detention; while Matt is suspended for the week. If the thunderous look Jason’s dad gives him is any indication, Matt has lucked out big time.

Matt leaves school straight away, feeling oddly elated. Sure, a one-week suspension is going to look shitty on his transcripts, but then again, it’s not like colleges are clamoring for him now anyway. And the pathetic, humiliated look on Jason’s face when Principal Williams read him the riot act more than made up for the impending shit storm he’s going to endure the minute he gets home.

He pulls out his phone. Emily is going to get a kick out of this.

Matt: I just rearranged Jason’s face. Got suspended for a week but it was so worth it. What u up to?

He waits. Emily always has her phone with her, so he expects her reply to be almost instantaneous.

Except it’s not.

Matt: Em?
Still nothing. No matter how angry Emily is, she wouldn’t be shutting him out like this.

It’s then when the realization hits him, square in the gut. Something is very, very wrong.

He gets into his car and drives towards her house without a second thought.

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His worst fears are confirmed the second he turns the corner to Emily’s street. Two cop cars are parked in her driveway, and the blinds to her house are fastened shut even though Matt can see Mrs. Davis’ car parked in their rundown garage. The place is ominously silent, foreboding, almost, and Matt has to fight a ridiculous urge to turn his car around and drive away.

He gets out, legs already feeling a bit stiff and weak. The air feels still and heavy and he finds it difficult to draw breath. There are so many possible scenarios for why the cops would be at Emily’s house. None of them good.

His mind flashes back to Jason, and to his goddamn prank. Matt can hear his high, mocking laughing ringing in his ears, can see Emily’s tough facade crumbling, just a little, when she sees what Jason has done to her.

He takes his phone out from his pocket, shaky fingers clumsily tapping on the keys.

*If anything has happened to Emily, you piece of shit, I will kill you*

He starts when he hears a door slam and shoves his phone guiltily back into his pocket. Two men exit the Davis household, both wearing long overcoats even though it’s humid out. They have an air of authority about them. Matt’s seen enough cops in his life to immediately recognize them as detectives.

“What’s going on here?” Matt asks, his voice sounding strained even to his own ears. “Where’s Emily?”

“Hello son,” one detective, a middle-aged man with a regrettable moustache, says to him. “What’ your name?”

“Matt.”

“Matt...” The two men share a look, with the taller, moustached man checking his notes. “Matt Taylor?”

“Yeah...”

“Mr. Taylor,” the other detectives says, his mouth set in a grim line. “My name is Detective Schultz and this Detective Sloane. We’d like to ask you some questions.”

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It’s dark by the time he gets home, his parents waiting anxiously by the front door of their house. They both look exhausted and sad, sending him almost identical anxious looks as his car pulls up. He expected to see his mother; her shift ends at four o’clock so she can pick his sister up from after school care. He’s surprised to see his father, although, in truth, he shouldn’t be. As soon as he heard about Emily’s disappearance Matt knew he’d be coming straight home, no matter how busy the hospital is or whether that decision will jeopardize his relationship with his boss. Matt sighs. Great. He’s really outdone himself in the shitty son stakes.

“Matt,” his mother says, sounding relieved, rushing towards him and throwing her arms around his shoulders, squeezing tight. He wiggles out of her embrace, ignoring her hurt expression. He feels drained, hollowed out, as if the afternoon’s events have sucked the life right out of him.

He wants to be left alone so he can brood, or maybe to punch something, but his parents don’t get the memo, following him inside.

“Why didn’t you call us earlier? We should have been with you when those detectives were asking you questions.” his mother asked.

“I’m eighteen. It’s not like I need you guys to hold my hand.”

“Did you at least ask for a lawyer? You’re entitled to a lawyer,” his dad asserts.

“No, because I don’t need one because I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Matthew….” his mother says, taking a tentative step towards him.

He waves her away. Suddenly, he finds himself unable to stand still, pacing around the living room, squeezing his fist into a ball and fighting the urge to scream.

“They weren’t trying to pin this on me if that’s what you’re worried about. Instead they spent the whole freaking time talking about the stupid video, and Katie, they kept going on and on about Katie, and how Emily felt about her, and how bad she must have been feeling, as if she’d run away just because of a stupid prank.”

“Matt, honey, what prank?”

“Like Emily would do something to Katie. Like she’d run because of a stupid fucking prank.”

“Matt, language,” his father warns.

“You don’t get it, dad, all they talked about was Katie. They went on and on about Katie, like Emily didn’t exist, like she didn’t matter.”

“Matt,” his mother approaches him, but Matt can’t meet her eyes. He doesn’t want, or deserve, her compassion.

“This is my fault. I shouldn’t have let her go out alone. I shouldn’t…. if I was just…. I’m such a… fucking useless idiot.”

“Matt?”

He whirls around and sees his little sister standing by the doorway to the living room, playing with the hem of her pajama top, eyes as wide as saucers.

“Lily, can you go up to your room please?” his mother asks.
Lily ignores her, continuing to stare at Matt gloomily. “What’s wrong with Emily?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Matt croaks, his mouth suddenly dry. He wraps his arms around her, feeling a little better when he feels Lily snuggling into his chest. “She’s missing. But it’s going to be okay.”

“She’s missing? You’re going to find her, though, right?”

“Yeah,” he says, running a hand through her hair and holding her tight. “Yeah, I am.”

He usually likes work. The place he works is run down and badly in need of renovation. Matt’s pretty sure the decor is straight out of the seventies but the customers are kind and his boss is very flexible when it comes to Matt’s roster.

Today, though, he’s anxious for closing time, his eyes flickering up to the clock right above the tattered wooden entrance. It’s five minutes before he’s supposed to close up and there’s only one customer left. But he doesn’t look like he’s planning on moving.

“Jack?” Matt asks, approaching the older man cautiously. Matt knows from bitter, painful experience, it’s not a good idea to creep up on him. Jack’s been a patron of the diner for as long as Matt’s worked there, and he always sits at the same booth, drinking bitter black coffee and staring out the window. He’s a haggard, prematurely greying man; dressed in ratty overcoats and sweaters replete with holes and tears. When he looks up at Matt, there’s a faint darkness in his tired eyes, one blue and absurdly youthful against his scarred face; the other cloudy and grey and full of cataracts.

“Closing time, is it?” Jack grunts. “Gonna throw an old man out on his ass?”

“Fraid so,” Matt says. “It’s ten o’clock. I gotta clean and close up.”

Jack says nothing, turning away from Matt and staring out the window.

“It’s her birthday today.”

Matt blinks.

“Whose birthday?”

Jack closes his eyes.

“Alexandra. My little girl. She’d be thirty-two today.” Jack lowers his head. “My poor girl…”

Matt doesn’t know what to say. He’s no stranger to loss, especially not now, but it seems that everyone is dying or going missing these days.

“I’m sorry,” Matt says at last. “I can’t imagine your pain.”

Jack looks up at Matt again, like he’s trying to look into his mind and parse out his thoughts, then sighs.

“No pain compares. I hope to god you don’t have to feel it for a long time, son.” Jack stands up with a groan, massaging his bad leg before sidling past Matt and heading for the door. Before he leaves,
he turns back to Matt one last time. “There are worse things that can happen to someone you love than dying. Keep that in mind.” And he leaves, without another word.

Matt sighs, feeling tired and lost and friendless in the old diner that had once been a place of peace and reflection. He cleans up and locks the door, trying to think of nothing as he scrubs away the grime and grease from the tables and ovens. It takes about two hours to finally get the place looking half-decent. Matt grabs his bag from the back and thumbs through the printed posters he loaded into it. It’s past midnight, far too late to be skulking around the city by himself, but the sooner he puts these up, the better the chance that someone will find Emily alive.

She has to be alive. She has to be. Emily’s too smart to die, too brave, too resourceful. He doesn’t want to imagine a world without her.

Matt’s not a technology wizard, but the computer-made missing posters turned out decent enough. It’s just the basics; her picture, name, age, height, weight, and the last time Matt saw her. Matt had to take a stab in the dark on Emily’s weight. He hopes she’s not offended by his estimate if—when they find her. Over the past day or so Matt’s seen plenty of posters asking about Katie. There’s an online campaign to find her on Facebook and Twitter. He got an Amber Alert about Katie on his phone just that morning. But nothing, not even the faintest whisper, of anyone looking for Emily.

If he has to tear this city apart by himself to find his best friend, then he will.

He’s on a street corner in between a set of tenement buildings and a dilapidated park, taping one of the missing posters to a streetlamp, when he hears a soft voice behind him.

“What are you doing?”

He turns around, startled. He never heard anything behind him, no footsteps, no breath, nothing; and yet now there’s a girl standing in front of him, tall and pretty, with an air of elegance and the faintest hint of menace. She giggles at his startled expression, tucking a lock of soft, dark brown hair behind her ear. In his entire life, Matt doesn’t think he’s ever seen a woman quite so beautiful.

“Oh, uh, aha, I-I’m just putting up some posters,” Matt stammers. “I’m looking for someone. A friend. She’s missing.”

“Missing? Oh, that’s terrible! How long has she been gone?”

“Just a few days,” Matt tells her. He moves aside so the girl can get a better look at the poster. “Her name’s Emily Davis. Do you recognize her?”

The girl stares at the missing poster for a few moments, then shakes her head.

“No. At least, I don’t think so.”

“Well,” Matt says, “there has to be someone in the city who has. Someone has to know what happened to her.”

“Aren’t the police looking for her?”

Matt scoffs.

“If they are, they’re sure taking their damn time. If I want her back alive, then I’ll have to find her myself.”

The girl’s eyes widen, with awe or amusement, Matt can’t tell.
“She must be very important to you.”

“She’s my best friend,” Matt says, wondering why this girl is so interested in all of this anyway.

The girl smiles. It’s a kind one, but Matt thinks there might be something else underneath it.

“I wish you the best. It’s hard to lose someone you love.”

“Thank you,” Matt says. He looks into the girl’s eyes, deep and lovely, and before he can stop himself, he blurts out, “I’m Matt, by the way.”

The girl’s eyes glint. She holds out a hand for him to shake. When he takes it, he finds it’s cold as ice.

“Nice to meet you, Matt,” she says. “I’m Hannah.”

Chapter End Notes

OOOOOH, as the notorious man-eater, Hannah is perhaps the most dangerous vamp for Matt to meet. Still, maybe Matt has a few sweet surprises of his own.

As always, thanks to my superstar co-author. It’s a privilege to write with you. This is story is so much fun for us to write, and I hope you guys are enjoying it too.

Writers are like vampires, really, but instead of blood, we live off delicious, succulent reviews, so if you liked it, please let us know.

Is Matt going to be stave off an interested Hannah? How is Emily going to fare in the pit? Next chapter should be out soonish. As always, thanks for reading.
After the third day has passed, Cassandra decides to have Emily released from the pit. Nervously, Jess waits beside Beth and Cassandra as Bev undoes the pit’s lock and heaves the heavy door open. The smell hits all of them immediately, and it’s all Jess can do not to retch. She has no idea how Ashley survived in the San Francisco pit for two years, and frankly, she doesn’t want to know.

For a moment, nothing happens. Jess’s stomach lurches and for a second, she fears the worst. Then, after a minute or two, Emily slowly walks out of the pit. Her face is stoic, resolute, silently challenging. Underneath that ironclad facade, Jess can feel her trauma, her horror at what she saw and felt and smelled for those three awful days. Her hunger hits Jess hard, and despite having just eaten, her stomach feels like a gaping hole deep inside of her. But even as Bev sneers and Cassandra appraises Emily, looking somewhere between frustrated and impressed, Emily betrays no emotion.

“Do you have something to say?” Cassandra asks.

Emily shakes her head. Her hand shakes almost imperceptibly.

“Fine then,” Cassandra says, an edge to her normally silken voice. “Jessica, make sure your fledgling is fed.”

Jess nods and motions for Emily to follow her, heading down the hall to the wine cellar.

“Stop.”

Jess and Emily stop and turn. Cassandra is eyeing them sternly while Bev can barely hide a shit-eating grin. Jess grits her teeth.

“Yes, Cassandra?” she asks.

“No blood wine,” Cassandra tells them. “If Emily wants blood, then she’ll have to get it fresh. Is that understood?” Jess nods once. Cassandra gestures to Beth. “Make sure neither of them break this rule, Beth.”

“Yes, Cassandra,” Beth replies, her face as expressionless as Emily’s. She doesn’t meet Jess’s gaze. Jess keeps her head down as she leads Emily past them, down the hall and out into the courtyard. The sun has just dipped below the horizon, the sky a wash of pale lavender and hints of peachy yellow. It’s early, almost dangerously so, but Jess doesn’t want to be anywhere near Cassandra’s aura of disappointment with her for the rest of the night. She leads Emily to the massive garage adjacent to the manor and past a slew of sports cars until she stops at a little red Lexus near the back of the garage.

“Here we are,” she says. Emily says nothing. Jess can feel Emily’s anger like a hot ball of metal in her gut. She swallows and opens the door. “After you, madam,” she says, smiling nervously. Stone-faced, Emily gets in the car.
It’s a long, achingly silent drive down to Palos Verdes. Here the coastal towns are replete with wealth and opulence, and wide-eyed tourists walk between fancy restaurants and kitschy souvenir shops before they turn in for the night. Jess figures they could head down to the beach and pick off a couple strolling under the stars, but she doesn’t think Emily’s ready for that yet. Instead, she pulls into a parking lot adjacent to a quiet, craggy overlook on a small cliff. There’s a bench near the edge of the cliff, overlooking the churning Pacific Ocean. Jess heads out of the car and round the back, opening the trunk while Emily tentatively opens the passenger door and walks out, stretching. Jess pulls a paper shopping bag out of the trunk and closes it. When she looks up, Emily is staring at her.

“So, who’s the person you want me to murder?”

Jess puts the bag on top of the trunk and pulls out a bottle of blood wine. Emily blinks in surprise. She stares at Jess, disbelieving and suspicious, but Jess can sense the hunger inside of her.

“Well?” Jess asks. Emily walks over to her and takes the bottle wordlessly. She wanders over to the bench with her gift and Jess follows, taking the bag with her. She sits down beside her fledgling and pulls out a bottle of her own. She’d been saving these bottles for the anniversary of Hannah and Beth’s rebirths, but in light of everything that’s happened, breaking in her fledgling gently seems like the better plan. She can sense the reluctance, the disgust at the thought of killing a human, inside her fledgling’s unbeating heart. Emily can’t kill someone she doesn’t have a grudge against.

Not yet, anyway.

They sit in silence, taking swigs from their bottles as the waves crash against the shore far, far beneath them. A part of Jess wants to fill the silence, the way she usually does, but she knows all her words would die on the salty night air. Emily doesn’t seem like the type to be big on idle banter.

Jess slips out of her sandals and rests her bare feet on the cool grass, wiggling her toes a bit. The oceanic air feels good on her skin. She should come out here more often. Back when she was human she’d begged and begged to go to the beach, but her parents had told her that the beaches were tainted by sin and debauchery, where whorish women would show their midriff to men they barely knew. Profaning God’s beautiful places, they’d said. Jess almost smiles at the thought. She’s profaned a lot of beautiful places by now. Just ask Beth.

Jess watches as the blue of the night deepens into black, the moon shining overhead, the stars drowned out by light pollution. She remembers when she could see all the stars clearly in her small town, as bright and beautiful as Christmas lights. It’s the one thing about being a human that she misses.

Well. That and diner food.

Jess finishes her bottle and sighs contentedly, letting the sweet, carefully aged blood settle in her stomach. Emily’s already finished hers, poor starved thing that she was, and now she’s looking out at the moon, saying nothing. The feeling of loss inside of her heart crashes down on Jess like the waves of the ocean below. Emily’s future is gone. She can never go to college now, become an adult, land a job that would let her keep her mother healthy and happy for the rest of her life. She’s alone and trapped with unfamiliar women and a deadline hanging over her head. Jess doesn’t know how Emily doesn’t cry from the terrible surge of despair. Jess feels a lump in her throat, a terrible sadness for the girl she was trying so desperately to save.

Jess was still right to do it. Emily deserves better than a wretched half-life as a human, a humiliated pariah hated and mocked for loving the wrong person. And yet…

It’s hard to withstand it, this crushing empathy.
It’s a weakness, a softness that must be purged from oneself, as Cassandra always says. But still, despite the sadness and anger and fear their bond makes them share, Jess can also faintly sense the things Emily loves, her aspirations and dreams and the little things that make her smile. She’s never, ever felt this intimately connected with someone, not even Beth.

Thinking back, she can sort of understand why Beth was so soft with Sam.

They sit in silence a little while longer, until the moon starts to fall in the sky and Jess knows they should be getting back. She taps Emily’s shoulder and motions for them to return to her car. Emily nods, looking reluctant to leave this quiet place and go back to the place where she’s under constant scrutiny and, honestly, who could blame her. Jess fights the urge to hold Emily’s hand as they walk back to the car. Emily doesn’t need or want that right now.

Jess hopes one day Emily will come to forgive her, even care for her as Jess does for her, but that’s never going to happen unless Jess gains her trust and respect.

Even if that takes years.

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Hannah starts by watching him.

He has a ritual, this strange, sombre, handsome boy. He works at a dingy diner three days a week. After every shift he spends hours canvassing the area, relentlessly sticking up posters and reapplying those that have fallen or been torn down. Sometimes he goes to populated areas and hands out flyers, even though it’s early in the morning and most humans barely give him a second look. She sees his shoulders slump after every rejection. She sees the sad way he worries his lip between his teeth, his desperation becoming more naked every night.

She almost feels bad.

Still, he’s piqued her curiosity. That’s a rarity these days. Most humans are so dull. Even the handsome ones. Maybe even especially the handsome ones.

She’s certain he cares for her. Humans are selfish, and men especially so. He can’t be out here this late at night unless he wants something from her. Does Emily owe him a debt? Is she an ex-girlfriend whom he still pines for? Is she someone he wants to fuck?

Well, if he’s looking to get in between Emily’s legs he’s probably out of luck. She remembers Emily melting into Jess’ embrace at the kill party, kissing her with an ardour Hannah has rarely seen. She’s lived long enough to see all kinds of people, and she’s sure, whether Emily knows or not, that the clan’s newest fledgling is more than a little gay.

It’s Thursday. After at least two hours of fruitless searching, Matt’s done for the night. He wearily dumps his bag into his car, then stands up straight and stretches. Even here, lurking in the shadows, Hannah can see the big, strong, athletic body he’s hiding away underneath all those layers.

She smirks. He may have eyes for Emily, but perhaps she can convince Matt to turn his attention elsewhere.
For the next few nights, they have the same routine. Jess takes Emily out to some secluded place with smuggled wine, they drink, they don’t talk, and then they go back. Emily can tell that Jess is trying to slowly wean her off it; with each new trip there’s less wine, and she seems to pick places that show off the worst of humanity: a deserted skate park favored by warring gangs; a plaza next to a famously corrupt financial firm; a park in a neighborhood even worse than Emily’s where they watched policemen come in and break up a vicious domestic disturbance. The officers pulled from a nearby apartment a man and his girlfriend, still screaming at each other and both covered in cuts and bruises, and took them both away. Jess watched the scene play out, lips in a tight line, and then she’d taken Emily back to the car, full of anger and anxiousness so potent it clouds Emily’s head and makes her muscles tense.

Every night, Jess takes her out on these excursions, and every night, Emily maps out the manor in her head, searching for a potential escape route.

She knows Jess keeps her purse and car keys in her bedside drawer, and after several days of testing she knows the courtyard security cameras have a single exploitable blind spot. In theory, she should be able to slip out through the courtyard, steal Jess’s car, and drive off into the night before anyone saw her. From there she’ll have to find her mom and Matt and get them all as far from this damned city as possible.

Emily waits for Jess to leave her room, then slips past her door and snatches her purse and car keys out of her dresser drawer. She opens the door again, looks around for any sign of someone seeing her, and dashes down the hallway, keeping to the shadows and avoiding the rooms that the other vampires frequent. Beth has been keeping a close eye on her, but she’s busy talking with Jess about something at the moment. Cassandra’s in her study, and Bev and Hannah are out hunting. There are others around, but they’re all so keen on avoiding her that Emily doesn’t bother to consider that one of them could—

A cold hand grabs her shoulder and wrenches her backward, spinning her until she faces a small girl covered head to toe in drying blood. Her hair is a tangled, gore-caked mess, and her eyes are wide and dark and gleaming. When this girl grins, Emily can see that her fangs are longer and crueler looking than the others’.

“Are you leaving?”

“Wha—”

“Mother says I get to play with you if you try to leave,” the girl says, licking her lips. Emily feels her already cold body drop a few more degrees.

“I—I just—”

The girl’s grin widens. She paws at Emily’s hair.

“You’re so pretty…I wanna rip off your hair and make a doll out of it.”

Emily’s throat feels dry. She can’t come up with an excuse, a way out of this. The strange girl leans in, baring her teeth.

“Come play with me.”
"No—"

"Emily?"

Emily looks over her shoulder to see Jess and Beth run over to her. Beth looks annoyed, Jess anxious. The girl lets go of Emily’s shoulder with a sigh.

“Oh, you found it!” Jess says, feigning a big smile. “I was looking everywhere for my purse. Thank you!” She walks over and takes her stuff back from Emily’s shaking hands, gently tugging her away from the strange girl with her free hand. Beth clears her throat.

“Jess, is there a problem here?”

Jess smiles at her sire.

“Nope! Em and I were gonna go hunting but I lost my bag, so Em went looking for it. Right, Emily?”

Emily looks from Jess to Beth and back to the murderous girl. She nods. The girl sulks.

“Does that mean I can’t play with her tonight?”

“I’m, uh, sure you can find another playmate tonight,” Beth says nervously. “Another night, another hunt, and all that.”

The girl sighs and brushes past Emily and Jess, headed for the courtyard without another word. Beth eyes Emily and Jess with a look of suspicion, then sighs.

“You two need to be more careful.”

She walks away, leaving Emily and Jess alone in the vestibule.

“Who...who was that?” Emily asks, gesturing to where the girl had been before. Jess sighs.

“Ashley. She’s Cassandra’s...”

“Plaything? Attack dog? Lunatic number one fan?”

Jess doesn’t meet Emily’s eyes.

“She wasn’t even supposed to be one of us. She failed her initiation, but then...” She doesn’t finish, and Emily can practically taste her bitterness. “Shit happened, and Cassandra kept Ashley around, breaking her down and building her up again, as...as that.”

“You...you’re fucking kidding me,” Emily says. “Cassandra drove someone insane for what? Kicks? That’s, like, so fucking up!”

“It’s...I mean...I’m sure she had her reasons,” Jess tells her. “I don’t know why she did it, I really don’t, but I’m not stupid enough to march up to Cassandra and ask. She doesn’t like when people question her.”

Emily snorts.

“I noticed.”

Jess sighs.
“Yeah, I...I dunno.” She looks away a flash of something like regret in her expression, then looks back. “Let’s go out.”

“By, ‘going out’, do you mean hunting or ‘hunting’?” Emily asks.

Jess smirks.

“Neither. We’re scouting out the routine of a very...specific kind of prey. Figuring out his movements so we can strike later.”

Emily cocks her head.

“What do you mean?”

“I know you’re not big on killing yet,” Jess says, “but I have a victim in mind that I think you’re going to enjoy.”

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He was going out of his mind at home, thinking of all the awful scenarios of what happened to Emily. Certain that every single minute he’s not out trying to find her is a minute wasted. Being at home and not allowed to go out and see anyone when his best friend was missing felt utterly awful.

Turns out, being back at school is even worse.

Matt can’t concentrate, barely completing any of his homework even though they’re on the cusp of finals. The teachers at Palos Verdes Academy are notoriously strict but even they are giving him a pass, letting him have an extension when he admits he spent his week-long suspension barely doing any homework. It’s just as bad, if not worse, outside of class. People avoid him in the corridors, as if his grief is contagious. On every corner in every hallway there’s a poster of Katie. Katie, Katie, he can’t escape her, can’t escape the bitter feeling in this throat every time he sees her picture. Why are people losing their minds over her? Emily’s just as missing.

The bell for the final period of pass rings but he can’t bear to sit through an hour of calculus. He darts into the bathroom, relieved and surprised that he’s the only one there. At least in the men’s toilets he doesn’t have to look at any more of Katie’s missing girl posters.

He splashes water on his face, trying to wake himself up. He still has a long day ahead of him. He’s got work, and around that he needs to squeeze in enough time to hand out the fliers about Emily both before and after his shift.

Truth be told he’s more tired than he should be. He could absolutely canvass the area near Emily’s house in half the time it usually takes him. But he finds himself loitering in the parks and street corners nearby where he first met Hannah.

Matt groans. He’s being stupid. He’s only seen her one time. But still, when he’s not stressing about Emily, or school, or his family, his thoughts stray to her. They only spoke for a few minutes, but her image is seared upon his mind’s eye. He liked her soft, shy smile, the sweet way she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear when she talked. The knowing way she looked at him, like she’s got the answers to questions he hasn’t even thought about.
That and…she looked really good in that slinky red top.

“Crap,” he mutters. He needs to get his priorities straight. His best friend is missing. Who knows what she’s going through and he’s thinking about some girl. God. He’s such a useless idiot.

Faintly, he hears the sound of someone humming coming from one of the other stalls. Matt tenses up, taking a cautious step towards the toilet furthest away from him. The closer he gets, the more certain he is that he’s not alone. He presses lightly on the door and finds it’s unlocked.

“Jason?”

“Matty,” Jason says, looking up at him and blinking slowly. He’s sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, looking a little zoned out. “Has a week passed already? How time flies…”

He looks terrible. His hair is damp and sweaty, sticking to his brow, and he’s still sporting a nasty black eye. His lip is still puffy and swollen and Matt can see a small cut on his other cheek. For the first time he feels grateful the other boys pulled him away. Another few punches and he would have done serious damage to the little creep.

Jason sighs and starts humming again. It’s a tune Matt doesn’t recognise. After a moment he brings a flask to his lips.

“What the hell? Are you drinking?”

“Of course I’m drinking. Are you blind?”

“No… I mean…. I can smell the rum from here, you idiot.”

“Well,” Jason says. He sounds like he’s slurring his words. “I’m on my way to being valedictorian now, aren’t I? I deserve a reward.”

“You creep,” Matt snarls, turning away, too angry to even look at him anymore. He has to leave. He’s getting too angry at the lack of remorse on his smug face.

“Do you know what the figures are? If someone has been missing for a week?”

Matt feels a chill trickle down his spine. Despite himself he turns around.

“Almost two thirds of people who go missing are found within two days. But….tick tock, tick tock... the longer she’s gone, the less likely she’s ever coming back…."

“Who? Katie?”

“No,” he snaps, glowering up at him. “Emily.”

Matt flinches.

“I didn’t know you cared.”

“Of course I cared, isn’t it obvious?” he snarls. He takes a long swig of his drink. “I care about her...more than anyone.”

“You have a funny way of showing it.”

“Oh, come on, man, it was a prank. It just a stupid, harmless prank. I didn’t think….I had no idea it was going to turn into this, I swear.”
“Maybe you should have thought of that before you did it,” Matt snarls.

“It was stupid, okay, I see that now,” Jason challenges, his voice shaky and wet, full of unshed tears. “Haven’t you ever done something you regret? Pulled a prank on someone you cared about?”

“No. And I never would.”

“Maybe. Maybe you wouldn’t. You have that big, noble thing going on. But then again...Nisi Dei gratia, eam.”

“What?”

“It’s Latin for...man, I dunno. Google it,” Jason drawls, smirking up at him, bringing the flask to his lips and flicking his other hand in Matt’s direction, as if dismissing him.

Matt fights the urge to shake him. This arrogant, insensitive little dick. How dare he sit here and wallow? How dare he sit here and try and make Matt feel like the stupid one, when he’s only person in the world trying to bring Emily back?

“I want a straight answer out of you, you piece of shit. Why did you do it?”

Jason’s smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “You know why.”

“That’s....what...she wouldn’t date you so you go and out her to everyone? Do you know what danger you’ve put her in? Do you know how many creeps there are out there?”

“I wouldn’t have done if she just....gave me the time of day. I loved her, okay? I loved her, and she looked at me with contempt.”

“‘Contempt?’ Emily liked you! She trusted you!” Matt’s yelling now, but he doesn’t care who hears. It doesn’t matter now; nothing about this pretentious school does, not when Emily is gone and the world acts like she never existed. “After you outed her, she came to me, and that’s what she said. ‘I trusted him.’ You ruined her life, you piece of shit.”

Jason glares at a point on the floor in between his feet.

“I know, damn it, I know! You think I’m not fucking torn apart by all this? Do you really think I’m that fucking heartless, Matt?”

“You sure seem like it.”

“I’m sorry, okay,” Jason moans, looking smaller and more pathetic than Matt has ever seen him. Tears dribble down his face as he kicks at the ground. “I never meant for this to happen.”

“Yeah? Well, what you want doesn’t matter much now, does it?”

He turns and strides away, not bothering to look back, even when he hears Jason’s choked sobs reverberating off the walls.

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“I don’t know what I did to deserve all this insubordination all of a sudden,” Cassandra sighs. She’s
sitting at her desk, looking tired and annoyed. “First Jessica brings in that devil of a fledgling, and now this.”

Beth says nothing. Since the whole Emily debacle, Cass has been a lot less charitable towards her. The scorn hurts in a deep, primal way, the way Beth had felt when she’d disappointed her mother back when she was a human, all those years ago. Then again, her mother had always been disappointed in her. Cass on the other hand has been proud of her until now, and the sudden loss of her approval stings like nothing else.

“Alex must have felt emboldened by your fledgling’s indiscretion,” Cassandra says. “She’s never acted out of line until now.” Her face hardens. “We’ll have to punish her sternly to quell the spirit of insurrection in her, and make an example to the rest of my girls. A week in the pit with no food should suffice.”

“A week?” Beth asks before she can stop herself. “Cassandra, it’s only a few missing bottles of blood wine, and we don’t even know if Alex really took them. Bev just said she did. Don’t you think a week in the pit is a little—”

“Harsh?” Cassandra cuts her off. “Oh, well, perhaps you’re right. Maybe I should be weak and soft in my discipline. After all, your softness worked oh so well with Samantha, now didn’t it?”

The insult hits Beth hard in the gut. She shudders quietly and swallows back a dry sob. Cassandra glares at her. “If you think I’m too stern, maybe you should lead, Beth. You can have a whole cabal of weak, useless vampires who can’t kill for themselves.”

“Cassandra, I—I’m sorry. That was a stupid thing for me to say. Please, forget I said anything—”

Cassandra waves her pleas away.

“Relax, dear. I’m just teasing you. I know you’d never question me.” She smiles, soft and kindly, like a schoolteacher. “I’ve always had high hopes for you. I know this whole business with Jessica has upset you, but I know from here on out you won’t disappoint me. Right?”

“R-right,” Beth stammers. “I’ll make you proud.”

“Good girl,” Cassandra says. “Now, go get Wren to take Alex down to the pit. A week down there should straighten her out nicely.”

Beth nods, and heads out of the room, her stomach aching from the stress of earning Cassandra’s ire. She closes the door behind her and feels for an absurd moment like she’s about to cry. Pathetic. She’s not five. Cassandra might be annoyed with her, but that’s Beth’s own fault. She needs to learn from this, not snivel over it. She marches down to the library, where Wren can often be found, and spots her sitting in one of the plush armchairs by the fireplace, reading an old book whose title Beth can’t quite make out. As Beth draws closer she can see Tamika and Sophie cuddled together on the couch opposite the armchairs, Sophie lightly dozing and Tamika reading a book of sonnets in her free hand.

It’s hard not to get jealous, looking at them.

“Wren,” Beth calls out. Wren looks up from her book. She’s a chittering, flighty thing with light brown hair and freckles all over her body. Mia sired her back in the nineties, and she’s been a fidgety little chatterbox ever since.

“Beth, hi. I was just reading this thing that you might find interesting, if you want to take a look, or I can just tell you—"
“Another time,” Beth says impatiently. “I need you to take Alex down to the pit.”

“Why?” Wren asks. “Did she do something wrong? She doesn’t seem like the type. Then again, it’s always the one you least suspect. Though that’s just in crime shows. In real life it’s usually the most obvious suspect who did it—”

“Wren.”

“Right, sorry,” Wren says. “Gotcha. I’ll go get her. Think I’ll need backup? I know she’s pretty gentle and stuff but she’s kinda big and—”

“Get Mia if you need backup. I don’t think you’ll need it though.”

“Okay but what if—”

“Just do it, Wren!”

“Okay, okay, I’m going. Here I go,” Wren says, making a big show of throwing down her book and walking out of the library. Tamika watches her go, then looks at Beth.

“What was that all about?”

“Alex has to stay in the pit for a week.”

“Wow. What did she do?” Tamika asks.

“She stole a few bottles of blood wine,” Beth answers. Tamika raises an eyebrow.

“Didn’t think that was a ‘week in the pit’ worthy offense.”

“It is now,” Beth says. “We’ve gotten careless and complacent, and now we have to put our foot down before people start breaking rules left and right.” It’s a favorite line of Cassandra’s nowadays, and Beth finds herself quoting it verbatim whenever she needs to explain herself. Tamika doesn’t look terribly convinced.

“Beth, don’t you think she’s getting a little...harsh?”

“No. She’s just being stern. Insubordination is dangerous.”

Tamika regards her with an unreadable expression.

“Yeah, sure. Just give me a heads up if Cassandra wants to start having us burn ‘forbidden books’ in pyres.”

Beth would normally lecture Tamika about speaking in such a provocative way, but she’s so, so tired. The night’s barely begun but she feels like she’s about to pass out already. Her head is pounding. Without a word, she leaves, finding herself walking to her sister’s bedroom without thinking about it.

Through the door she can hear her sister humming, something light and sugary; one of those awful pop songs that this latest generation seems to adore. God, she misses jazz. Beth knocks.

“Who is it?” Hannah asks. Her tone is as chipper as her humming was.

“It’s me,” Beth calls. “Can I come in?”
“Sure, sure! Watch your step though, my room’s a bit of a miss right now.”

Beth opens the door and finds the whole room is full of fancy dresses, skirts and tops, some laid together on the bed, some thrown onto the floor. Hannah stands in front of the full length mirror, modeling a pair of skinny jeans and a lacy black shirt.

“Alright,” Beth says, stepping carefully over the shirts, shoes and dresses. “Who’s the guy this time?”

“Hm? Guy?”

“You know,” Beth says. “The target. You don’t get this dolled up and fussy about your clothes unless you’re really trying to impress somebody.”

“You don’t know that,” Hannah says, but her tone is light, teasing. “Maybe I’m just getting dressed up for me.”

“Nope, I don’t think so. I recognize that top you’re modeling. That’s the Seduction Top.”

“Beth, you’re being ridiculous,” Hannah tells her. “I just want to look good.”

“You always look good,” Beth says. “Because I always look good.” Hannah rolls her eyes and jostles Beth as she comes nearer. Beth sees her own reflection in the mirror and almost doesn’t recognize the haggard woman staring back at her. “Han, come on. You only put in this much effort when you’re reeling in someone special. So who is it? Some business mogul? A minor movie star? Hot French tourist?”

“I’ll never tell, I’ll never tell,” Hannah says, smirking as Beth huffs. “What? Is a lady not entitled to a few secrets?”

“Sisters shouldn’t keep secrets from each other,” Beth replies. Hannah looks at her and sighs.

“I know. Look, I’ll tell you everything in a while, okay? I just kind of need to keep this on the down-low for a bit. Don’t want anyone blabbing.”

“Excuse you, I do not blab.”

“Oh, come on,” Hannah says. “Jess gives you one puppy-dog look and you spill your soul to her. Sorry, Beth. Gotta keep this one wrapped up for now.”

“Ugh, fine,” Beth pouts. “Keeping secrets from your own kin. That’s just evil.”

“Yep!”

“Okay, but if you bring him home, keep the noise down before you get rid of him, will you? There are a some things no immortal creature should ever hear.”

Hannah whirls around, narrowing her eyes in mock-anger.

“Gross. Like you can talk. I’ll need, like, four lifetimes to forget some of the things I have seen and heard back when you were dating Jess.”

If Beth had more blood in her her, she is certain she’d be blushing. She kicks at her sister, who easily evades her, before returning her attention back towards her outfit.

Hannah smiles at the mirror, apparently satisfied, and starts putting the excess clothes away. Beth
joins her, folding and putting away the dresses and skirts and blouses, grateful for a simple, mind-numbing task. Once it’s done, Hannah runs a hand self-consciously through her hair.

“You look beautiful,” Beth tells her. Hannah gives her a shy smile.

“Thanks, Beth. You look like a butt.”

“Hey!”

Hannah giggles. Beth throws a pillow at her. Hannah laughs again, then puts the pillow back down on the bed. She gives Beth a look of mild concern.

“Are you okay, Beth? You seem—”

“I’m fine,” Beth says. “I just...I’m fine.”

“Seriously, Beth, what’s wrong?” Hannah asks.

“I…” Beth says, but she doesn’t know what to say, how to describe it. The crushing weight of her duties, the fear of losing Jess, the creeping fear she feels whenever she sees Cassandra’s smile fade. It’s not fair for her to dump all that on her sister, who finally seems happy and settled after so many years of being lost in the group. “I’m just tired, that’s all. I’ve been staying up too late. My own fault.”

Hannah frowns, looking unconvinced.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Beth says with a smile. “In fact, I might just pass out right here on your floor, if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll draw a mustache on your face.”

“I’d expect nothing less from you,” Beth says. She gives Hannah’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Go out and have fun, sis. I’m sure your ‘dinner’ is getting cold.”

Hannah winks.

“I like to slow-cook my food.” She heads for the door, slinging a fashionable handbag over her shoulder. “Don’t get too comfy in my room, you dweeb, or I really will draw on your face.”

And with that, she heads out of the room, leaving Beth in the room of the most important person of her life, feeling more alone than ever.

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It’s drizzling outside tonight. Thankfully the rain’s not heavy enough to damage the missing posters he wants to pass out, but it’ll be an inconvenience, that’s for sure. It almost never rains these days; the drought’s been going on since January, and it’s unlikely that it’s going anywhere. So, he supposes, it’s good that they’re getting at least a little rain, but it doesn’t change the fact that it’s a pain in the ass to deal with.
It’s ten minutes to closing time when a news story about Katie’s disappearance comes on the TV over the counter. He stops busing tables for a few minutes to watch.

“Authorities believe her disappearance may be tied to a number of recent disappearances and deaths tied to a local gang, whose members recently took part in a brutal massacre in a warehouse. While the perpetrators, Ross Brown and Diego Alvarez, claim to have been unconscious during the massacre, experts believe that they savagely murdered the other people partying in the warehouse under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs. Coming up next, we’ll discuss how to protect your kids from the latest—”

The other barista, Aki, mutes the news, a look of disgust on her face. No one seems to mind. The massacre was a minor sensation when it first happened but everyone’s interest waned with each passing day. No one wants to hear about the horrible things routinely happening in their neighborhood.

As Matt carries a tray full of dirty dishes to the kitchen, he hears a familiar gruff voice.

“Pfft. Gangs. What a load of bullshit.”

Matt lays the tray down on an empty table and walks over to Jack, seated on a worn barstool and looking darkly amused.

“What do you mean? What else could it be?”

Jack looks at Matt carefully, sizing him up. He takes a long sip from his coffee mug before answering.

“Talk to me after closing. I want to tell you about something important.”

Ten minutes later, the customers leave and Matt and Aki clean up the place. Outside Matt can see Jack sitting on a bench by the street, waiting for him.

“I don’t think he’s going to leave. Do you want me to finish up so you can talk to him?” Aki offers. She eyes Jack suspiciously. “Someone should be in here by a phone in case, you know.”

“He’s harmless” Matt says, rolling his eyes.

“Have you seen that scar? I bet he wrestles bears or something.”

“Good thing I’m not a bear.”

“Matt.”


Aki nods.

“Don’t get yourself killed out there, yeah? The paperwork we’d have to fill out would be a nightmare.”

Matt heads out while Aki cleans, keeping his backpack close to his chest. It’s an anxious, defensive posture, but he’s been on edge these days. It’s hard not to walk through the world without thinking it wants your blood.

Jack takes a drag from a big, chunky cigar, blowing clouds of smoke into the rainy night. He looks up at Matt, who stands awkwardly in front of his bench.
“Son, have you ever seen something that completely changed the way you looked at the world?”

Matt blinks, taken aback. He didn’t know what to expect from this, but he sure as hell didn’t expect that opener.

“Oh, I guess? I mean, I took it pretty hard when I saw my parents putting out the Christmas gifts and not Santa.”

Jack chuckles, low and rumbling, like a tremor in the earth.

“That’s, uh, quaint. But not quite what I had in mind.” He takes another drag. “I heard your friend is missing. Tell me, had she met anyone recently who seemed real interested in her? Maybe someone who was too good to be true?”

Matt thinks back to Emily’s cheerful, drunken ramblings about Jess.

“Why do you want to know?”

Jack blows out another puff of smoke, watches it twist and turn in the breeze.

“I think I know what happened to your friend.”


“I’m guessing it was a pretty lady about her age. Sound familiar to you?”

“But, she died,” Matt blurts out. “There was a girl there at the party with Em, but she died in the massacre.”

“Did she now? Did you ever get any proof?”

“I mean, they said—”

“Have you ever seen a list of the victims? A full list?” Jack gestures to his patchy messenger bag. “Cause I got one. Take a look and see if you recognize any names.” He pulls out a newspaper clipping and, despite his reticence, Matt takes it. He scans the list of names, looking for a “Jess” or “Jessica” or “Jessamine”.

He doesn’t see it on there. In fact, despite Emily claiming that there were numerous pretty women there, virtually all the names on this list are those of men.

“This can’t be right.” Matt mumbles, scanning the names, again and again, hoping his eyes are deceiving him.

“I don’t think those ladies were counting on a witness escaping,” Jack says. “In fact, I don’t think they expected her to show up at all. So they decided to get rid of her.”

Matt’s blood runs cold.

“That—that’s insane. A bunch of women killing people in parties for no fucking reason? That’s fucking ridiculous.”

“No reason,” Jack growls. “They were hungry.”

Before Matt can react to that, Jack pulls something else, a worn old book, out of his bag and hands it
to him. “I doubt you believe me. Doesn’t matter, because you will. There are people out there who took your friend and either killed her or turned her into a monster. Odds are, they’ll be looking for you next. You need to know what these things are and what they can do.”

Matt doesn’t know what to do with the book, but it seems impolite to give it back, so he stuffs it into his bag with a forced smile.

“Uh, thanks. Look, thanks for telling me all this, but I have to go look for my friend.”

Jack snorts.

“Don’t bother. Your friend is already dead. And if she isn’t, then what’s left of her is a soulless demon that needs to be destroyed.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Matt blurts out. He’s liked Jack, respected him until now, but his callousness is grating on him in a major way. “Don’t fucking talk about Emily that way. Okay?”

Jack glares at him.

“Fine, then. I said what I needed to say. Run along and get yourself killed, kid. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He gets up and walks away, into the night, not bothering to look back.

Matt turns and catches Aki’s eye. He’s glad she didn’t overhear that shitshow. She’s watching them from behind the counter, glowering at Jack’s retreating figure.

Matt forces a smile, hoping she doesn’t see just how rattled he is.

See, not a bear, he mouths, smiling genuinely when Aki just flips him the bird in response.

He’s not rostered to help Aki with the close, so he heads off towards his car, getting more and more pissed with every step. He’s the only one who works at the diner who gives Jack the time of day. If he’s sitting next to a window, Matt lets him smoke his nasty cigars, never hassles him to give up his seat, even if he barely orders anything, and turns a blind eye to when he spices his coffee with a dash of rum. And this is how Jack repays him.

He’s getting desperate. Getting his hopes up for the ramblings of a crazy old man. Handing out fliers and getting nothing in response is demoralizing, and for a split second Matt thought Jack might be onto something, anything. Jesus. Grief is turning his brain upside down.

When he gets to his car, he leans against the hood, trying to get Jack’s words out of his head. Maybe because it’s the middle of the night, and strange tragedies seem to be befalling him lately, but the more he thinks about it, the more he thinks Jack may be right about Jess. It could be that Jess just gave Emily a fake name, but there were still only two or three women on the list of victims when, according to Emily, there had been at least ten women there, all beautiful and haunting and utterly unforgettable. Jack’s demon theory is undeniably batshit, but Matt can’t deny that something doesn’t add up.

“Matt?”

“Holy Jesus!” Matt yelps, springing off his car like it’s made of molten lava. He whirls around, fists clenched, ready for a fight when—

“Did I scare you?” Hannah asks, blinking at him innocently, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. “Hannah,” Matt gapes. He almost wants to rub his eyes, just to check he isn’t dreaming.
“You remembered me?”

“Of course...you’re kind of unforgettable,” Hannah’s eyes widen, and if he could, Matt would kick himself. Great. Two seconds in and he’s already made a fool of himself.

“It’s just...you know...you keep appearing out of nowhere. That’s definitely unforgettable.”

If she thinks he’s a fool, she doesn’t show it, smiling at him so kindly it makes him feel immediately at ease.

“You work at that cafe? The one across the street? I was going to go in for a drink but I saw you and I thought I’d say hi.”

“Oh, um. Cool. I’m glad you did.”

“So,” she says, leaning up against the car next to him. Matt tries to ignore how his skin prickles with heat just by having her near. “Whatcha doing?”

“Oh,” he says. He realizes with a sad jolt that he doesn’t have time to talk to this pretty, sweet girl. She looks even more gorgeous than he remembers, all dark eyes and pale skin and hair that looks so soft it almost aches not to touch it. But what pretty girl is going to want to follow him on this grim mission? He’s no casanova, but he’s pretty sure standing around in the frigid night air handing out missing girl posters is a major buzzkill.

“I was just going to put up some more fliers, then call it a night.”

“Your friend hasn’t been found yet?”

His stomach twists. “No.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, and she sounds it. “I can help?”

“What do you mean?”

“Helping you hand out your posters, silly.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t ask you to do that...”

“Good thing I’m not asking. I’m telling,” Hannah says, eyes dark and mischievous. She gets up and reaches towards him, hands out, waiting and expectant. “Well?”

Well. He’s hardly one to refuse a pretty lady’s demands.

“Okay. We’ll do it together. But I’m buying you a thank-you drink afterwards.”

Hannah’s smile couldn’t be sweeter.

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“Okay, so this is the only bit I haven’t really canvassed yet. I was thinking of sticking up some fliers between here and 44th street.”
“Hmmm,” Hannah says, looking down at the map, worrying her lower lip between her teeth, and Matt has to look away because he’s staring and it’s embarrassing. “I’ll take these two blocks.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to split up. It’s dark… who knows who’s out there.”

“I’ll just be a street away. If I see anything strange, I’ll scream. I bet you’ll come running.”

He hopes she doesn’t notice him flush. “Are you sure? Hannah, honestly, we can do this together…”

“It’ll take me five minutes, I promise,” she says, reaching out towards him, long fingers brushing against his.

“Hannah,” he says, aghast. “You’re freezing.”

“Oh,” she looks sheepish, adjusting her glasses self-consciously. “Sorry. I get like this sometimes. I have a weird… blood pressure thing when I don’t eat.”

“Jesus,” Matt says, dropping his bag to the ground. Hannah’s wearing a slinky, dark top. She looks great (better than great if he’s being honest) but no wonder she’s cold. Matt curses himself for not picking it up earlier.

He strips off his jacket, walking forward and wrapping it around Hannah’s shoulders. Hannah offers him a sweet smile, and Matt feels the tips of his ears get hot.

“Such a gentleman,” she teases. “No wonder Emily liked you.”

“Oh, no, we’re just friends,” Matt says with a laugh. “And even if we did like each other like that, trust me, we would not work out.”

Hannah raises her eyebrows.

“Oh? Why not?”

“Just trust me on that one.” He hands Hannah a small pile of posters. “Uh, do you want my number? Just in case something happens and you need to call…”

“I would love that,” Hannah says. She holds the posters to her chest with one hand and pulls out her phone with the other. Matt gapes at the sight of it. It’s a sleek, incredibly expensive model of smartphone, a model that, according to this dad, isn’t even supposed to be in public markets for a year. “Heh, you like? I have a friend in the industry.”

Matt feels a little shabby giving her his own phone. It’s not ancient or anything, but it’s definitely several steps down from hers. They exchange numbers, and Matt takes back his phone to see that Hannah put a little heart emoji next to her name in his contacts. When he looks back up, she’s already heading off to her chosen blocks.

Her flirtation is making him dizzy. He nearly runs into a wall on his way to the other blocks. But looking down at the posters and seeing Emily’s face staring back up at him steels his resolve.

_Come on Matt_, he thinks. _Get in the game._

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He’s putting the sticking the last picture up on a lamppost when he feels the hair on the back of his neck begin to tingle. He glances around, once, twice.

Nothing. The street is empty and silent, save for the sound of sirens screeching in the distance.

Shrugging, he goes back to work. It’s a clear, bright night, but there’s menace in the air. Maybe it’s all dilapidated buildings. This street, like the area in general, is half abandoned, and he gets the uncomfortable feeling he’s being watched. He probably is. All these empty spaces would be a magnet for squatters. For about the millionth time tonight he chastises himself for leaving Hannah all alone in the sketchy part of town.

Sometime clatters behind him. He spins around, eyes peering down the empty street behind him.

“Hello? Hannah?”

Nothing.

He shoves his hands into his pockets. He’s going insane. If he’s going to jump at every sound, then he’s definitely done for the night. The last thing he wants is for Hannah to think he’s a total wuss.

He picks up his bag while pulling his phone out of his pocket, smiling a bit when he scrolls down his contact list, eyes lingering over the little heart next to Hannah’s name. His thumb hovers over her number, and he’s about to press down when—

“BOO!”

“Agh!”

He staggers back, hand on his heart, trying not to swear. “Oh, god.”

“Whoa, sorry there,” Hannah says, looking apologetic. “I didn’t mean to scare you….well, I did mean to scare you, but not like, scare you, scare you, you know?”

“I just…wow…someone should put a bell on you or something,” he says, trying to ignore how pretty Hannah looks when she smirks at him. “Why…why do you keep doing that?”

“Sorry. It’s just you…you have a really cute startled face and I couldn’t help myself. Sorry. Let me make it up to you by buying you a drink.”

“No way. I gotta buy you a drink, I mean, I can’t thank you enough, helping me hand these out…”

“It’s nothing, really,” Hannah says. “Let’s go find somewhere first then argue about the drinks later.”

“Sure,” he scratches the back of his head, suddenly very aware they are in the middle of nowhere in the shabby part of town. It’s probably best if they drive somewhere, even if it’s at least a twenty minute walk to his car.

“I know a place we can go,” Hannah says, as if reading his thoughts. “It’s a little way away, but we can get there in no time if we hustle.”

“My car’s not too far away. We can always just drive.”

“Drive? Where’s the fun in that?” She takes his hand. She still feels quite cold, even though she’s wearing his bulky jacket. “Follow me.”

Then she’s tugging his hand, and they take off running. He’s sprinting to keep up as they run down
the street, Hannah’s hand closing around his own in a vice-like grip. They run a block, then two, Hannah barely breaking her stride, long-legs gliding over the pavement.

“Through here,” she says, tugging his arm. They make a sharp left turn and run down a small alleyway. Hannah evading the puddles of water and debris like it’s nothing. Matt moves as fast as he can, pulled gently along in Hannah’s slipstream.

They make another sharp turn, then another, Matt starting to feel overwhelmed and dizzy at their frantic pace. Hannah glances back at him, a wide smile on her face.

“Come on, slow poke. Can’t you keep up?”

‘Oh is that a challenge?’ he thinks, gritting his teeth. His lungs may be aching, but he’s not a quitter. Not now, not ever.

He speeds up, matching her step for step as they continue to weave their way through Los Angeles backstreets like a pair of street urchins until finally they slow down, stopping in a nondescript alleyway.

Matt suppresses the urge to go down on his haunches and suck in as much air as he can. Hannah, on the other hand, looks poised and unflustered.

“Wow. That was impressive. Not many guys can keep up with me.”

“Yeah, well,” he gasps, trying to keep it cool even though he’s dying a bit inside. “I work out.”

“Clearly,” she says, eyes glinting. She turns and nods towards a doorway. “We’re here.”

He blinks. The alleyway is deserted, but if he strains his ears he can hear the faint sound of what could be a saxophone. As he gets closer he sees a some steps, at the bottom a thick, dark door.

“Vino?” he asks, eyeing the sign.

“It’s Italian for wine, and they serve some of the best here,” Hannah says. She knocks her shoulder against his, playful all of a sudden. “Come on then. Follow me.”

‘This has to be the weirdest night ever,’ he thinks, but follows Hannah down the stairs nonetheless.

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The place is fancier than he expects, plush carpets, low lights and sleek wooden benches everywhere he looks. There’s a man on a stage, playing the sax, and Matt finds himself nodding in time with the music. But while the atmosphere is great, the more he looks, the more out of place he feels. Most of the customers are sophisticated, older, late twenties at least, dressed in expensive clothing and actually sniffing their wine before taking a sip. It’s so different from anywhere Matt has ever been before that he suddenly feels awkward, standing around in his t shirt, jeans, tattered sneakers and carrying an old black bag.

“In here,” Hannah says, brushing her fingers against his. Matt follows her lead. She’s clearly in charge of...whatever this is.

“After you.”
“Thank you,” Hannah beams, settling into their small, intimate booth. He slides in across from her, trying not to stare too obviously at how the candlelight flickers across her glasses.

“This place is really nice. How’d you find it?”

“Oh, I think by now I know Los Angeles like the back of my hand.”

“That right?” Strange. She looks barely older than him. “Well, would my knowledgeable companion like a drink?”

“You’re not going to let that go, are you? Sure, I’ll have a strawberry daiquiri.”

“Cool,” he says, getting up. “Do you want some food too?”

“Oh,” Hannah says, her voice low and soft. “I’m fine. Maybe later, though.”

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After popping into the bathroom to wash the sweat from his face, he gets a beer and Hannah’s strawberry daiquiri, ignoring the bartender, who just mutters ‘kids’ when he places his order. When he returns, conversation flows easily between them. He tells her about his parents, ER nurses who met in school, and his sister, who’s sweet and charming and almost scarily smart. He skirts around himself, and his future, and instead describes his loved ones, but if Hannah notices his aversion to talking about himself, she doesn’t comment on it. He learns she’s a college student, studying French, and that she has a twin sister and lives with a group of friends on the edge of the city.

“When do you graduate?”

“In a couple of months.”

“What do you want to do?” She asks, gazing at him curiously.

Oh. He should be prepared for this question by now, but he’s not. Matt fumbles around for a lie, but settles for a half-truth instead.

“I dunno. It’s hard... So much stuff is up in the air. I just...I can’t focus on the future right now. I can’t.”

“So you’re living in the moment? You sound like my friend. She never plans past next week.”

“Oh yeah,” he takes a deep swig of his beer. Maybe it’s the candlelight, or the music, but for the first time in weeks he feels almost at ease. “She sounds like trouble.”

“You have no idea.”

They share a grin. He feels his heart race a bit when he notices her eyes lingering on his lips. She blinks, and looks away like she’s embarrassed, both them trying to ignore the tension crackling between them.

“So,” Matt clears his throat. “Twin sister, huh? I bet you tried to fool everyone growing up.”

“We did. We used to dress up in identical clothing and pretend we had some weird, psychic
connection, like out of a horror film, just to freak people out. But you wouldn’t mistake us now. She has short hair and bangs and is all tough and no-nonsense. Not like me.”

“Hey, you’re plenty tough. We ran, like, ten blocks and you acted like it was nothing.”

“That? Oh that was nothing….I mean I was cheating a bit, since I have long legs.”

_Hell yeah you do_ , he thinks before he can stop himself.

“My sister’s great though,” Hannah sighs. “I don’t know what I would do without her. She takes care of me.”

“But…."

“Well, obviously she’s not like your sister. She’s not perfect,” Hannah laughs, poking his leg with her shoe. “I love her. But she’s grumpy. Like, all the time. And an annoying stickler for rules. And she has the worst habit of sleeping with my friends.”

Like an idiot, he chokes on his beer.

“Wait...she sleeps with your friends?” He splutters.

“Yeah. Well, uh... one friend. They’re over now though.”

“Oh.” His mind is buzzing. Hannah said they were identical twins. Or practically identical. He feels his heart leap into his throat. Does that mean...

“You don’t like girls though?” he blurts out.

There’s a horrible, split second pause, and Matt’s convinced he has blown it, that’s he’s offended her and she’s going to get up and walk out of his life forever. But she doesn’t. Instead she giggles. It’s a high, delicate sound, and it makes him want to laugh, too.

After a heavy beat, she leans down and wraps her mouth around her tiny straw, pursing her lips around the plastic, taking a long, deep sip, dark eyes never leaving his face.

She swallows, a small pink tongue darting out to lick her lips. For a split second, he forgets how to breathe.

“No,” she says, a coy smile playing on her lips. “No, not at all.”

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She buys him a drink, then another, amused at how he becomes more and more animated as the time passes by. Soon, he’s cracking terrible jokes and telling her stories from his childhood. It’s sweet. Like him. She’s surprised how much she likes his company, enjoying how she can coax this shy, serious boy out of his shell.

Eventually, though, she sees his eyes starting to droop a bit. She glances at her phone. Three a.m. She’s wide awake, but Matt’s fatigue is writ large on his face.

She smirks. Maybe she should tuck him into bed, then.
Matt insists on accompanying Hannah to her car. She scrutinizes him closely as they walk besides each other in easy silence. Over the years Hannah’s targeted dozens of men for…special attention. She’s seen all kinds by now. Shy men, brash men, men who pretend they have nothing to hide. In the end it’s the same. She’s their fantasy, nothing more. Matt, though, is almost achingly sincere. Hannah can’t detect in him the yawning want that haunts most men the way bloodlust haunts vampires. Most men wear their lust for power and sex and gratification, but Matt somehow betrays none of this, despite clearly not being an expert when it comes to subtlety. She searches for any hint that he’s a fraud but finds none.

That’s…novel.

“Well, this is me,” she says, coming to a stop by her tiny black Fiat.

For the first time in hours Matt becomes a bit uneasy. He shoves his hands in his pockets, like he’s unsure what to do with them. She has plenty of ideas, and she’s certain he’d like all of them.


“My pleasure,” she says, making sure there’s a sultry edge to her voice, eyes lingering over his body in a not-so-subtle fashion. He squirms under her gaze. It’s so adorable Hannah has to fight back the urge to snap the tension between them and press her lips against his.

Whatever feelings he has for Emily, they don’t stop him from wanting her too.

“Are you going to be okay getting home?” he asks.

It’s an opening. If she wanted, she could have him tonight. It’s not like she hasn’t thought about it. He’s so close to giving in, fatigue and concern making him lonely and in need of comfort. He’d be an earnest and attentive lover, and Hannah could make up for his lack of experience. She’d love to savour him for as long as she can, making him gasp and squirm for hours until the deed was done.

“I’m fine. Thanks,” she says eventually, feeling a bit flattered when she senses his disappointment. “This has been really fun. Would it be okay if I come by and see you at work sometime?”

He nods eagerly. He’s such a sweet, sensitive boy.

He’s going to be a delicious treat.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, poor Matt. This kid is in way over his head. His weakness for pretty, feisty women may well be the death of him. Maybe. (;

Leave a comment if you liked it! (I’m starting on last chapter’s comments soon. I meant to get to them last week but my college schedule was crazy busy. Sorry!)

As always, I want to thank my cowriter holeybubushka for being talented, dependable, and altogether wonderful. I couldn’t do this without her!

Thanks for reading!
He doesn’t look at it for days, until finally, curiosity gets the better of him.

Matt picks up the tattered book Jack has given him, opening it up and flicking through the first couple of pages.

“Okay,” he mutters. “Let’s see how crazy you are.”

‘This is a book about a creature called the Vampyre,’ the first page read. ‘Only a few men have dared to hunt these cursed creatures. Heed these words, or it shall be you that dies by its hands. And you will not be the last.’

‘Whoa,” Matt mutters. He wants to put the book down, go downstairs, watch the game with his dad, or annoy his little sister, but there’s something that keeps him here, locked in his room, reading the words of a madman.

‘Some of the lore is well known, but much of the rumors are hearsay and lies. Here is the truth. Indeed, they do have a craving for blood, a need so deep it cannot be sated. They hunt in packs, like wild demons, but they choose their victims carefully. Poor souls, on the fringes of society, who will not be missed. The vampyre is strong and can rip through flesh as easily as a man may rip cloth, and they can heal nearly every wound, but there are ways to defeat them. Prolonged exposure to sunlight (3-5 minutes approx) will turn them into ash and tar. I have it seen it. Bullets will pierce their skin, but not kill, though a shotgun will keep the cursed creatures at bay. They are susceptible to fire, and bright lights, shone directly into their eyes, will stun them. They cannot enter a private residence without an express invitation from its owner; be wary of strangers who may try to earn this invitation from you. Garlic, crosses and holy water do not work, nor do any other religious objects; so far fallen are these monsters from God that they no longer fear him. An unarmed man is no match for a vampyre, but when they are stunned they are vulnerable, and that is when one must strike; a stake to the heart will kill them.’

Matt flips through another few pages, barely able to believe what he’s reading.

‘There may be others, but the ones I hunt dwell only in California. They are a group of cursed women, beautiful, soulless creatures who leave carnage in their wake. They keep their identity secret, but I know them.

For every demon who dies, by my hand or by some other twist of fate, they add another woman to take her place. They target lost souls, lured into their cult by a glamorous outsider, who promises these poor girls the world before damning them. They have taken my own child. Alexandra. They have taken my little girl and snuffed out her soul and for that they will all pay.’

There are a few illustrations alongside the scribbling, surprisingly impressive profiles of women with black eyes and the classic vampire fangs in their open mouths. Matt wonders if Jack had been an
artist before he went off the deep end. The next few pages are filled with newspaper clippings and missing posters, some dating back to the 1930’s.

**Couple Disappears Days Before Their Wedding**

**Local Used Car Giant Found Dead**

**Four Missing From Castro Apartment: Bloody Scene Suggests Foul Play**

**Fiddler Case Goes Cold; Missing Co-Ed Presumed Dead**

**Fifteen Slaughtered In Lincoln Heights Massacre**

**Disappearance of Two Young Women After Emergence of Homophobic Viral Video Raises Concerns About Cyberbullying**

Matt shakily puts the book down, immediately feeling bad for having judged Jack so harshly before. Matt’s never known grief, not really, not the type that sneaks into your mind and warps your thoughts until one day, you’re writing a book on the existence of vampires. But then again, Matt feels like he’s going out of his mind, and Emily only been missing for a month. Jack’s daughter has been dead for almost a decade.

Still, looking through the pages, there is one thing that stands out to him. One trend that Jack, in his grief-stricken ramblings, may have stumbled upon. There’s a disturbing pattern of beautiful, young women from disadvantaged backgrounds going missing. If Jack’s clippings are right, then every ten years or so, vulnerable women are being targeted.

That means Emily is probably alive. Whoever has taken her, for whatever means, she probably has years before… they need to find someone else.

And before then, he’ll find her.

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Nobody told Beth being an immortal vampire could be so tiring.

She let Alex out of the pit this as soon as the sun sunk below the horizon today. Poor soul looked almost broken, hunched over and shaking, too afraid to look Beth in the eye. She’s not sure why. It’s not as if Beth was the one who decided she should be in the pit. She’s only doing what she’s told. Without order, there’d be chaos.

Alex was never one for socializing. Since Bev turned her back in 2000, she’s kept largely to herself, and Beth’s pretty sure she’s only heard her talk a handful of times in the past few years. Still, she’s always done what she was told to do, up until now. It scares Beth to think of this virus of insurrection spreading through the clan. If respectful, loyal Alex is giving into rebellion, what’s to stop everyone else?

Alex flees into the darkness of the mansion to sulk, leaving Beth alone in the darkened foyer. Beth can tell the mansion is almost deserted. Tamika and Sophie were gone at dusk and Bev had enticed some of the other girls to go out a group hunt.
“Don’t wanna come, Beth?” she’d asked. “Who knows, you might find yourself another new fledgeling to fuck. Is it gonna be another dumb blonde like Saint Samantha or that brainless whore who’s fingering the new bitch?”

It hurts, hearing her name, and it fills her with rage to hear Jess written off as a brainless whore, but after decades of putting up with Bev, she knows better than to engage her. A fight is just what Bev wants, especially when she has an audience to back her up.

Bev’s got a new clique now. Tamika spends most of her time with Sophie nowadays and Amy hasn’t talked to anyone much since Pam got killed. Now there’s Mia, Violet, and Aishah; a group of naive, gossipy vampires that follow Bev around like sheep. And Beth is their favorite target.

Sighing, Beth stalks toward her room. She’s supposed to go out and hunt tonight, but everything with Alex and the wine has taken a lot out of her. Her stomach aches but the thought alone of going out and spending the whole night chasing after more screaming humans is exhausting. Thankfully, there’s a couple of spare bottles in her room in case of emergencies. Hardly anyone knows about it; she doesn’t want to get caught being a hypocrite, even if Cass technically allows her to hoard the bottles herself so long as she doesn’t go overboard.

Beth pushes open her door with a sigh before she hears a gasp and a thud. She tenses.

“Hello?”

No one answers. There’s a brief moment of total stillness before Beth moves carefully into the room. She gets a flash of guilt and panic in her mind and stops.

Even after all this time, Jess has never been good at shutting her out.

“Jess?”

A familiar blonde head of hair peeks out from behind her bed. Jess brushes her hair away from her face, looking embarrassed.

“Oh, uh. Hey.”

“What are you doing?”

“I was just...uh...you know. In here. Hanging out.”

“Hanging out under my bed.”

“...Yes?”

Beth walks further into the room and Jess moves back a bit, startled. As she does there’s a soft thud and the sound of something smooth rolling around on the carpet. Beth and Jess watch in silence as an unopened bottle of Beth’s blood wine rolls a few feet away from where Jess is kneeling.

“Jess…”

“This isn’t what it looks like, Beth, I swear.”

Beth sighs and closes the door to her room, switching on the light and glaring down at her wayward fledgling. Jess swallows and stands up slowly, another bottle held in her right hand. She looks a bit like she wants to jump out the window and make a run for it, but instead she quietly picks up the fallen bottle and walks over to Beth, handing them over without a word.
“Why were you in here, Jess? Why were you really in here?”

“I was just—”

“Jess.”

Jess presses her lips into a thin white line. Her mind is full of blaring static and racing thoughts. She looks away and back like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

“Emily’s not eating. She won’t kill. If I don’t do this for her, she’ll starve—”

“That was supposed to be the whole point, Jess,” Beth says, fighting to keep her voice level. “Emily’s on trial, remember?”

“I know, but—”

“Cassandra’s not fucking around, Jess. If you don’t get Emily killing, you’re both gonna suffer for it.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“No, I don’t think you do,” Beth snarls. She closes her eyes, sees Alex’s haunted expression flash before her. “You’ve been stealing the wine, haven’t you?”

“Beth…”

“Ugh, Jesus fucking Christ, I cannot believe you. Alex was down in the pit for a week. You just let her rot in there, when all that time, it was you. How could you do that?”

“I’m sorry okay, I’m really sorry, and I did feel really super bad about Alex, okay, I did, but what do you want me to do? If I’m down in the freaking pit, who’s going to take care of Emily?”

“I’d take care of her,” Beth snaps, feeling a bit hurt in how little faith Jess has in her.

“You’d let her starve, more like,” Jess challenges. Beth can feel a rush of hot anger surging through her fledgling’s veins. Jess advances towards her, and Beth has to resist the urge to take a step back. She hasn’t seen Jess this angry for decades. “If I wasn’t here to protect her, you’d let her starve until she snapped and killed some old lady. Then we’re back to square one. Only worse, cause she’s gonna be even more reluctant to kill.”

“Well maybe if you’d been thinking with your head and not your crotch during the kill party, you wouldn’t have sired an unfit fledgling and we wouldn’t be in this mess!” Beth fires back. “I of all people should know how dangerous it is to turn someone weak just because you—” She stops. Jess’s expression softens slightly. “And anyway, stealing blood is a big-freaking-deal,” Beth continues, feeling even more shaken and tired than when she let Alex out of the pit. Thinking about her is always draining. “Do you think blood wine just magically appears? Do you think it’s easy to replace a stolen bottle? Don’t you realize that every last one is meticulously sourced, and that it takes fucking months of planning to provide a whole basement worth of blood?”

“Okay, okay, I won’t do it anymore, jeez,” Jess says. “I get it, I’ll stop, mild misunderstanding, no harm done, okay?”

“Jess, this is serious,” Beth says. “Emily has to kill. I know I’m being a major fucking hardass about this, but if she doesn’t, then she’s gonna die, Jess. And you’ll have to do it.” It’s hard enough, losing a fledgling, but killing your own would destroy anyone.
“Beth, I promise you, she’s going to get there,” Jess says. “She’s not going to kill unless I get her to like it. And I have a plan for that.”

Beth raises an eyebrow.

“I don’t know if I like your plans.”

“Trust me. Everyone’s got someone they’d kill if they would get away with it, right?” Jess says. “I know how to tap into that. Just give me some time.”

Beth wants to argue some more, to get the gravity of the situation through Jess’s maddeningly thick skull, but she’s getting a headache from arguing and lecturing and having to play the hardass all the fuckin’ time. She rubs her temple.

“You’re tense as fuck, Beth,” Jess says.

“You’re not helping my stress levels lately,” Beth fires back.

“Maybe you should go lower those stress levels,” Jess says, smiling a tiny bit. “If I were having to take orders from Cassandra all the time, I’d need to unwind and get laid like every night.”

“Jesus, Jess,” Beth says, stifling a laugh in spite of herself. “Is sex your answer for everything?”

“Of course not. Sometimes violence is the answer instead,” Jess says. She grins. “Sometimes both.” Beth rolls her eyes. Jess more than anyone she’s ever met has an incredible ability to avoid her wrath with just a cute look and a few dumb jokes. It’s infuriating. “Anyway, if you’re feeling pent up, I’m sure your pal Diane could help you let off some steam.”

Beth’s glad she hasn’t eaten today. Blushing right now would only make things worse.

“I hate you sometimes, Jess.”

“Come on! I like your foxy mama cougar friend, even if she is a little, you know, dusty.”

“Says the little old lady from 1934.”

“Hey now, don’t play the age game, grandma. We both know who’s gonna lose that one.” Jess laughs and Beth cracks a smile, but it’s hard to find it in her to laugh. She feels like there’s a pile of rocks in her chest. Jess moves closer to her and gives her shoulder a little squeeze. “Seriously though, are you okay?”

Beth shrugs.

“I’m fine. Things will be fine. I just…”

She doesn’t know how to put it into words, how everything feels flat and grey and heavy these days, how she dreads the coming of dusk, how she keeps feeling fuzzy and lost and forgetting what she’s supposed to be doing; how all the work and hunts and dalliances are starting to get repetitive, even boring.

Some days she just wants to sleep, and sleep, and sleep.

“Beth…?”

“I’m fine,” Beth says again. “It’s fine. You should, uh, go find Emily and take her hunting. Really hunting this time, got it?”
Jess winks.

“Don’t worry, boss. She’ll be Hannibal Lecter in no time.” She heads toward the door, looking not even the slightest bit guilty over stealing from the cellars. Of course she isn’t. Still, Beth can’t find it in her to be mad at Jess as her fledgling saunters out into the hallway.

Beth still has four or five hours before dawn, but she just walks over to her bed and crawls under the covers instead. She wasn’t planning to go out tonight anyway, and she might as well try to sleep this stress off. She hopes Cassandra never sees her like this, all listless and depressed. This sort of weakness is unacceptable.

Thankfully, she’s only trapped with her thoughts for a few minutes before she slips into a shallow but dreamless sleep.

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“So, I have to ask,” Jess says, breaking the silence and taking a swig of blood wine (the last in their stash, though Jess doesn’t seem worried). “What did you, like, see in Katie anyway?”

They’re sitting in the dusty living room of a vacant house across from Jason’s swanky suburban home, watching through the window for any sign of him. Jason stays out late on the weekends, always coming home at some inhumanly late hour, though his parents never seem to mind. It’s almost four in the morning and Jason hasn’t come back yet. In spite of everything, the part of Emily’s brain that still clings to her sundered bond with Jason is a little worried.

She shrugs, licking a bit of blood from her lips.

“I dunno. She was cute, I guess. And smart. And she didn’t take any shit, I liked that.” She remembers Katie’s voice getting low and mocking in the basement, remembers her eyes gleaming with disgust and contempt. She swallows, her throat feeling dry despite having just eaten. The thought of Katie still fills her with an awful anger she can barely stomach. “That’s what fucking gets me about this whole thing. I guess Jason was, like, maybe feeling bitter that I didn’t jump on his dick, but what did I ever do to Katie?”

Jess shrugs.

“I don’t know. Maybe she was just a dick. It’s not, like, great for your mental health to try to humanize someone whose neck you snapped.”

“...Fair point.”

“You’re gonna see that most people are way worse than us,” Jess tells her. “Like, we kill because we gotta eat. But humans hurt and kill and fuck with each other for, like, fun. You know?” She rubs the back of her head and sighs. “When you get older, you’ll see how much people repeat themselves. You think people are gonna learn and get better but then there’s another war or another mass shooting or another serial rapist. People’s lives get ruined every day by people who get off on making other people miserable. That’s who we pick off.” Jess glares at the floor. Her voice takes a hard edge. “The world’s better off without the scum we eat.”

There’s almost a full minute of silence as they sit in the dark, empty house. It’s only been a few days since the former occupants moved, but it still feels spooky and desolate; all the empty rooms covered
in dust and dull chrome fixtures with sheets thrown haphazardly over them. She hears the skittering of a mouse somewhere. It’s weird, being alone with Jess. Lord knows how high this girl’s body count is, and Emily knows what kind of awful monster Jess and the rest of the cult want to turn her into, but she’s charming, despite everything, and she’s the only one to show Emily kindness in the cult. She gets that it’s all just a ruse to get Emily to play along, but still, Emily thinks she’d go crazy without someone to talk to, even if that someone is an unrepentant spree murderess.

Desperate for something to fill the silence, Emily blurts out the first thing that comes to mind.

“How old are you?”

Jess bursts into laughter. It’s a pretty, joyful laugh that sounds a little weird coming from an undead serial killer.

“How old are you?”

Emily! Don’t you know you’re never supposed to ask a lady her age?”

“That’s weird, I didn’t see any ladies in here.”

Jess puts a hand on her chest in mock indignance, then cracks a smile.

“Fine, fine. If you insist. Let’s see, I was born back in 1934, and it’s 2014 now, so that makes me…” She mumbles the math to herself, counts on her fingers. “…Seventy—no—eighty years old.”

“Woah,” Emily says, not knowing what else to say. “That’s, like…”

“Don’t you dare call me old,” Jess teases. “I’m downright spy compared to Cassandra. She’s been around for five hundred years.” She smirks at Emily’s bemused expression. “Hey, don’t think of it as a bad thing. We get to be young and hot forever, you know? Unless you’re stupid and decide to go take a sunbath.”

“So the sunlight thing is true, huh?” Emily asks. “What other vampire rules are real? If someone, like, throws garlic at us, will we die?”

Jess laughs.

“No, thank god. But you can’t eat it or you’ll be sick. Though, that’s the same with everything that isn’t blood, so…” She shrugs. “Guess Bram Stoker or whatever saw a vamp eating garlic like a moron and decided it must be their secret weakness.”

“Can you turn into a bat?”

Jess scoffs and rolls her eyes.

“What? It’s just a question,” Emily protests.

“You might as well ask me if I sleep in a coffin or wear a cape,” Jess says. “I swear, Hollywood has done us so dirty. We’re either ugly demons with bad stage makeup or brooding sparkly hunk machines. It sucks.”

“Aw,” Emily says with mock disappointment, “we don’t sparkle?”

Jess is about to reply when the glare of headlights shines through the window. Emily and Jess look outside to find a familiar black Lexus pulling into a generically opulent suburban driveway. Emily can’t see Jason very well when he gets out, but his shoulders are slumped and he stumbles a bit as he heads to his garage door and fiddles with the garage keypad. He looks utterly spent.
“Huh,” Jess says. “Guess ruining your life took a toll on him.”

“He’s probably more upset about the trouble he got in,” Emily grumbles. Seeing Jason pulling his poor me act for the whole neighborhood to see is filling her with a new wave of bitterness. No, not bitterness—seeing him makes her blood stir and boil and the veins in her temples pulse. Something inside her twists up painfully and she clenches her fists until her knuckles turn white. Jess looks over at her.

“You good?”

“I...no. I feel like I’m gonna kill something.”

“That’s a good thing. The anger we feel is intense. Way, way more than human anger. It’s kinda hard to handle at first, but then you learn to use it.”

“To kill people.”

Jess gives her a ‘no duh’ expression.

“Hard to rip out someone’s trachea when you’re all ‘meh’ about them.”

“I...how are you so fucking chill about killing people?” Emily blurts out, turning her anger to outrage as she glares at Jess. “How can you be like, ‘oh, I’m hungry, guess I gotta butcher someone.’”

“How else are we gonna live, Em?” Jess retorts. “It’s either eat people or starve. We have to do this anyway, might as well kill the people who deserve it.”

They’re quiet for a bit, Emily feeling a pang of guilt in spite of herself. Jess has hurt and killed god knows how many people, but for some reason, Emily doesn’t have it in her to keep her anger at her burning for too long. Outside the window, Jason heads into his house, closing the garage door behind him, heading for the last peaceful night’s sleep of his life.

“Tomorrow’s Saturday,” Jess says, breaking the silence. “Think your little fuckboy will be out feeling sorry for himself again?” Wordlessly, Emily nods. “Good,” Jess says. “I’m sure he’d love for us to pay him a visit.”

He keeps a grim score in his head. He’s had a month to find to find her. That’s 720 hours and in that time he’s come up with exactly zero leads.

Well, unless he counts Jack’s tattered old diary, and he’s seriously skeptical of that.

The vampire stuff is bullshit, obviously, but Matt still had a tiny skerrick of hope that maybe Jack has stumbled on some clue he can use.

The more he looks into it, though, the more it seems the diary is nothing more than the ramblings of a man turned mad by grief. He’s desperate for anything, thumbing through the pages, but nothing makes sense. When he flips towards the back, he can see Jack’s underlined one clipping, about a used car salesman and his wife who, along with half a dozen homeless people, went missing in a small town just outside of Los Angeles in the 1950s.
Jack’s scrawled a note with what looks like a large red marker next to the article: *pattern consistent with clan. Female victim taken.*

Taken for what? Unhelpfully, Jack doesn’t elaborate.

Next to the article is a grainy, black and white picture of a young, good looking couple, with matching broad, beaming smiles. That must be the car salesman and his wife.

He stares at them, feeling a bit uneasy and sad. They looked so happy. Did they know what was going to happen to them? Did they have any idea their lives were going to snuffed out before it even begun?

“Ugh, this is bullshit,” Matt grumbles, trying to ignore the shiver that wriggles down his spine. Looking at old missing posters is creepy and will do absolutely nothing to help get Emily back. He hates taking anything Jason says seriously, except he’s right about one thing. The longer Emily is missing, the harder it’s going to be for him to get her back.

And he’s going to get her back.

He hears something beep next to him. He glances at his phone, hoping to see a text from Hannah. He feels a bit guilty, but he really enjoys their back and forth messages. She’s sweet, flirty, and uncomplicated, and quite possibly the only thing keeping him from completely flying off the handle.

But no. His phone is silent. The sound came from his laptop. Curious, he goes to investigate.

His computer is open at a website called NextOfKin. As far as sites go, it’s pretty grim. Every thread is filled with pictures of missing people, just from the east side of Los Angeles alone. Matt tries to ignore the dread that settles in his chest when he realizes many have been missing for a year, maybe more.

A fellow poster, some guy called ‘Max Schreck’, has sent him a private message.

“Max Schreck,” Matt mutters. He’s seen him on the forums before, but unlike most of the people on here he doesn’t come across as an conspiracy theorist weirdo. Before he can tell himself not to, he clicks on the message.

Max: *Yo. I wanted to talk to you about your friend. Emily.*

Matt pauses. He doesn’t usually talk to strangers on the internet, but right now he’s desperate.

Matt: *What do you want to know?*

Max: *Nice mom, good school, and valedictorian. She was on her way to an Ivy league, right?*

Matt grits his teeth, choosing to ignore the past tense.

Matt: *Yeah.)*

Max: *Doesn’t sound like most of the girls on here, right?*

Matt: *Dude, what’s that supposed to mean?*

Max: *Whoa now, Hulk Hogan, simmer down. I’m just saying.... This is a girl who has a lot to live for. No one turns down a free ride to an Ivy League, especially from her part of town. What are the police saying?*
Matt: *They’re telling me jack. I feel like I have find her myself.*

Max: *Nice one, bro. Stick it to man.*

Matt snorts. At least this guy has a sense of humor.

Max: *Seriously though, I want to ask you something about her, if you don’t mind.*

Matt grimaces and braces himself for something gross and cruel. If Max asks some trolling question about Emily’s sexual prowess just like every other damn freak who’s approached him, Matt’s gonna have to fucking kill something.

Matt: *Sure go for it*

Max: *Did she meet anyone in the days before that was like, nice and attractive and really friendly to her*

Matt thinks of Emily’s very, very detailed description of her night with Jess.

Matt: *You could say that. Why?*

Max: *Was the person male or female?*

Matt blinks in surprise. Everyone else he talked to about this assumed immediately that whoever took Emily was probably a guy. The only other person who even thought about it being a girl was Jack.

Matt: *Female. Why does it matter?*

Max: *I think there’s a pattern with Emily and a few other girls who went missing. These girls who are troubled somehow get approached by women who seem too good to be true, and then within days they disappear.*

Matt swallows. He remembers the mad scrawl in Jack’s book describing the exact same thing. Lovely, impossible women promising the world to girls on the fringes before those girls disappear like they never existed at all.

Matt: *Did they take someone from you too*

He send the message before he can stop himself. He doesn’t expect a reply but after a few seconds, Max sends another message.

Max: *Yeah. My sisters.*

Matt doesn’t know what to say to that. He’s utterly useless when it comes to this kind of thing. When he thinks about it, he could have prevented all of this by just being a better friend. He could have insisted Emily go to the hospital; he could have stopped her from going to that party; he could have kept an eye on Jason; he could have insisted on having Emily stay the night after the prank.


Max: *Do you know the name of the woman Emily met?*

Matt hesitates. It could very well be that this Max guy is pulling his leg, but he’s out of options and out of luck at this point. He’d rather stumble into a trap doing the right thing than sit around being the same useless idiot he always has been.
Matt: Jess.

Max: I know that name. I think Jess has taken others.

Matt: Are you sure? It could be a coincidence. Jess is a pretty common name.

Max: Positive. Check it:

Max posts links and pictures into the chat. Matt looks and sees the same pretty blonde woman in every photo. She looks strikingly similar to Mrs. Riley, but Matt chalks that up to coincidence. Still, it’s uncanny; with the bright blonde hair, dark green eyes and a flirty look on her face, she looks exactly like how Emily described her, right down to her, well—

Matt blushes. Emily wasn’t kidding about Jess’s boobs.

Max: I don’t know what’s going on, but I think this girl is part of it. We need to find out who Jess is.

Matt breathes out and stares at his monitor, feeling a tiny pang of hope. It might be nothing, or a coincidence, or a dead end, or even a trap, but after all this time, Matt finally, finally has a lead.

*Hang on Em,* Matt thinks as he looks through the pictures again, *I’m gonna find you, I swear.*

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Apparently, the vampire invitation rule doesn’t apply to cars.

Jess helps Emily up as she squeezes through a window in Jason’s Lexus that he conveniently forgot to roll up. Emily looks at Jess expectantly but Jess flashes her an awkward smile and gestures to the locked car door.

“If you could just open it, that’d be great,” she says. “I’d squeeze in after you but I don’t think the ladies are gonna fit.”

“The...oh,” Emily says, and blushes a bit. “Yeah, uh, right.” She flips the lock on the door and Jess opens it, flicking the latch closed again behind her.

They crawl into the back and hide under a dusty old seat cover, Jess snickering like a mischievous teenager as Jason’s footsteps sound and he opens the car door.

It’s nine at night. Jason’s headed out again to god knows where while his parents sleep, satiated by vague promises of his return time. Emily’s not feeling particularly forgiving toward this fucking prick, but she still has to wonder if he would have turned out better if his parents actually gave a shit about what he did when they weren’t around.

The car purrs to life and pulls out of the driveway. Emily holds still in the back, quietly amazed that Jason hasn’t noticed them yet. Over the faint sound of the engine, Emily can hear the quiet sound of Jason’s sobbing. Jess rolls her eyes.

“Bit late to pretend to care,” she mouths.

Eventually, Jason pulls into a parking spot somewhere and stops the car. Emily stays still, listening to the sound of him shuffling and pushing open the door, shutting it with a grunt. She hears the lock
click and waits for the sound of footsteps to fade before she and Jess throw off the blanket and get their bearings. Jason’s parked on a hill overlooking the city. Emily would guess from her surroundings that they’re just off the road leading into the most ridiculously wealthy parts of town. Emily peers through the window to see Jason leaning on the guard rail at the edge of the cliff, his back to them and what looks like a joint held in his right hand.

Pretentious fuck. Of course he deals with all of this by smoking a joint and looking over the city. What does he think this is, a sappy indie flick? Emily stares at his back, finding a new thing about him to hate with each passing second. She hates his tee shirts with obscure messages on the front. She hates his purposefully disheveled hair and his expensive clothing that tries so hard to look cheap and grungy. She hates his face, his voice, the way his nose turns up in self-satisfied disgust when someone disagrees with him. She hates his “poor me” shoulder slump and the melodramatic way he occasionally shakes with sobs, like he’s sorry. The rage simmers in her stomach and shoots corrosive poison into her guts. Just looking at him makes her want to vomit.

“Remember,” Jess says, “this is the guy who ruined your life. You’d be happy right now if it weren’t for him.”

For once, Emily can’t argue with her logic.

She gets out of the car. Jason doesn’t seem to hear the door slamming behind her, just keeps smoking and crying softly as he looks over the skyline, bloated with light and drowning out the night sky. Emily stands still, unsure how to approach this, as Jess gets out of the car behind her. She points at Jason’s head.

“He’s got headphones in. See?”

Emily squints and sees them, little bumps at the end of thin cables that she can just barely see in the electronic light from far, far below them. It almost feels unfair to take him by surprise like this, but then again, he did the same thing to her. She walks across the grassy knoll, a light breeze catching in her hair and rustling the manicured, too-green grass. Jess hangs back, but Emily can feel her anticipation like sugar melting on her tongue.

She gets right behind him. Jason doesn’t look up. Down in the city, a siren sounds.

“Jason,” she says.

He doesn’t respond.

“Jason,” she says, a little louder.

Again, nothing.

Emily rolls her eyes and grabs his headphone cables, ripping the buds out of his ears so fast and so forcefully one of his ears starts to bleed. Jason shrieks and staggers back, his headphones falling out of Emily’s grip to dangle by Jason’s side, still somehow jacked into the phone in his pocket. She can hear some sophomoric bullshit by The Smiths playing faintly from the buds.

“Emily,” Jason says, his voice breaking. There are tears in his eyes. Emily grits her teeth. Whether they’re genuine tears or not, she doesn’t care. She wants an apology, and she’s going to get one if she has to beat one out of him. “E-Emily…” Jason splutters, uncomprehending. “…I thought you were dead. What happened to you?” He moves in to hug her and she shoves him away. He stares at her, hurt.

“Oh, don’t give me that fucking look, you creep,” Emily snarls. “You know what you did.”
“Emily, listen—”

“No, you listen,” she snaps. “You don’t get to pull the whole ‘poor me’ act after you put my life in danger because I wouldn’t go out with you. You don’t get to treat your fucking friend like that just because she wouldn’t suck your dick. What, did you think because you were nice to me that you earned my body? Did you think that I told you I was gay to spite you? Was our friendship nothing but an attempt to get me to fuck you?”

“Em, I didn’t—I wasn’t—it was just, you know, a joke—”

“A joke? A fucking joke!?” Emily asks, her head growing hot with anger. “Do you know how many lesbians are raped and murdered and driven to suicide every year, Jason? Did you think my little disappearing act after you fucking outed me was a coincidence? Do you ever, ever, think about anyone besides yourself?”

“What the fuck?” Jason blurts out. “You go fucking missing for weeks, nobody hears anything from you, your fucking mother thinks you’re dead, and you come back just to yell at me? What’s wrong with you? Do you know how worried I was?”

“Oh, stop pretending to care,” Emily says. “If you really cared about me oh so much, you wouldn’t have fucked me over in the first place.” Distantly, Emily can feel the joy building inside of her sire as she watches this. She’s eating this shit up.

“I do care about you!” Jason says. “Damn it, Emily, I love you! I’ve loved you since we met! All I wanted was for you to be with me, but all you did was toy with me. You strung me along and cried on my shoulder and let me have the slightest hope you returned my feelings, and the second I finally worked up the courage to tell you how I felt, you rejected me for that big dumb oaf. And then you had to go and pretend to be a lesbian because you wanted so badly to be special or feminist or whatever. You broke my heart and stomped on the pieces, so yeah, maybe I wanted a little revenge, okay?”

“Are you serious? Do you hear yourself when you talk?”

“You don’t understand,” Jason whines, and Emily realizes how grating his voice is. If she were still mortal, she’s sure his bitching and moaning would be taking years off her life. “I was just angry. People made fun of me because I was a nerd. I’ve never had anyone, I’ve always been so alone. But you were different. You have to understand—”

Emily slaps him, hard, across the face. He drops to the ground from the force of the hit, clutching his cheek and whimpering. Jess, still standing by the car, bursts into laughter.

“Did you understand that?” Emily asks.

Jason says nothing, just sobs on the ground, pathetic and tiny. It’s like swatting a mosquito and watching it twitch and die on the ground, its legs and wings flailing uselessly. You almost feel bad for it, but not quite.

“Man,” Jess says, finally walking up to the two of them and smirking down at Jason, “I thought he’d never shut up.”

Emily looks down at Jason, who looks up at her with wide, frightened eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he whimpers, “I’m really, really sorry.”

“Yeah, I bet you’re sorry now,” Emily growls. “Poor baby, is this the first time you’ve actually had
to face some consequences? Sucks, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t understand,” he whines. Emily kicks him in the gut.

“This is all your fault, you know that?” Emily says. “If it weren’t for you, Katie would be alive right now, and I never would have ended up like this!”

“W-what…?” Jason splutters. “Katie’s…?”

“Oh, she’s super dead,” Jess interjects. “Your crush here did the honors.”

“What?” Jason looks up at Emily with shocked, accusatory eyes. “You killed her?! Why?!”

“Wow, this guy’s dim,” Jess comments.

“Here’s a better question,” Emily tells him. “Why shouldn’t I kill you?”

Jason tries to get to his feet and make a run for it, but Emily grabs him by the arm and twists. His pained squealing only sets her more on edge. She wants to rip out his heart and eat it while he watches. She wants to purée his guts. She wants him to feel as miserable and pained as he’s made everyone around him feel.

“I’m sorry,” Jason sobs. His face scrunches up as tears and snot dribble down his face. “I’m s-so sorry...I can’t...I wish I could take it back, r-really...I never, n-never thought it would...I wish...I’m sorry…”

“Wow, almost a coherent thought or two in there,” Jess snarks. She looks from him to Emily. “Em, honey? What do you say we put this pathetic little tool out of his misery?”

Jason struggles uselessly in Emily’s grip, tears spilling onto his shirt. Another Smiths song plays distantly from his ear buds. Emily listens to the sound of his heart thundering in his chest, his veins filled with the adrenaline that won’t save him.

Her mouth waters.

“Emily...please...oh please god no…!”

Emily yanks him forward and bites down hard on his neck, piercing his jugular with her teeth. Jason cries out and struggles weakly in her grip as his blood runs down her throat, hot and sweet. His pulse quickens as more blood spurts from the wound and into her mouth, Emily drinking deeply and gratefully. There’s a rush of ecstasy that the still blood in the wine bottles can’t even hope to imitate. There’s nothing in the world like this.

The pulse slows as Jason slowly grows limp in her grasp, twitching feebly before growing utterly still. Emily feels his heart slow, and slow, and stop.

She lets go of him and his body collapses to the ground like a ragdoll. She stares down at him, her eyes lingering far too long on his empty, half-closed eyes, his mouth agape in shock and pain. The expression would almost be funny if it weren’t so horrific.

With Katie, the kill had happened so fast and in such a fog of rage and hunger that Emily hadn’t had time to even process it. But with Jason, so pitiful and broken lying at her feet and with nothing else to distract her, she feels the full weight of what she’s done.

She’s killed two people. Horrible people, sure, but still people.
Jess walks over to her and puts a hand on her shoulder. Emily can’t meet her eyes; she just keeps staring at Jason’s corpse.

“So,” Jess says, “how do you feel?”

Emily opens her mouth, then closes it.

“…Em?” Jess asks again.

“I—I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Jess asks incredulously. “What do you mean, ‘you don’t know’? This guy ruined your life! Doesn’t it feel good to get back at him?”

“I guess.”

Finally, Emily manages to look up at Jess, who shakes her head, bewildered.

“That’s so, like, weird,” she says. “I mean, when I killed my husband, it was the happiest I’d ever been.”

“What?” Emily asks. “You killed your own husband?”

“Don’t be so shocked. He was an abusive piece of dog shit,” Jess tells her. “All men are. Just look at mister nice guy down there.” She spits on Jason’s body. “Come on. Let’s throw this guy in a ditch somewhere and call it a night.”

Numbly, she follows Jess’s command, kneeling and fishing out Jason’s car keys. She picks him up by his arms while Jess grabs his legs, and together they haul his corpse into the back of his Lexus. They’re quiet for the rest of the drive down to the pier, Emily staring out the window, watching fancy lawns and sleek buildings turn to crappy drug stores and chain restaurants and back again, everything awash in sickly yellow-orange light. The superficial glamor of the hills gives way to the grungy city, before giving way to boathouses and docks sticking out like broken bones into the filthy water of the bay.

She hates Los Angeles. She hates how the rich live in shameless opulence right next to some of the worst poverty and crime in the nation. She hates the muggy weather and the goddamn traffic and the gawking tourists. Everything about this damn place makes her blood boil, so it’s only fitting that the universe has decided to trap her in it for fucking eternity with a bunch of literal monsters.

They get to the dock at around two am. Without speaking to each other, they grab the body, wrap it in the blanket they found in the Lexus, and drag him to the edge of the pier.

There’s no one else around, thank god. Lights from the docks and seaside businesses reflect eerily in the salty, murky water. Of all the things Emily thought she’d be doing at nineteen years old, she wouldn’t have predicted giving someone a burial at sea.

His body lands in the water with a loud splash, floating for a few seconds before sinking below the waves. A wave of nausea grips Emily and she keels over, vomiting up something thick and red into the ocean.

“Emily…”

Jess moves over to her, helping her up and rubbing her back, her face full of concern. “Em, are you okay…”
“I—” Emily begins, then swallows down, curbing another wave of nausea. “I feel so…angry. A-all the time. And hungry and bitter and when I kill someone I—Jesus Christ, I enjoy it. What’s wrong with me?”

“Oh, honey,” Jess says, giving her shoulder a little squeeze. “It’s okay. You’ll get used to it, I promise. The first few kills are always the hardest. And you learn to manage the hunger. I promise you, you’ll learn to love being like this.” There’s almost painful sincerity in her big green eyes at it hits Emily that Jess might actually, genuinely believe that being a monster is a good thing.

The rest of the night is thankfully quiet. Jess and Emily drive back to Jason’s neighborhood, switch back to their car, and drive back to the mansion. Jess turns on the radio, humming along to some sugary pop song while Emily leans back and closes her eyes, trying to shut everything out.

She’s going to lose her mind. She can already feel the stress of what she’s done weighing down on her psyche, threatening to shatter it.

As the sounds of repetitive pop lyrics and soft humming fill the car, Emily wonders if the same thing has already happened to Jess.

Chapter End Notes

In a hurry so I can't talk long, but I hope you're enjoying the story so far! Emily's psyche is taking a beating, but I have faith in her to be able to resist the cult's siren song. Meanwhile, Hannah is sad and Matt's got a new cyber bromance in his life. Interesting developments all around! Leave a comment if you liked it. Thanks for reading!
She sees no harm in taking her time.

She’s usually done with a man after two or three weeks. She doesn’t like to let a hunt linger too long, preferring to strike just before the flirtation becomes stale. Scratch away at the surface and she finds that most men are terribly boring, after all.

And yet.

She watches Matt as he works at the diner, moving among the customers with practiced, affable ease. She can’t put her finger on it, but there’s something about this shy, guileless mortal that draws her in. She’s not sure how long she’s there, but it’s probably hours judging by how many customers have left the diner, leaving Matt and his co-worker almost alone. She’s barely conscious of the other humans. They don’t interest her; these pale, flat mortals. They’re nothing. Not compared to him.

“Hannah!” Matt says, sounding pleased when she appears at the doorway. “I wasn’t sure you were coming. Come in, come in.”

“Hey, I was in the neighborhood so I thought I’d drop by.”

“Cool,” he says, his eyes warm. “I’ll be finished up in a bit. You want anything?”

“Sure.”

“Lemme guess, the sweetest drink we have, but with added sugar.”

“I like ‘em sweet,” she says, smiling coquettishly at him, just the way he likes. Matt squirms and ducks his head, tips of his ears reddening slightly.

“Well, Aki can hook you up. I won’t be long, I swear.”

Hannah moves to the counter of the diner, taking a seat and glancing at the menu. They all taste the same, but regardless, she orders a pomegranate tea from the girl behind the counter. The girl, Aki, smirks at her.

“That’ll be five dollars,” Aki says, handing the tea over.

“Thanks.”

“You want me to get him to lift some more shit?”

“Excuse me?”
“Mr Muscles. My co-worker, who, I can’t help but notice, you can barely keep your eyes off.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t.”

“No, it’s okay. He likes it. He’s a big dude who likes lifting things. If that’s what you’re into.”

Clearly, it’s not what Aki is into, which means she either has terrible taste in men, or she’s gay, but whatever she is, Hannah senses an opportunity.

“How about instead,” Hannah whispers, pushing a twenty dollar bill towards Aki. “You take this and maybe Matt can get out early?”

“Really? He’s due to leave in like ten minutes anyway.”

“It’s for your inconvenience.”

“Uh, wow, okay, sure,” Aki turns towards the kitchen. “Hey Matt, I’m sick of your pretty face. Why don’t you get outta here.”

“Huh?”

“Get out of here. I’ll finish up. We’re about to close anyway.”

“Oh,” Matt glances at Hannah bashfully. She can see he’s eager to go, but he’s reluctant, probably because he doesn’t want to leave his colleague in the lurch. Hannah feels... an emotion she can’t quite name, surge into her chest.

“Cool, well if you’re sure,” Matt says. He turns to Hannah. “Hey, I’ll just get my things. Be back in a second.”

He leaves, and Hannah goes to stand by the door, already thinking of her plan of action. She’s so focused on her thoughts she almost misses the shuffle and cough of the human standing next to her.

“Got a light?”

The man looks like he’s come back from a war. He’s haggard, old before his time, and Hannah can smell the sour stench of tobacco and whiskey on his breath.

“Sorry, sir, I don’t.”

“Shame,” the man growls. He narrows the one good eye he has. The other is cloudy, and full of cataracts. Hannah tries not to stare. “You’re new.”

“I guess so.”

“I don’t much care for strangers.”

I don’t much care for old drunk men unless I’m hungry, Hannah wants to bite back. Instead, she sends him a timid smile.

“Is everything okay?” Matt says, coming up behind her.

“We’re fine.”

“Jack.”
“Just asking for a light, son. No need to get protective.” He scowls, before grunting and shuffling off into the night, throwing Hannah one last, suspicious look.

Hannah narrows her eyes. He could be trouble. She’ll have to keep an eye out on that one.

“Sorry about that. He’s like that with everyone, I swear.”

“It’s okay, I’ve seen creepier,” she says. She reaches for his hand. “Wanna get out of here?”

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It doesn’t take them long to get to the bar Hannah has picked out for them a few blocks away from Matt’s work. She has her fake ID at the ready, and is impressed by how realistic Matt’s is. She wonders when he uses it. He doesn’t seem the type to do much underage drinking.

Well, unless he’s with her.

“This place doesn’t serve a lot of food. There’s a burger joint over there if you want though.”

“Nah, it’s okay,” he gestures to himself, a little self consciously. “My body’s a temple and all that.”

*If your body’s a temple, mind if I worship at it?* she thinks, before internally groaning. Jeez. She’s been been hanging around Jess for way too long.

“Hey, what the hell?”

“Matt?”

She follows his gaze and sees some of Emily’s missing posters. Someone’s used a thick, dark marker to scrawl a message across the bottom of the page.

“If you want a good time, call Emily?” Matt tears the flyer down. Hannah can feel the rage reverberating off him.

“Who would do this?”

“I don’t know,” she says gently. “Matt…”

“So this is the reason why I’ve been getting…I barely even check the burner phone’s voicemails anymore. If it’s not some crazy guy calling it’s some creep telling me all the ways…” Matt closes his eyes, a pained expression on his face.

“People are jerks,” Hannah says, not bothering to hide her contempt. “Don’t expect any better. I don’t.”

“You know what’s the worst thing,” he continues, acting as if Hannah isn’t there. “Maybe I wouldn’t have to do all this work if the police were doing their jobs. Instead I feel like this is all on me..”

“Matt, it’s just one poster. Don’t let some jerk get to you.”

“You don’t get it. How else am I going to find her? I practically don’t have any leads.”

“It’s okay,” she says, concentrating on keeping her composure. She almost wants to shake him. Emily’s gone and she can tell by the defeated look in his eyes he knows it. But instead of shouldering the grief and moving on, he wallows in it, like a self-indulgent toddler. All the while
ignoring the girl in front of him, the one who is practically offering herself up to him on a plate.

How childish, how insipid, how mortal, can you get?

“Hey, new plan,” Hannah says, smiling in way she hopes is mysterious. “Let’s get away from here. Away from the posters and the crime and your work. Somewhere…. private.”

“Hannah…”

“Come on,” she cajoles, stepping close to him, curling her fingers around the lapels of his jacket. Hannah longs for him to wrap his arms around her, to rest her mouth against his throat and feel the blood thrum through his veins.

Most of all, she longs for him to forget Emily.

“Don’t you get tired, Matt?”

He draws in a strangled breath, his lovely, dark eyes flitting down to her lips. She wants him to consent to this; consent to be hers. And hers alone.

“Actually… I am pretty tired. Maybe we should call it a night,” Matt says, his voice sounding weak and shaky. He steps away, gently dropping her hands from his coat, but his rejection still stings.

“What?” she snaps.

“No, I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, I got exactly what you meant.”

“Wait—”

“Aren’t you in love with her? Tell me.”

“What?”

“Were you ever going to tell me you were in love with her, or were you stringing me along as a prank?”

“No, that’s not it at all—”

“I thought maybe you just wanted to fuck her, but turns out, I’m an idiot. Because no one would spend practically every night sticking up posters unless they were hopelessly in love.”

“Hannah,” he says, reaching for her hands again. She bats him away, harder than she intended, ignoring his wince as her hands slap away his grasping fingers.

“Get away from me!”

“Hannah, let me explain—”

“No, get away from me you child,” she snarls, turning her back, ignoring the group of humans standing a few metres away, staring at them in shock.

“Hannah, please—”

She barely hears his pleas as she takes off running into the black night.
She doesn’t know why she can’t forget him.

For the first few days after Matt rejected her, she felt a rage that she hasn’t felt before. Not since she found out about Mike’s betrayal on that first, awful night as a vampire. No matter what she does, the anger still burns. Finally, she decides to get out her frustration the only way she knows how. She finds a drug dealer, one she’s been monitoring for a while. By anyone’s metric he’s a monster, a man who knowingly wreaks havoc on his own community. She shows no mercy, tearing at his flesh, snapping tendons from bone; his anguished cries satiating her rage. By the time she’s done with him, he’s barely recognizable. But as his shattered corpse lays at her feet, she feels empty, deflated, as if her rage has hollowed her out.

She tries to keep her emotions to herself, but that’s not exactly her strong suit even at the best of times. She snaps at Jess, scowls at Tamika and steers clear of her sister and Cassandra.

She avoids Emily most of all.

She doesn’t understand what Matt sees in her. She’s a loud, bitter, ungrateful brat. She refuses to learn her place, and if she did end up with Matt as a human, she’d tear his head off, no question. Besides, if the way she kissed Jess at the kill party is any indication, she’s more than a little gay.

She looks down at the sketch of Matt she’s drawn in her journal. She’s proud of it. Hannah spent a decade or so learning from the best and brightest in Los Angeles, and the sketches in her journal reflect her skill. The likeness is clear, although she’s not sure she’s captured the softness in his eyes. She doesn’t believe any artist could.

Emily wouldn’t appreciate him. She doesn’t know why he doesn’t see that.

She needs to find out why he’s so committed to her, why he can’t let Emily live in the shadows, where she belongs.

She needs to know. Once she does, she can go from there.

Matt glances up from his unfinished calculus homework when he hears his computer beep.

Max: So. What’s the deal with you and Emily?

Matt sighs, a familiar sinking feeling in his stomach. This again. He wonders if it would be easier if he and Emily were together. At least no one would be questioning his intentions then. A pit forms in his stomach at the thought. No need to relive that mess again.

Matt: There is no deal, man.

Max: You gonna play coy with me, Mr Mysterious? C’mon, bro. Spill.
Matt: Look, it’s not what you think. We’re friends.

Max: Ah. Cool. Naked friends, though, right?

Matt coughs back a laugh. This guy’s a riot. He’s only known Max for less than two weeks, but already, he’s not shocked by anything he says anymore.

Matt: No, dude, she’s my best friend. And it’s platonic. On both our ends. Trust me on that one.

Max: That’s fair. I don’t want to bone my best friend either, even though, on every objective measure, she’s a total babe.

Matt: You’re a real gentleman.

Max: Only in certain contexts, Matthew. I can be a very bad boy ;)

Matt: You’re a real gentleman.

Max: Man. That’s a travesty.

Matt: Fine. There is someone. Someone I really like, but I think I’ve blown it with her.

Max: Why I am getting the impression you are holding out on me, Matthew? Spill.

Matt: I’m no expert, but I’m pretty sure you can’t blow a girl.

Matt: Dude.

Max: Alright, alright. But, hey. I was right. You HAVE been holding out on me. Not cool. So you need to tell me all the grisly details.

Matt: Snorts.

Max: U rly interested?

Max: Bro, it’s a Tuesday night, it’s late and we’re both alone. I am living vicariously through you right now. So. As I was saying. Spare me no details about this mysterious woman. What she like? I bet she has a really tight bod.
Matt: She’s hot. A total ten out of ten, but I haven’t done much of anything with her. It’s not that I don’t want to make a move. I mean, I do. A lot. But I messed up. Someone had written nasty shit on one of Emily’s missing posters and I got really upset by it. So this girl, I think she wanted to go somewhere private, to take my mind off it or something, but I was still so mad someone would do that to Emily’s poster. So she got pissed and left.

Max: Hold the phone. A total knock-out wanted to take you somewhere private? Bro, she was gagging for it, and you turned her down? I applaud your dedication to your friend, but time and place, my man, time and place.

Matt: I know. I’m a chump. And meeting Hannah has been the only good thing to happen to me since Emily disappeared. I don’t know how to make it right, I keep texting her to explain, but she’s not getting back to me.

Max: Her name is Hannah?

Matt: Yeah.

Max: And you met her after Emily disappeared.

Matt: Yeah.

Max: Okay. Cool. So. Hannah. Great. Why don’t you tell me all about her? You know, how she’s doing, what she’s like.

Matt: Aw, man, I don’t want take up your time

Max: No. I want to know. I want to know everything.

Matt pauses. There’s something a bit too eager about Max right now, but then again, maybe he’s just lonely. That would make two of them. It’s a little depressing, but Max is the closest thing he has to a friend these days.

Matt: Okay. What do you want to know?

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She lasts less than a week before she’s stalking him again. He’s a ridiculously easy boy to track, really. He does the same thing every day, the only difference being where he goes with his stupid posters and how long he takes to clean up the cafe. She doesn’t understand him. He’s a beautiful person, equal parts handsome and pretty. He’s tall and charming in a clumsy, endearing kind of way, and despite his slight limp he’s obviously athletic in all the ways that count. He could get any girl or guy he wanted, but instead he follows the trail of his obviously gay friend with the hopes of what? Converting her? Is he one of those guys with a fetish for lesbians because he thinks they’re just playing hard to get? Was all his earnestness and dogged niceness just a ruse to get people to trust him?

And why can’t Hannah just finish this damn job and move on to some more straightforward prey?

She’s been dragging this on long enough, deluding herself into thinking Matt is interesting. He’s a sex-crazed, lovesick fool just like the rest of humanity’s men, and the next time she sees him she’s
going to make sure he pays for it.

Finally, she decides to end her game and heads to the cafe where she waits for Matt’s shift to end. Five minutes pass, then ten, twenty, thirty, but for all the time she waits outside the restaurant, she never sees any sign of Matt. Finally, an hour after closing, Matt’s co-worker Aki walks out of the restaurant and looks down at her, blinking with surprise.

“You’re Hannah, right?” Aki asks. “Matt’s friend.”

*Friend.* Of course Matt called her just a friend. How could there be anything more when Matt’s so obsessed with a girl who will never return his advances?

“Is Matt here?” Hannah asks. Aki shakes her head.

“No, sorry. He took the day off to help Emily’s old lady with some things. Said it would take all day, probably.”

“Helping her at her house?”

“I’d assume so,” Aki says, then narrows her eyes. “Look. I get that you like him, but the guy’s grieving, okay? Give him some space.”

Hannah fights the urge to gouge Aki’s eyes out.

“He asked for me to meet him. I thought he’d be here but I guess he’s not.”

Aki raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Sure thing.”

She leaves before Hannah can retort. Hannah stews on the bench for a moment or two. Being around Matt has made her soft. Cassandra kills mortals like this for less. Sighing, she texts Jess for directions to Emily’s old house and follows them to one of the saddest neighborhoods in Los Angeles. She drives over pothole-riddled streets as she listens to barking dogs and domestic arguments through the thin walls of shitty apartments.

Emily’s house is a run-down looking one-story building right across from a tiny, dilapidated park. Hannah sees Matt’s car parked outside of it and parks down the street, moving silently through the shadows and through the weedy yard until she’s right beside the living room window. She peers through and sees Matt and an older woman who bears a striking resemblance to Emily. They’re sitting around the living room, the wall behind them looking like it was freshly painted. Both Matt and Emily’s mother are wearing old, paint-stained clothes and look tired, relaxing in a pair of stiff-looking armchairs.

Hannah kneels below the window and presses her ear to the thin exterior wall, relying on her vampiric senses to listen in on their conversation.

“It’s late, but would you like to stay for dinner? I made too much stew yesterday, and there’s enough leftovers for two.” Mrs. Davis’s voice, though a bit muffled, is clearly tired; no doubt the woman’s weighed down by the loss of her daughter and likely still mourning her husband. In spite of herself, Hannah feels a pang of sympathy for this woman. She was never supposed to get mixed up in all this. Neither was her daughter.

Neither was Matt.
“I guess I could stay another hour or so,” Matt says. “Let me text my mom.”

Hannah listens as Mrs. Davis moves over to the kitchen and prepares something while continuing her conversation with Matt.

“I don’t suppose you’ve found anyone who knows anything,” Mrs. Davis says.

“Not really, no,” Matt says. “No one seems to know anything.”

There’s a momentary pause.

“I...I just wanted to thank you for looking so hard,” Mrs. Davis says. “You really don’t have to do any of this.”

“I know it’s what she’d do for me, Mrs Davis,” Matt replies. “Friends look out for each other.”

“Sakura, Matt. Call me Sakura. You know, she always liked you a lot,” Mrs. Davis tells Matt. “Said you were always so genuine.”

“Yeah, well,” Matt says, “I like her too.”

Hannah tries to ignore the stab of jealousy in her heart. She hears Mrs. Davis’s breath hitch.

“I...I keep thinking about the night she disappeared. If I’d just been there to drive her home, if I’d just thought to call her—”

“Mrs. Davis...Sakura…. it’s okay, you didn’t know she was upset,” Matt says. “I should have driven her home after everything. She just seemed like she wanted to be alone.”

“I just...if she hurt herself because of that video, and I could have stopped it…”

“Mrs. Davis, no, please. She wouldn’t have, I know she wouldn’t. She’s so, so strong. I know that wherever she is now, she’s fighting like hell to get back home.”

“I just...I just wish she knew that I would always accept her, no matter who she loves. I wish I could tell her that.”

“You can tell her when we find her,” Matt says. “And we will find her. I’m not about to let her down.”

Hannah searches for some indication in his tone that he’s lying to her, but he sounds just as earnest as Beth when she talks about Hannah or Tamika when she talks about her long dead kid brother. Hannah stands and steals a quick, nervous look through the window, wary of being spotted. Matt’s sitting on the armchair, looking into the kitchen where Mrs. Davis makes dinner. Hannah looks for something, anything, that would betray an ulterior motive; a glint in Matt’s eye, a quirk in his smile, the way he sits and speaks, but there’s nothing. When he talks about Emily, there’s nothing but honest, brotherly love. The way he talks about his best friend reminds her of Josh when he’d talk to the twins, protective and gentle and full of simple, unconditional love.

Josh.

She’s gotten good at not thinking about him, burying the memories deep inside her mind, only coming back as vague reminders and half-remembered dreams.

Well. Until now.
She kneels beneath the window and breathes, in and out, the breaths ragged and pained. It’s stupid, mimicking a mortal like this, but deep breaths always calm her down when she remembers something terrible or feels consumed by anxiety.

Matt and Sakura keep talking as they eat the stew, their conversation steering towards the painfully mundane. Matt talks about his family, his sister, his school and his work, unpretentious and friendly and so, so...

Kind. Honestly, truly, sincerely kind.

He’s a good man. Cassandra says that’s an oxymoron, but there’s no other conclusion to draw. He’s a good, kind, gentle person, who deserves a lot of things, but definitely doesn’t deserve to die.

Hannah sneaks away from the house and heads back to her car. As she hops inside and drives down the crumbling road she can’t help but wonder if Matt’s just an anomaly, or if all this time, Cassandra has been wrong.

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“So, your friend Hannah,” Emily says. “Was she born with permanent resting bitch face, or did I do something to piss her off?”

“Heh, I have noticed her being more pouty than usual,” Jess says. “It’s cute. Shame she’s straight as a pumpkin spice latte, she’s just wasted on men.” Something about the way Jess talks about Hannah makes Emily’s stomach hurt a little. Hannah’s a lot of things, sure, but cute? Cute enough for someone like Jess to notice?

Jess notices Emily’s discomfort and smiles a bit. “Jealous much?” she asks. “Don’t worry, I have enough sense to not bark up that tree.”

Emily rubs the back of her head and looks away, feeling uncomfortable. The twins have been giving her the stink eye lately, even more so than the other girls in Cassandra’s undead cabal, and it’s seriously giving her the creeps.

“I’m guessing they aren’t thrilled that I’m not eating up Cassandra’s bullshit.”

“No,” Jess says, and takes a sip of her beer. They’re in some seedy bar in downtown LA, the kind of place where the bouncers can probably tell your ID is faked but don’t even pretend to care. All around is the din of drunken conversation, all of it sounding on the edge of either a bar fight or horribly awkward bathroom sex. “Truth be told,” Jess continues, staring into her glass, “I think they might be upset because you remind them of someone else who didn’t exactly play by the rules.”

Emily feels a pang of embarrassment when she perks up visibly and Jess raises an amused eyebrow.

“That got your attention, didn’t it?” Jess says. She lowers her voice. “It’s a sad story, actually. The twins, they had this friend who probably never should have been a vampire in the first place. Eventually unlife got her down and she just...snapped.”

“What happened?” Emily asks.

Jess opens her mouth to answer when they hear a peal of drunken laughter and they look up to see a pencil thin guy in sloppy business attire offering his best attempt at a flirtatious smile at them from across the bar.
“Hey, ladies? Want some drinks on me?”

Jess reacts immediately, assuming a coquettish, brazen pose on her barstool.

“I bet I could drink you under the table,” she says, loud enough for a few of the patrons to overhear her and let out an ooooh in response to the challenge. The thin man look a bit taken aback, then smiles.

“Well. Challenge accepted, little lady.”

Calling the next forty-five minutes a drinking “contest” is pretty inaccurate. Jess is annihilating the poor bastard, downing beer after beer with a pleasant smile on her face as the thin man flounders and struggles to keep up, already tipsy after his fourth beer, visibly drunk after his eighth. Emily knows Jess is cheating—vampires can’t get drunk unless the alcohol is in the blood they’re drinking—but it’s still a sight to behold, watching her wipe the floor with this guy, her look of contentment and confidence never faltering. Still, she can’t help but feel a little unnerved; Emily has a pretty good reason to doubt Jess started an impromptu drinking contest for shits and giggles.

Once the guy is practically brain-dead, Jess finally stops drinking. She motions for Emily to follow as she gets off the stool, takes the thin man’s arm, and gently leads him out through a backdoor into an adjacent alleyway.

Swallowing her trepidation, Emily follows them.

It’s starting to drizzle outside, and the thin man mumbles something unintelligible when the rain hits his face. Jess tugs him by the arm until the two of them are in the middle of the alley, then lets go of him. He staggers and sways for about two seconds before he sways forward, waving his arms in a vain attempt to keep his balance before landing hard on his stomach with a dull thud. Jess smirks and prods the man with his foot. He mumbles weakly but doesn’t try to move away.

“Oof, this guy is ripe,” Jess says. “Be careful when you drink from him, Em. Take it slow or you’re gonna get wasted.”

Emily looks down at the man. He’s semiconscious, pleasantly oblivious to the fact that he’s about to get eaten alive. She swallows.

“I dunno, do you think this guy, like, has a family or something?”

“Not one he cares about if he’s off getting wasted on a weeknight,” Jess replies. “Come on, Em. He probably deserves it.”

“Probably.”

“Well, I dunno! He’s probably done something shitty. Does he look like Mother Teresa to you? Come on.”

Emily sighs and looks away, down the dark, dirty alleyway. She has no idea who this guy is. He could be anyone. He could be a father. Another little girl will grow up without her dad because of hungry monsters that, scientifically speaking, shouldn’t even exist. And besides that, if she lets herself start killing like this, if she sees the same enjoyment in the hunt that Jess does, she’ll be on the fast track to becoming another of Cassandra’s brainwashed goons.

“I’m not gonna kill him, Jess.”

“Look, I’ve hurt the people I wanted to get back at. At least with those two I knew they were shitbags. I don’t know anything about this guy.”

“So you’d rather starve than take a chance on some drunk asshole who was clearly hitting on the youngest-looking girls in the bar.”

“I—”

“Emily, I don’t want to have to be a bitch about this,” Jess says. “But I will if I have to.”

Jess picks up the thin man’s head by his hair and rakes her manicured nails down his exposed neck, allowing a few beads of blood to slide down onto her fingertips.

Emily’s stomach rumbles at the smell of fresh blood. It takes everything in her to keep her feet rooted to the spot. Jess rolls her eyes.

“This isn’t cute, Emily,” she says. “You have to kill people, or Cassandra’s gonna have your neck. You know that.”

“I know.”

Jess’s eyes widen a bit. Then she glares at Emily and gives the thin man’s hair another rough tug. He whimpers.

“If you don’t woman up and kill him, then I will. And I’ll make it slow.”

Emily says nothing. The rain splashes onto her face and hair. Jess grits her teeth.

“I’ll break every fucking bone in his body, Em! I’ll rip out his guts and cut open his thighs and rip out his eyeballs and fucking feed them to him!”

Emily looks back to the bar’s backdoor, still slightly ajar. Inside she can hear the sounds of muffled conversation and raucous laughter.

“You do that, you’re gonna alert everyone and their damn mother in that bar,” Emily points out. “Do you think Cassandra’s gonna laugh when she finds out you had to massacre an entire bar’s worth of people just to make a point?”

Jess glowers at her.

“Ugh, you’re such a bitch.”

“I’m right, though,” Emily says. “Maybe this guy’s a serial killer or something, I don’t know, but I’m not gonna torture someone to death over a ‘maybe’.”

The rain’s falling harder and colder now. The early November chill fills the rain drops that splash down on the alley. One particularly heavy droplet lands right in the thin man’s eye, and he stirs. He looks up at Jess, catching the faint glint of her fang in the dim light, and pales.

“...Wha...W-what the fuck?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Jess mutters. The guy begins to let out a shrill scream of horror but Jess snaps his neck before the sound can carry too far. “There. He’s dead anyway. Happy that you wasted five goddamn minutes trying to be all noble and shit?”

Emily doesn’t say anything. Jess offers her one last sneer before biting down on the dead man’s neck.
and taking a massive gulp of his blood. She stands, wiping at her mouth and swaying a bit as the alcohol in the man’s blood hits her with what look like disturbing quickness.

“Stupid bitch didn’t even take off his wedding ring,” Jess mutters, pointing to the thin man’s left hand. Emily looks down at the simple gold wedding band, gleaming dully in the flickering neon glow of the city.

“Do you think he had kids?” Emily blurts out before she can stop herself.

“I don’t care,” Jess spits. “They’re better off without him if he did have some anyway.”

“Oh yeah, I was totally better off without my dad when he got fucking murdered,” Emily spits. “Do you ever fucking think about that, Jess? About how many fucking families you tear apart?”

“Families? Families?” Jess asks. She barks out a hoarse laugh. “Humans don’t have families. Human men have property. They only pretend to care about their wives and kids because they belong to them. Their wives are too weak and stupid to fight back when they abuse them and their kids grow up to be just like their worthless parents.”

“So every human is worthless.”

“I—”

“Was I worthless too, then? Was I just another blood bag to you?”

“What? No,” Jess says, her voice suddenly softening. “You...you were different.”

“How? How can you tell who’s worth something and who isn’t? What gives you that right?”

“I just...I thought...I could tell that you were suffering because of humans and—”

“People suffer because of humans every goddamn day. What makes me different from any other girl my age who has it rough?”

“I—”

“Jesus, Jess, listen to yourself! Don’t you get it? All the shit Cassandra’s told you doesn’t hold up!”

“But...but she saved me,” Jess says weakly. “This place is the only place I’ve ever felt...worth something.”

In spite of everything, how fucked up all this is and all the terrible things Jess has done, Emily can’t help but feel a pang of sympathy as tears begin to spring in Jess’s eyes.

“I was nothing before the clan found me. My family thought I was a dirty whore and my husband only kept me around to have someone to take his bad days out on. And you know what? I never questioned it. I was weak and stupid and I never even thought about fighting back. If they hadn’t come along and saved me, Richard would’ve killed me before I hit twenty-five.” Jess wipes furiously at her eyes. “I have purpose here. I never would have meant anything to anyone as a human.”

Jess’s emotions hit Emily like a bullet train. Her bitterness, her helplessness, her profound sense of worthlessness, all of it carefully repressed and buried under sugary sadism until now. And maybe, just maybe, a tiny flicker of doubt in her clan.

Jess honestly thinks she’s free. But in truth, she’s just traded one abuser for another.
Jess slumps down on the ground, her back pressed against the wall and her face angled up, her tears mixing with the falling rain. Emily tries to conjure up her old disgust for her sire but instead all she can feel is pity and maybe a stab of hope. Jess might not be as unreachable as she thought.

Wordlessly, Emily sits down beside her sire, listening to the patter of the rain and the soft, almost inaudible half-sobs of the profoundly damaged woman beside her.

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Hannah tries to forget him.

She treats herself to a manicure. Then next night, she drives out to Griffith Observatory to marvel at the stars. Eventually, she decides to have a night in, so she rents *Beauty and the Beast*, which to her mind, is still the best musical of the last century. And she should know; she’s seen them all.

But it doesn’t matter what she does. She can’t get Matt out of her mind.

He doesn’t make it easy for her. Matt texts her all the time, all sweet and apologetic, asking for her to give him another chance. As if he has something to apologize for. If only he knew the thoughts that were in her head. It makes her feel nauseous now, remembering how she strung him along, making him feel something towards her, waiting until he stumbled into her trap.

Cassandra trained her well. She always told Hannah that all men are weak, and even the gallant ones are hiding a seedy secret. That’s why she’s not allowed have a relationship, a proper one, like how Jess and Beth used to be. No vampire should stoop to a mortal’s level. That’s why the clan has a clear rule: no man is fit to be a vampire’s paramour.

Maybe Matt is the exception to the rule? Although, she’s not about to go tell Cassandra that. She glances around the room. Her clothes and shoes are strewn everywhere. There’s probably an outfit in there she could throw together, though she’s not sure she could ever find the right outfit to convey just how she feels about him.

She has no idea what she’s doing. If she had any sense she would leave him alone. That’s the safest option. Then again, it doesn’t feel right. Matt has been so decent and sweet to her. Surely no one would begrudge Hannah a proper goodbye?

Hannah sighs and rubs her brow. She can’t do this alone. She needs the big guns.

*SOS!!! Emergency!!!*

With shaking hands Hannah drops her phone on her dresser. She holds up a simple, black halter-top dress, modeling it in the mirror. This is normally a good outfit when she’s trying to win a man’s attention, but will Matt think it’s too slutty? Will he dismiss her apologies before she’s even opened her mouth?

There has to be something else she can wear. Something that says ‘sorry’ or ‘I’m a jerk’ or ‘I promise I won’t eat you.’

“What’s the emergency?” Jess asks, sauntering into her room. Emily is a step behind her, looking mutinous, as usual.
“Hey,” Hannah says, smiling softly at Emily. “How are you doing, Emily?”

“Fine,” Emily says, sounding bored. She turns to Jess. “Can I go now, please? Or do I have to hang out with you and Morticia Addams?”

“Are you actually asking my permission for something?”

“Yes. Don’t be a bitch about it.”

“Fine, you can go,” Jess says fondly, and if Hannah wasn’t having a meltdown she’d definitely want to know what’s going between those two. “But no leaving the mansion, okay?”

“Like I could leave, anyway.” Emily says, sounding sullen. She sneers at Hannah, before turning on her heel and stalking away from them both.

Jess shakes her head, but then turns her attention back to Hannah.

“So?”

“I need outfit help.”

“Well, you have come to the right gal, ladyfriend,” Jess says brightly, hopping on Hannah’s bed. “So what’s the 411? Are you going for the little-girl lost look? The sexy minx? Oooh, that dress screams hot college dropout.

“What’s the outfit for...I’m sorry I screwed up?”

“What?” Jess laughs. “Since when do you screw up when you’re on a hunt?”

“I really have this time,” Hannah says, looking down at the floor and hoping Jess doesn’t see the shame in her eyes.

“Hey,” Jess says, gently. “It’s okay. Don’t be so stressed. Unless you ran over the guy’s kid, he’s going to forgive you.”

Hannah shakes her head. How can she explain Matt, to Jess of all people? How can she explain his kindness? How does she explain to Jess that he spends all his time looking for his friend, even though he wants nothing from Emily in return?

How does she explain to Jess he’s not the sort of man Cassandra taught them to hate?

“Earth to Hannah?”

“Oh, uh, sorry.”

“Wow, you actually care about this one. He must be really hot.” Jess hops off the bed and comes to stand behind her, looking at their reflection in Hannah’s mirror.

“When I’m trying to get a man’s attention,” Jess says, squeezing Hannah’s shoulders. “I just get the girls out. Works every time.”

“Uh...” Warmed by the fresh blood she just drank, Hannah blushes. “I don’t think they’re my best asset.”

“Oh honey, don’t put yourself down. If they’re anything like Beth’s, then—”
“Jess.”

“Okay, okay, don’t have an aneurysm, jeez,” Jess laughs. She winks at Hannah, a wicked look in her eyes. “Let’s show off those Washington legs, then.”

Hannah gulps. This is probably a very bad idea.

But it’s not like she has a better one.

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She lurks in the shadows watching as the final customers start to file out from the diner. As usual, the old man is the last to leave, cursing and grumbling to himself as he shuffles down the street. Her instinct is to go to Matt as soon as he’s alone, but the wiser part of her tells her to wait. So she stays silent. When Matt switches off the lights, she strikes.

If she were a human girl, her heart would be beating out of her chest as she knocks on the cafe’s door, trying to push her skirt a bit further down her legs.

How on earth did she let Jess convince her to wear a mini-skirt again?

“Hannah?” Matt gasps as he opens the door, blinking a few times, like he can’t quite believe it.

“Uh. Hi. I’m sorry to bother you, but do you mind if I come in and, uh, talk?”

“Not at all,” he says, stepping aside and gesturing to the empty cafe behind him. “After you.”

Hannah tries to hide her smile. She doesn’t deserve any kindness, but here he is, being a gentleman all the same.

They walk inside, Matt keeping a respectful distance between them. Despite this, she catches him casting furtive glances in her direction. His gaze is heated, full of yearning, and it makes her already shaky knees go weak. She doesn’t want to make a fool of herself though, so takes a seat at the front counter, fidgeting, unsure what to with her hands.

“So, uh, can I get you anything?” he asks, walking around to his familiar spot behind the counter.

“No, I, I’m fine.”

“Okay.”

There’s a heavy pause. Then—

“I’m sorry,” they both burst out at once.

Hannah gapes at him.

“And I’ve been taking advantage of you,” Matt says, his guilt practically radiating off of his body.

“What? No! Matt, I wanted to help you. I like you. I didn’t want to see you so sad.”

Matt looks away, clearly weighing something in his mind, before looking back at Hannah, his
expression a bit anxious.

“You’ve been helping me so much,” he tells her. “You deserve to know about me and Emily.”

“Oh.” She’s glad she’s sitting down. “Okay.”

Matt comes around the counter and takes a seat on the stool next to her, rubbing at his face tiredly.

“I’ve known Emily for a long time. We met in sophomore year. She was the only girl who didn’t care that I played football. I mean, she was definitely wasn’t impressed by it.” He laughs at the fond memory. His laughter dies down and he continues, looking at her seriously. “And then…then for a while, in junior year, we weren’t just friends anymore.”

Hannah tries to swallow, but her throat is dry.

“Oh.”

“I never met a girl like her. I mean, when you meet her, you’ll understand. She’s crazy smart and has this poise, you know? Like nothing in the world can scare her.”

She thinks of Emily at her initiation, weak and hungry and desperate, but defying Cassandra anyway.

“I believe you,” Hannah says softly, hoping he doesn’t notice the slight tremor in her voice.

“We dated for a while, and it was great, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Hey, don’t let all these muscles fool you, I’m not an expert with the ladies...well, I mean,” he stutters. He must have caught her smirk. “I’m not, like, a newbie or anything, I’ve dated other girls before Em, but, I mean, I guess what I’m trying to say is, even I could tell something was wrong with us, you know? Something was off.”

“Off?”

“Yeah. I guess I was right because… like four months in she told me she liked girls.”

“Oh my god, what?” Hannah gasps, hoping she sounds surprised. Jess will be pleased, she thinks.

“Yeah, it was a shock, but also it wasn’t, you know? Like maybe we both knew. So, I mean, we broke up and it was a little awkward at first. I wanted to give her space. But then….”

“Then?”

“I got injured. It was playoffs and I got caught up in a tackle and boom, my knee buckled and that was it.”

“Just like that?” Hannah gasps. Mortals are so fragile. “Don’t tell me your ACL…”

“Yeah.”

“Oh Matt, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Matt says, staring off into the distance. His tone is light but Hannah can see the anguish on his face. “I needed surgery, then rehab. At first everyone came and visited me at the hospital. My football buddies, my coach, pretty much the entire cheerleading squad, too. But as the months went
by, everyone visited less and less. Until no one came at all.”

“Matt…”

“I guess people were busy.”

“Still,” Hannah fumes.

“Anyway. Emily was the only one who came and visited. Everyday. She didn’t have to, it’s not like she was my girlfriend anymore. She didn’t have to waste her energy on me.”

He stops, trying to even out his breathing, and Hannah has to fight the ridiculous urge to reach out and cover his hand with her own.

“Some days, I didn’t want to get out of bed, cause what was the point anymore? It’s not like I’m going to make it to the NFL. But Em, she would just storm into the room, chew me out for a while, and not leave until I got up.”

“Okay. Not the best bedside manner.”

“I think she was going for the old, ‘bull in a china shop’ technique, but hey. It worked.” He looks at his feet. “It uh, got pretty bleak for a while there. I don’t know if I could have made it without her.”

“Okay, Matt,” she whispers.

“And now she needs me,” Matt says, his voice hoarse. He sniffs and looks away, but not fast enough for Hannah to miss him blinking back tears. “She never turned her back on me. I’m not turning my back now.”

There’s another heavy pause between them. Hannah thinks of Emily, so proud and defiant, and Matt, so soft and sweet. People probably didn’t understand their friendship. She gets that. People said the same thing about her and—

“I had a friend like that,” she blurts out.

Matt cocks an eyebrow at her. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she didn’t mean to say anything, but now she feels an almost overwhelming urge to share. She stares down at her hands, picks at the fraying white paint on the counter.

“Her name was Sam. We were best friends. We met as kids, and she was the loveliest person in the world. We did everything together, shopping, cooking, watching movies. I even taught her how to dance.”

“You like to dance?”

“I love to dance. Actually,” Hannah chuckles fondly at the memory. “Sam was kind of a terrible dancer and an even worse student. But I think she was only humoring me. I think she was waiting for the lessons to be so over so she could drag me outside. We chased fireflies in my yard, tried to catch them in glass bottles.”

“Yeah?”

“We had to release them though. Sam never met an animal she didn’t want to save.”

Matt frowns.
“Why do you always talk about Sam in the past tense. Is she…”
“I don’t know. She…” Hannah closes her eyes, sees the image of Sam’s face, shining with incandescent rage, blaming Beth and Hannah for Ashley’s fate. If she were a better friend, she would have stayed with Sam on that awful night. If Hannah just stayed, maybe Sam’s despair wouldn’t have overwhelmed her.

So many disasters could have been averted if Hannah were a better friend.

“She left,” Hannah continues, voice hitching. “She was living with me and my sister and our friends. But I guess she was dealing with some issues and one day she just disappeared.”

“She didn’t leave a note, or…”

“She left a note,” Hannah says, wincing as she remembers Cassandra plucking it from Beth’s hand and setting it alight. “She didn’t tell us where she went.”

“Maybe you can find her on Facebook?”

“Oh,” and she laughs. “I doubt she’s on Facebook. And if she is, let’s just say I’m blocked.”

Matt looks at her sympathetically. His compassion shames her. She’s spent the last couple of months trying to prove he’s a fraud, only to find he’s always been what he appears to be: sweet, decent and kind.

He’s not the fraud. She is.

“I should go,” she stutters, getting up, scared her emotions will overwhelm her. “I should—”

“Hannah, wait.”

“No,” she cries, she’s already halfway out the door when she feels Matt’s warm, human hand, wrap around her wrist.

“Stay.”

“You don’t understand,” she whispers, tears sliding down her face. “I’m not good, like you. I’m—”

“Hey, don’t say that,” Matt whispers, pulling her close. She’s wearing platform shoes, just as Jess instructed, so they’re almost the same height. She’s so close to him she can feel his breath against her cheek as he leans over and brushes the tears from her face.

“There. Better.”

“Matt,” she says, shakily. “I should…”

“Hey, you said you like dancing, right? Check this out.”

He lopes over to the other side of the room. Curious, Hannah follows, and sees Matt is standing by a battered old jukebox.

“Ta da!”

“A jukebox?”

“It’s got all the classics. So. C’mon. Dance with me.”
“Matt, I can’t… I’m in heels and a skirt.”

“I noticed,” he quips, his mouth twitching, like he’s trying to smother a smile.

“What?”


She stares at him for a few seconds, before bursting into laughter. Matt grins back at her, looking a bit relieved.

“I know, right?” she says, feeling a bit giddy all of a sudden. This is what she gets for listening to Jess. She kicks off her shoes, sighing with relief when she feels the cool floor underneath her toes.

“You best be ready to rumble, girl, because I’m warning you: I got the moves.”

“Quit it, dork,” she laughs, batting him away. “Fine. One dance. And I choose the song.”

She tries to ignore horde of butterflies in her stomach as she scans the jukebox’s playlist.

“Oh my god,” she squeals, selecting a song. She sees Matt listening intently, before beaming at her.

“Moondance. By Van Morrison, right?”

“You know him?”

“Van Morrison? Hell yeah. He’s a classic.”

“I saw him in concert once. He actually blew me away, he’s so amazing.”

Matt cocks his head, confused. “Van Morrison still tours? Isn’t he ancient?”

“On Youtube,” she corrects herself quickly. “I saw him on Youtube. Now, are you going to ask me to dance already?”

“Of course. My lady,” he says, holding out his hand to her.

She giggles and takes it, watching in awe as Matt starts to dance, moving with more ease and grace than Hannah could ever imagine.

She follows his lead, and soon they’re dancing, twisting and swaying to the beat. Eventually, with obvious trepidation, Matt wraps his hands around Hannah’s waist. They’re warm and firm, and the way he holds her and she him, it’s like they were made to fit together.

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God, what a night.

Sam slowly pulls her car up to her apartment. It was a long night at the center. She must have spent four straight hours in her rigid office chair, booked to the gills. Every session was intense, all her clients stressed and anxious as the holidays draw near. She’s exhausted, weary right down to the bones. Although, in a sense, it’s a good kind of tired. It certainly beats all those years slumming it at the diner. At least now, as an online counsellor, she’s helping people. If she can just make one person’s life a bit better every shift, it’s worth all the anxiety and stress that’s a natural byproduct of the job.
And it helps the pay is better too.

Sam remembers all of the hovels her and Josh used to live in. Granted, none of them were as bad as Josh’s cave, and none as creepy as living in the abandoned Washington manor, but they stayed in some real shit holes all the same. The last place had a rat infestation, although, as Josh said, at least they didn’t have to go out for a meal.

This place, though, is a decent mid-city apartment. It has two fairly spacious bedrooms, and plush carpet with practically no stains on it. It even has security at the door. Sam smirks. Well, not like she needs it, being an undead creature of the night, but it’s a little piece of luxury she thought she and Josh would never afford.

They deserve it. She used to think she didn’t deserve anything except endless torment. She used to think she was worthless, weak, unfit to exist. Like Cassandra always said.

But fuck Cassandra. What does she know anyway?

Sam heads into their apartment. It’s around five-thirty in the morning, inching dangerously close to dawn. She’d love nothing more to grab a snack and crawl into bed sleep the rest of the day away.

“Oh for Pete’s sake,” she grumbles. She opens their fridge to find it empty. She was hoping Josh had left her some of the cow’s blood, or had the decency to replace it. No such luck. God damn it. The cow’s blood is expensive, paid for in covert bribes to a slaughterhouse that never comes cheap. Josh has always had a voracious appetite, probably left over from his feral days, but still, he could have warned Sam before he drank the whole jug.

Well, guess she’s going to go hungry then.

She’s about to head off to bed, grumbling under her breath, when she trips on something at her feet. She staggers, almost knocking her knee against the coffee table. When she glances down to check what her foot got tangled on, she actually gasps in shock.

“What the hell?” she groans, gingerly picking up the boxers with two fingers and holding them as far away from her face as possible. “Josh!”

She storms over to his door, banging on it as hard as she can.

“Josh! I don’t care if you have a guy in there. You need to come out right now.”

Sam doesn’t want to embarrass him, but honestly, just because they’ve been living together for decades doesn’t mean Josh can ignore time honored roommate etiquette. Like don’t eat all the food. And don’t leave your used underwear in the living room.

Undead or not, boys are just gross.

“Josh!” she repeats, pounding on the door. “I know you’re in there.”

She puts her ear up against the door and listens in. She can’t hear anything. If there was a human in there she’d at least hear him drawing breath. So that must mean Josh is alone. But why isn’t he replying?

“Josh,” she repeats, softening her tone. “Hey, I’m sorry, I’m not mad anymore. Can you just let me know you’re okay?”

Still nothing.
“Josh...?”

Fear grips her. She steadies herself, ready to bash the door down, security deposit be damned. She’s poised to strike when suddenly the door is wrenched open.

Sam gasps. There’s Josh standing before her, carrying his laptop, eyes wider and more frantic than she’s ever seen them. His hair is disheveled, and by the smell of him, he hasn’t changed his clothes all day.

Her mind races. Is he having an episode? She thinks back to her training, her strategies for calming him down.

“Josh,” she repeats slowly. “Are you alright?”

He blinks at her rapidly.

“Josh?”

“Sammy,” his voices comes out in a strangled gasp. “Sammy.”

“Josh, what?”

“I think I know,” he says, voice trembling. “I think I know how to rescue Hannah.”

Chapter End Notes

Every story is better with an added dose of Josh and Sam.

Thanks again to my co author, who handled the bulk of the editing for this one. Also Hannah really is a ridiculous vampire but I love her anyway.

Anyhoo, happy Thanksgiving to all those who celebrate it. Say, you know what makes me happier than a perfectly cooked turkey? REVIEWS (and kudos). So please. Get in the festive spirit and write a review. Even a one liner makes both of us smile.

As always, thanks for reading.
Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 2014 song of the same name by Lykke Li.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She’s alone in her playroom.

Ashley gnaws at fibula in her hands, lapping her tongue across tip, suckling the last of the gristle between her teeth.

She’s sad to see her last doll go. She was her favourite. Her boyfriend was fun too, but she tired of him after a week. His girlfriend, though, was ever so lovely and pretty and meek and soft.

So lovely to hold.

So satisfying to break.

Ashley wonders when Mother will let her out to go hunt again. If she’s good, she gets to go find another doll to play with. And Ashley loves to play.

She drops the bone to the ground. It clatters on the concrete floor, the noise echoing around her playroom.

In the gloom, she can see the heads of her other dolls, stacked neatly on the shelves, each one reverently placed so their sunken eye sockets are turned towards the center of the room, where Ashley sleeps and plays with her new toys.

Warmed by the fresh blood, Ashley flushes with pleasure. She used to be so lonely down in the pit. She’s never lonely now. Now that she has her dolls.

With a start she hears the door creak open. She staggers to her feet, toes slipping a bit on the damp floor. She desperately wipes at her face, hoping Mother is in a good mood and won’t punish her for being such a messy eater.

“Ashley?” Mother’s voice is clipped, stern, and Ashley feels her knees knock together.

“Y-yes, Mother?”

“Come on. I need you in my room,” she sighs, softening her voice when Ashley hesitates. “It’s all right. You can bring your bone.”

She doesn’t need to be told twice, picking up the remnants of her broken toy and scrambling towards the door as fast as she can. Mother looks bored, but when Ashley passes her, her lips curve into a small, secretive smile.

Together they walk up to Mother’s room, Ashley always making sure to be a step behind.

Once inside, Mother sits at her desk, shuffling through some papers. Ashley carefully takes her place
on the floor by her feet, close, but far enough to avoid a stray foot. She remembers the last time her almost-sire tripped over her. Then she remembers pain of her strap hitting Ashley’s skin, again and again.

Mother flips through her papers, but Ashley can tell she’s waiting for someone. She can practically feel her frustration, her anger, coiled and furious like a snake.

Ashley shivers. Whoever it is, if they’re smart, they better not keep her waiting.

With nothing better to do, she starts to gnaw on the breastbone she bought, sucking at the tiny remnants of blood vessels and quietly sharpening her teeth. She keeps rubbing her fangs up against it, filing them again and again until -

A knock. Mother clicks her tongue, motioning for Ashley to get it.

When she opens the door she sees the newest fledgling standing on in the hallway, looking mutinous and sullen as usual. She flinches when she sees Ashley though.

She’s afraid of her. Good. Ashley opens her mouth, showing off her long, curved fangs. The fledgling glowers at her, but Ashley catches the way her lips tremble.

“Ashley, sweet girl, let our guest in.”

The girl blows past her. Ashley closes the door, glowering at the ungrateful child’s back.

“Well, Emily, how are you settling in?”

“Fine. It’s real swell place you got here.”

“Is that right? You don’t seem to be terribly happy.”

The fledgling looks poised to make a snide remark, but she’s smart enough to choose her words carefully. A pity; Ashley wants this girl to mess up so she can have a new doll already. Vampires are more fun to play with than humans, more durable and longer-lasting. It’s too bad they don’t leave behind any trophies except a foul-smelling pile of ash. She’d love to have the fledgling’s head on her shelf, to play with her silky hair and watch her pretty dark eyes slowly melt away.

“I’m just, uh, a little overwhelmed is all. This life takes some getting used to.”

Mother smiles maternally. Ashley seethes with jealousy.

“That it does, my dear. Everyone has a hard time at first. After all, you’ve been told your whole life that hurting other people is wrong. When you make your very first kill as a vampire, you feel like a murderer. Is that right?”

“I…” The fledgling doesn’t look at Mother directly, instead looking at Ashley and swallowing. Ashley bares her fangs and the fledgling looks away.

“Conventional wisdom would say that we’re evil,” Mother says, “because we have to kill human beings to survive. But don’t you think that’s a little hypocritical? After all, scores of humans are slaughtered daily for no real reason. Do you remember that runner with the amputated legs who murdered his own girlfriend? Or all of the awful massacres in theatres and schools in this country, and all the politicians who are more concerned with getting reelected than putting an end to all this violence? All this corruption and decadence, and the ones who can put a stop to it just sit on their hands and wait for someone else to have all the answers. They’re so busy killing their own that it’s a
miracle they haven’t driven themselves to extinction yet.”

“Are you saying humans deserve to die?” the fledgling asks. Mother chuckles.

“That’s an oversimplification, Emily. All I’m saying is that black-and-white morality is useless when you’re talking about hunting another species. Whether or not any given human deserves to die is none of my concern. All I’m saying is that we’re predators, and humans are our prey. When a cheetah kills a gazelle to feed her cubs, do you call her evil? Of course not. Surviving is not a crime.”

“There’s really no other way?” the fledgling asks.

“No, there isn’t,” Mother tells her. “If there were, we wouldn’t be going through all this trouble, now would we?” She pauses, putting a long, thin finger to her chin and thinking. “You know, Emily, you remind me of someone I knew a long time ago.”

“...Oh?”

“Yes,” Mother says. “There was a girl who used to belong to this clan. She had everything she could ever want; friends, money, sex, knowledge. Whatever she could have wanted from this world, she could have had it. That’s the right you have as one of us, Emily. You want a dress that the First Lady wore to a party? Done. Want a pair of designer shoes that haven’t yet seen the light of day? You can have them. I can even get you the designer’s private sketchbook, no questions asked.” She smiles as some of the color leaves the fledgling’s face. “You didn’t think I knew about your dreams of being a designer, did you? I know a lot more about you than you think.”

The fledgling is once again at a loss for words. Ashley is so used to seeing this child be loud and defiant, but before Mother, she’s powerless. She wants to see that powerlessness again, in the dark of her playroom while Ashley breaks her pretty fingers, one by one.

How long does she have to wait?

“...What happened to the girl...?” The fledgling asks, sounding uncharacteristically timid.

“Over the years, she became...dissatisfied with our lifestyle. She began to starve herself, and encouraged others to do the same.” Mother shakes her head. “It was sad to watch. This child had become so deluded that she believed all of us starving to death was better than a few dead humans.”

The smirks. “Apparently she forgot how quickly and fervently they reproduce. But, in any case, I thought if she had a fledgling of her own, she would realize the gifts and responsibilities she had, and she would understand that not everything was about her and her moral quandaries.”

Ashley chews on the bone with more force now, gnawing and snapping until she hears it splinter between her jaws. That girl. That girl. That girl.

“...Well. Samantha got her fledgling, but during her initiation, she interrupted, trying to drag her fledgling away and killing her fledgling’s boyfriend in the process. I saved the poor fledgling, but Samantha ran away from us. We don’t know what happened to her, but I would hazard a guess that she spent her last minutes bathed in sunlight.”

Ashley rocks back and forth. The memory of his screaming, the sound of raw meat tearing, the hot wet blood, and Sam’s cold, cruel stare all hit her. She murdered Chris. Her Chris. Her Chris. She murdered him and ran away and left her in the pit, alone.

The fledgling steals a glance at Ashley. Mother follows her gaze.

“Jessica told you I drove Ashley insane.”
“How did you…”

“But she was quite insane already after what Samantha did to her. I was rehabilitating her. She’ll never be how she was, but this is the best we can hope for, I’m afraid.”

The fledgling looks at Ashley again, then at Mother. The rebellion is back in the insolent girl’s eyes.

“My father died,” she says. “He was murdered right in front of me. I was six. It nearly destroyed me, but my mom still sent me to therapy on her music teacher salary. You could give Ashley the best psychological help money could buy, you could get her some real, genuine help, but you didn’t. You ‘rehabilitated’ her yourself, and last time I checked, rehabilitation doesn’t involve letting someone butcher people and chew on bones for fun.”

Ashley smiles. She watches as quiet fury plays out on Mother’s face. Any minute now, she’ll have her doll. Mother’s manicured nails scrape on the hard mahogany of her desk.

“If you’re so skeptical about how I rehabilitated Ashley, why don’t I demonstrate on you? My sweet girl would be happy to show you what I did to her.”

“I…”

“You’re proud of your sharp mind aren’t you?” Mother says. “4.0 GPA, on the honor roll, very impressive. It would be a shame to watch that clever mind shatter.” The fledgling shifts in her chair, trying to remain stoic, but Ashley can see the fear in her eyes. “You know, Emily, I don’t think it would be very hard. Especially if you, by chance, see something terrible happen to Jessica. She would deserve it too, after all the blood wine she stole.” She smirks as Emily’s eyes widen. “She didn’t really think I would believe that Alex did it, did she? Maybe she is as stupid as she looks. But you aren’t, right Emily?” She leans in close and puts a hand on Emily’s shoulder. “I know you’re not one to take orders, but a lot of lives rest on you falling in line. Yourself, Jessica, your dear mother who lives on 3506 Griffin Avenue in Lincoln Heights…” Ashley didn’t think it was possible for Emily to get any paler, but now she’s as white as a bedsheets and visibly trying not to shake. “Do try to take your time here seriously. This isn’t a game, my dear.” She leans back and examines her nails on one hand, the other hand waving in dismissal. “You may go.”

Shakily, the fledgling turns, trying to saunter out of the room but Ashley can clearly see how her legs wobble with every step.

She sighs. Mother looks amused, so Ashley takes the risk of approaching the desk. After a moment of hesitation, she sits on her lap, nestling her head against Mother’s shoulder.

“So I don’t get to play?”

“Not yet, sweet girl,” she says, running her hand through Ashley’s hair. “But soon though. Soon.”

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“Hannah. Hannah!”

“Ugh…”

“Hannah, wake up, wake up.”

She opens her eyes with a start, sucking in an unnecessary breath and she glances around to gain her bearings, her skin all hot and slick with sweat. It takes a second, but soon her anxiety ebbs away. She’s okay. She’s in her room, in her bed, safe within the mansion’s confines.
She’s not alone, though. Blinking back sleep, she sees her sister sitting next to her on the bed, looking down at her with concern.

“Beth?”

“Hey, Han. You okay? You sounded like you were having a nightmare.”

“A nightmare,” Hannah stutters. She closes her eyes, trying to shake off her discomfort. “I think I did, but, uh, it’s fine. Sorry. You should go back to bed.”

“I haven’t been to bed yet,” Beth says wearily. She pulls the blanket back and nudges Hannah’s side. “Come on, schooch over.”

“You have your own bed.”

“Yes, but it’s so far away,” Beth whines. “C’mon sis, move over

Hannah huffs, grabbing her pillows and moving across the bed, making space for her twin. Beth’s a pain, but truthfully, she doesn’t want to be alone right now. Not with her dead brother’s voice still echoing in her head.

She glances over at Beth. She looks ashen faced. Usually her sister’s eyes are bright and inquisitive, but right now they’re flat and glassy. Hannah sighs. Whatever chore Cassandra is making her do must be really taking its toll.

“Hey,” Hannah says, pulling her sister close. Beth must be tired, because she folds into her embrace without complaint, nestling her head underneath Hannah’s chin. Their legs tangle up together, and when Hannah’s feet brush up against her sister’s, she pulls away in shock.

“Ew, Beth, your feet are freezing. Have you been eating enough?”

“Stop talking. Let me sleep already.”

“Beth! You can’t not eat.”

“I want to sleep,” Beth mumbles. “I promise I’ll eat something when I get up. Quit mothering me.”

“Technically, I am older than you.”

“Whatever, doofus, I seem to recall being turned first.”

Hannah chuckles, until it all comes back. She can vividly see her sister, shaking with fury and fear as Cassandra pins her down on the kitchen floor. There’s Frances, holding Hannah up against the wall, her pale, cool arm pressed against her windpipe. She remembers staring, petrified, as Cassandra sank her fangs deep into her twin’s neck. She wanted to cry out for Josh, her Josh, to come and save them, but being too afraid to even draw breath.


She feels Beth stiffen.

“Why are you asking?”

“It’s just… I think my nightmare was about him. He was there, on the night we were turned, but he couldn’t do anything, he had to watch us die and then Beverly started attacking him and I could tell he was so scared -”
“Hannah,” Beth snaps. Hannah flinches. She hasn’t heard her sister use that sharp tone with her in decades. “What's the point in thinking like that?”

“But…”

“What does Cassandra always say?”

“Our mortal lives are an insipid shadow,” Hannah recites.

“Exactly,” Hannah feels her sister exhale against her neck. “There’s no use thinking about it now. It’ll only make you upset.”

“I know,” Hannah’s voice catches, and for a second, it's difficult to swallow. Beth is right. Thinking about their old lives is futile. But it feels the like the ghost of her brother has loomed over her the last few days, the pain of his loss coming back with an ugly vengeance.

“I just…miss him, that’s all.”

“I miss him too,” Beth says, so quietly Hannah almost doesn’t hear it.

“Do you think he got away?”

“Hannah, let’s not go over this.”

“No, I’m serious. He’s the only one we don’t know what happened to. I know Cassandra told us not to talk about him, but, do you think maybe Frances went and found Josh, and -”

“Frances was in charge of getting Mike, and anyway, if Frances hurt him, then Bev would have found out, and do you think Bev would have kept that a secret?”

“I guess not,” Hannah says, feeling oddly deflated. “I just wish I knew what happened to him. Even if it was something horrible. It’s better knowing.”

“If he had any brains, he would have seen the writing on the wall and got the hell out of dodge,” Beth says. She sounds like she’s holding back, like there’s something else she wants to say but is reluctant to share. So Hannah waits, running her fingers through her sister’s hair.

“Josh was smart,” Beth finally says. “He was stupid, in a lot of ways, but he could look out for himself. I- I always hoped he got out of Los Angeles. Out of California, even. I hope he found friends, real friends, not the lackeys who were only there for the money. I hope he found a man and grew old with him and forgot about his stupid, toxic family.”

“A man?” Hannah says, shocked.

“Yeah…”

“So he was, you’re saying Josh was… gay,” Hannah gasps, scarcely believing her sister’s words.

“Yeah. That’s why father treated him like shit.”

“Father didn’t do that! And how do you know he was, anyway?”

“Trust me. I know.” Beth says, her voice sounding strangely intense and bitter.

They’re silent for a few moments. Hannah doesn’t know how Beth is feeling, but she’s actually flabbergasted. Her brother, gay? The same boy who would whistle at good-looking girls on the
boulevard and tease Sam about how pretty she was?

Hannah spent more time with her brother than the rest of her family combined. Josh doted on her. He was her confidant, protector and greatest ally. Surely she would have known if he was gay.

Although, now that she thinks about it though, maybe the signs were always there. She remembers how Mike’s mouth would set in a hard line whenever she spoke about Josh. She remembers her brother and her father arguing, feeling tears prick at her eyes when her father called Josh pathetic, his contempt obvious, even to her.

She remembers having to wake her brother from a drunken stupor one morning, how he stank of whiskey and an unfamiliar cologne.

“How could he never tell me? How could you?”

“It was a different time then,” her sister says, sounding more tired than Hannah has ever heard her. “You wouldn’t have believed me. You wouldn’t have wanted to.”

She wouldn’t have. Of course she wouldn’t have. She never thought there was anything wrong in the world, even in the depths of the Depression when the breadlines would snake around the block. All Hannah had to worry about was looking pretty and waiting for her movie star boyfriend to propose. Back then the world was made for a girl like her. She thrived while her siblings languished.

God. She was such a child. Such a useless fucking child. No wonder Cassandra didn’t want to turn her.

“I’m so sorry,” Hannah whispers, pulling her sister close..

“S’okay,” Beth mumbles. To Hannah’s surprise, she feels Beth’s tears sliding down her neck. “It doesn’t matter. Whatever happens, we still have each other, right?”

“Right,” Hannah says, squeezing Beth as tight as she can. “Right.”

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Emily spends the whole day lying on her bed as still as possible, trying not to make a sound. Cassandra’s eyes and ears are everywhere in this house, and she doesn’t want to draw too much attention to herself by looking for them. When dusk finally comes, she’s dizzy from lack of sleep, and it takes everything in her to keep from dozing off while Beth gives her yet another lecture about taking her responsibilities as a clan member seriously. It’s infuriating to listen to the old bat go on about Cassandra’s vision and the “harmonic sisterhood” they’re all supposed to maintain. She wants to point out that if Tamika and Sophie are any indication, this is a pretty incestuous sisterhood, but she holds her tongue.

Emily’s not used to shutting up and listening to idiots talk unchallenged, so sure that everything they’re saying is right. Her own silence hurts like a bee sting.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Huh?” Emily looks up. Beth is glaring at her.

“I said, I can tell when a vampire hasn’t been eating, so don’t even try to hide that from me. If I don’t see clear evidence that you’ve drunk from a human by the end of the week, then I’m not gonna let you hunt with anyone but me. Understand?”
Emily would rather jump into an ore grinder than hunt with Beth, so she nods. Beth sighs.

“Alright then, move along. Jess is waiting for you in her room.”

Emily doesn’t need to be told twice, brushing past Beth and walking down the hallway, passing Violet and Bev along the way. Bev looks up at her and smirks. Something in the woman’s eyes makes Emily freeze up. Bev raises her eyebrows.

“Problem?”

“...No…” Emily forces out, feeling like an idiot for suddenly filling with anxiety. Bev moves closer to her, her dark eyes narrowing. Something in her deceptively childlike face stirs a memory. Involuntarily, Emily shies away from her. Bev grins, and behind her, Violet laughs.

“Hold on,” Bev says. “Are you scared of me?”

Emily’s lip twitches. Bev’s shit-eating grin widens. She moved in closer, baring her teeth, and Emily takes an involuntary step backward. Distantly, she hears a scream, distorted and murky, like it’s coming to her through a wall of water.

Bev and Violet crow with laughter.

“Aw, is she scaring you?” Violet mocks. “Are you gonna cry into your slut sire’s tits about it?”

“Her slut sire is about to rip out your fangs and shove them up your asshole, Vi,” a familiar voice cuts in. Emily looks away from Bev to find Jess walking down the hallway to them, her eyes harsh and challenging as she faces Bev and her minion. “Go be annoying somewhere else.”

Bev sneers.

“Quick to save your uppity little bitch, aren’t you? That’s cute. Gosh, just like Beth and Saint Sam, right? The only girl Beth ever loved.” Jess flinches a bit, and Emily can sense a twinge of pain and regret in her. Bev grabs Violet forcefully by the arm, dragging her down the hallway. “Come on, Vi, let’s get out of here before those freaks do something we can never unsee.”

Emily watches them go. Her head swims with dulled panic, like pressure on a hand that’s half-asleep. Jess looks at her carefully, her pretty green eyes looking deeply into Emily’s.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” Emily says flatly. “Can we go? This place is giving me hives.”

Jess looks Emily over one last time before nodding.

“We should head out soon, but first...” Jess smiles. “...If we’re gonna go to one of the hottest clubs in town, we better dress for the occasion.”

An hour later, Emily and Jess stand outside of a sleek Beverly Hills nightclub, the thrum of music resonating somewhere deep in her stomach. Emily casts a glance down at what she’s wearing. It’s the kind of outfit she used to cut out of magazines and pin on her wall, admiring the subtle details the designers put into every sequin, every fabric, every coordinating color and choice of aesthetic.

(And, perhaps, she liked to look at the pretty models wearing the dresses too. Maybe.)

Now, she and Jess, dressed like movie stars and walking together like nothing in the world could hurt them, are heading to a party to mingle with the rich and famous. Normally, this sort of thing is
frowned on, since there’s probably no one at this rave that people wouldn’t notice missing.

But this time, no one is going to disappear or die at all.

They bide their time for an hour or two, dancing together, coming close and locking eyes as they sway to the rhythm but neither dares close the distance. Whatever spark of attraction Jess had for Emily, she seems to be content to let it sleep.

For now.

The music cycles and surges like wild tides and the lights overhead cycle red-blue-green, bathing the partygoers in unnatural light. Eventually, the man Jess and Emily have been watching out of the corners of their eyes staggers outside, looking pale and shaky. Slipping silently through the mass of humanity on the dance floor, Jess and Emily follow him.

Their target sits alone in the expansive backyard, staring at the eucalyptus trees swaying slightly in the breeze. He looks up slowly as the women approach, and right away Emily can see that the guy’s pupils are practically nonexistent. He’s flushed and sweaty, and he seems to look through them as they come near.

“Merry Christmas…?” He says uncertainly.

“Not for three weeks, dumbass,” Jess says, but there isn’t much bite to it. The man doesn’t seem to comprehend what she said in any case, and goes back to staring intently at nothing. He’s a young guy, heavyset and tan, with a mop of reddish-brown hair. Absently, he mixes a blueish powder into a garish-looking cocktail and downs it like a shot.

He’s so stoned that he probably wouldn’t remember anything about this night, but then again, that was the plan the whole time.

Jess saunters up to the man, still seated in his chair, and flashes a beauty queen smile. The guy looks Jess in the eye for the first time, bleary but intrigued. Jess subtly gyrates her hips, licking her lips and looking down at the man with hooded eyelids. Something stirs in Emily’s gut as she moves, agitated, behind the man and picks up his arm, eyeing a spot on the underside of his pale arm where she could see his veins snaking like rivers just under the skin.

Emily bites down, careful to not let her fangs pierce too deep. The guy doesn’t even notice, not even after Jess takes his other arm and starts sucking blood from his wrist. He makes a noise, halfway between surprised and aroused, and Emily fights the urge to retch. His blood is rife with toxins, and Emily can barely get down a coffee mug’s worth of blood before she pulls herself back, feeling unsteady. Jess keeps drinking at first, but when Emily pries her off the guy, Jess doesn’t protest. Emily pulls some cotton and rubbing alcohol and gets to work cleaning and dressing the guy’s wounds. He watches her with mild interest as she patches him up, and then goes back to staring off into space, completely oblivious to the fact that two biologically impossible monsters just drank a Red Cross donation’s worth of blood from him. Jess grins with a mixture of amusement and fondness as Emily finishes up.

“I can’t believe you dragged a mini doctor’s office out here just to prove a point,” she tells her.

“Actually, wait, yes I can.”

“I was right though,” Emily says. “We don’t need to drain anybody. This way, we live, and he lives. It’s a win-win. A live-live.” Her surroundings blur a little bit. Emily puts the heel of her hand to her head and tries to focus, but she can feel her mind getting away from her. Apparently Jess feels it too, because through the haze Emily can see her staring at her with that same blissful, slightly-zoned out
gaze as the druggie in the chair. “And I’m glad to hear you finally know the rules,” Emily continues, her words slurring together a bit. “Rule number one: Emily is always right. Rule number two, uh...I forget. But, like, I’m right, so, yeah.”

Jess giggles, and the sound is even more musical than usual.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone quite like you, Em,” she says. “And I’ve been around a while. Like, a loooooong while.” She looks like she wants to say more, but she trails off and wanders away from the man, into the garden. Emily follows, noticing how pleasantly strange the morphing menagerie of flowers is. They shift in shape and size and color as she walks, and she’s filled with euphoria and a twinge of anxiety the longer she walks. Finally, she and Jess stop in front of a fountain and flop down on the lawn. Emily marvels at how soft the grass is beneath her. She could fall asleep right now and burn to a crisp in the rising sun, and a part of her wouldn’t even mind. She’s just so sleepy.

“Don’t fall asleep, Em,” Jess says fondly.

“Woah, did you just read my mind?”

“We’re connected, you stuffing-head, remember?”

“‘Stuffing-head?’ That was weak, Jessica.”

Jess laughs again, and Emily turns her head until she’s looking at her sire’s face, eyes staring up at the sky, her pretty, soft lips curved in a faint smile. Emily has forgotten in these past few months how breathtaking Jessica is.

A thought occurs to Emily and she snorts with laughter.

“What?” Jess asks.

“No, it’s just... you really took my breath away a couple months ago.....”

Jess laughs, and in contrast to her usual laugh, this is more like a cackle, sudden and almost harsh, but still somehow endearing.

“Oh my god, that was terrible.”

“Excuse you, how dare you not appreciate my rapier wit?”

“Er, no. You’re worse than Beth.”

Hearing Beth’s name makes something in Emily’s skull start a tiny jackhammer.

“You guys are pretty close, huh?”

“Well, yeah,” Jess says. “I mean, she’s my sire. You know how...intense...those bonds can get.”

“...Wait, what do you mean, ‘intense’?”

“Oh, you know...” Jess trails off with a giggle. “Let’s just say Saint Sam wasn’t Beth’s only...indulgence.”

Realization smashes through her high like a sledgehammer.

“Wait, what? You and grandma?!”
Jess laughs again.

“Oh nelly, please don’t let her hear you say that.”

“No, but,” Emily splutters, sitting up, “She’s so nasty and awful and old. No, please don’t...please don’t tell me you actually went there?”

“Oh, honey, please” she says, “I’ve ridden all the rides at that rodeo.”

“That’s...I can’t…”

“Don’t let that whole iron lady thing fool you, Beth’s a surprisingly gentle lover,” Jess says, a fondness in her voice that sends blades of jealousy into Emily’s chest.

“Is that why she’s such a bitch? You left her and she decided to dull the pain by sucking Cassandra’s dick?”

Something in Jess’s expression darkens, and Emily feels a brief stab of guilt.

“I...well, I did leave her, but it’s just because we weren’t, you know. Working out.”

Emily figures it’s best to leave it at that, but after about thirty seconds of silence, Jess blurts out:

“Please don’t run away. Sam did and it...it destroyed us. Beth was never the same after she left.”

“It’s not like I can, anyway,” Emily sighs. “Least not right now, anyway. Not while everyone and their damn mother is watching me.”

“Emily…”

“You could come with me,” Emily tells her. “We could figure this out, and just, you know, be careful, and maybe in a few months when they’re distracted with something else we could ‘go hunting’ and never come back. Find my mom and my friend and get the hell out of town.”

“But, where would we go? How would we find enough people to eat, and a place to hide every dawn?” Jess asks.

“I...don’t know,” Emily admits. “But I’m going to try to figure it out.”

“What about Beth? And Hannah and Tam?”

The desperation in Jess’s voice is naked. Emily looks into her eyes and sees the faintest beginnings of tears there.

“...I...if we can convince them to come with us, then we can all leave together. If not, I mean...we’ll have to cut our losses. You can’t save everybody.”

Jess’s eyes close. She swallows, and opens them again.

“Em...you’re high, I’m high, we’re just talking about this because neither of us is all there right now.”

“Jess—”

“There have been others who’ve tried to pull a Sam and run,” Jess says. “They’ve all been caught. If you don’t believe me, ask Ashley how many of their tongues she’s ripped out.”
“But…”

“I can’t let that happen to you,” Jess tells her. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Emily wants to tell Jess that every second they’re in the cult they’re all being hurt, but Jess continues before she can get a word in. “It’ll be okay,” Jess says. “We can make it work here. You can be happy here.” She takes Emily’s hand in hers. “Please stay.”

Emily wants to argue, but the pained, resolute look on Jess’s face tells her it wouldn’t matter. Her vision blurs again and her head throbs. She groans. Jess manages a tight smile.

“You’re tired, Em. Let’s go back to the manor and sober up.”

“No,” Emily begs. “Not there. Not yet. Just another hour or two. Please?”

Jess’s expression softens. She squeezes Emily’s hand. Without thinking, Emily squeezes it back.

“Okay”, Jess says. “Couple more hours. Probably should wait a bit and sober up before I drive into a tree anyhow.” Suddenly, a mischievous smirk forms on her face.

“You know, cold water is supposed to help you be more alert. I saw a pool back closer to the house.”

“But we didn’t pack swimsuits.”

“We didn’t?” Jess asks, her smile widening. “What a shame. I’m sure we’ll figure something out…”

In spite of herself, Emily smiles back.

They almost look like a regular couple.

Sam lurks in the shadows, watching the broad smile on Hannah’s face as she and her companion make their way through the old fashioned arcade. She doesn’t dare get too close, staying out of a vampire’s earshot, even making sure not to be standing downwind, worried, absurdly, that Hannah will be able smell her fear.

She doesn’t pay much attention to the boy. Hannah’s had an eclectic taste in men over the years, but the boy is in her favourite mould: tall, handsome and athletic. Sam’s seen dozens of men just like him, young men, eager to impress, not comprehending they’re sleepwalking to their deaths.

And yet.

Sam watches for any sign of insincerity. Sam watches when the boy turns around, searching hard for that familiar predatory gleam in Hannah’s eyes. She’s been skulking in the shadows for over an hour. And in all that time Sam’s seen none.

They move further into the arcade. Sam follows, darting behind a dilapidated popcorn machine, trying her best not to lose her nerve. If she were a human girl, she’s pretty sure Hannah would be able to hear her heart slamming against her chest.

Hannah and the boy are now playing air hockey. Normally in this scenario Hannah lets the man win, giggling girlishly and playing to his ego. Here, she’s the Hannah Sam once knew: intense and deeply competitive. The boy has an athlete’s reflexes but that’s not enough against a vamp; Hannah’s wins the game in minutes, throwing her arms in the air and cheering while the boy grins good naturedly at
It’s too early to hope this is real, Sam thinks. It’s too early.

It’s too scary to hope.

They continue their date. The boy (and the more she watches him, the more she realizes he can’t be older than twenty, tops) competes in one of those mini hoop competitions. He has a good eye, sinking the baskets to Hannah’s absolute delight. Eventually, he wins, handing Hannah a small, purple butterfly pendant. Even from a distance, Sam can tell it’s cheap, a trinket really. Nothing like the jewelry Hannah has at home, but her old friend holds the necklace to her chest, her eyes shining with, what has to be, genuine warmth.

Sam blinks back tears, finding it difficult all of a sudden to swallow. She always thought Hannah suffered a particularly cruel fate; a romantic by nature but indoctrinated to hate the people she’s supposed to love. She made up for it with glamourous dresses and having the best looking men on her arm, but even in the 60s Sam could see the toll it took on her. Cassandra could call it what she liked, but there was no hiding the emptiness in Hannah’s eyes.

Sam promised to protect Hannah if she ever fell in love.

It’s a promise Sam intends to keep.

Sam’s pulled away from her thoughts when the pair of them move away, shyly holding hands. It would almost be cute, if Sam’s attention wasn’t suddenly pulled elsewhere.

The man is standing stock still a few feet away from her, not taking his eyes off Hannah and the boy. He’s wearing a loud Hawaiian shirt, aviators and a cap, but Sam would recognise him anywhere.

“Josh,” she hisses, hurrying over to him, panic surging through her veins. “What are you doing here?”

“Same as you.”

“You- you promised to stay in the car. You promised. Also... what sort of disguise would you call this?”

“Look at her,” Josh says, ignoring her, his eyes still focused on Hannah. “I can’t believe it. She...she....she looks so different, you know. All grown up. Elegant. Not like she was when she was a kid.”

“Josh,” Sam says gently, reaching for his hand.

“She was the only one who didn’t think of me as a burden you know,” Josh says, sounding very faraway. “Growing up, I was an inconvenience to Mom and the living embodiment of failure for Dad. And Beth was too concerned with stopping everything from falling apart. But Hannah...she saw me as a superhero, you know. And not like a... not a defective….fucking...queer.”

“Josh!” Sam gasps.

“We need to go to her,” Josh says, dragging his eyes away from his sister. His eyes are wide, frantic and desperate. He raises a shaky hand, taking his hat off and pulling at his curly locks.

“Josh,” this is what Sam was afraid of. Seeing Hannah would bring back all the awful memories, of how he tortured himself for decades thinking about his sister’s fate while festering alone in that
goddamn cave.

“We can’t. I’m not sure what we’re seeing here, what she really feels…”

“Does she look like she’s going to eat Matt?”

“No,” Sam concedes.

“There you go! She’s fine. She’s… cured. Let’s go get her already.”

“Josh, it’s not like that,” Sam pleads.

“Why not?”

“It’s too risky. The only way I’ve been able to stay hidden for so long is that I’ve cut off all ties to my sire and the cult. Blocked them out. But you can’t do that if a part of you wants to go back. If Hannah still has ties to Cassandra or to anyone else, she’ll lead the whole clan straight to us.”

“No offense, but this is different, Sam. I’m their brother. One look at me and they’ll forget all about the stupid clan. I’ll prove it. Hannah. HANNAH!”

Josh is yelling, almost at the top of his voice. Hannah and Matt are at almost out of sight, but Hannah has a vampire’s hearing and Josh is doing whatever he can to attract her attention.

“Josh, no,” Sam pleads, pulling him away.

“Hannah!

“Josh, quit it.”

“Hannah, it’s me, it’s Jo—”

She doesn’t let him finish, taking advantage of him being distracted to whirl him around and sink her knee right into his crotch.

Josh collapses to the ground, letting out a horrible, pained, cry. Sam leaves him there, prone on the floor, glancing up, gasping in relief when she realizes Hannah and Matt are no longer in sight.

Josh, groans, gingerly getting to his feet. Sam winces. She feels terrible. She had to do it, and she’d do it again if it meant protecting them all, but seeing the pain on his face makes her heart ache.

“Josh…”

“I know you’re not an expert in balls, Sammy, but hot tip: it hurts like a bitch when you knee them.”

“I’m sorry,” she says. She goes to comfort him, but he bats her away.

“Why didn’t you let me go to her, Sam?” Josh spits. Sam almost flinches. She’s never seen Josh’s face so twisted with rage. “I can put an end to this. And we can all be together, like you said you always wanted.”

“Josh, if we screw this up, then we’ll lose Hannah. And if she ends up running away and getting caught she’ll get hurt. Let alone what… what the others would do to you, if they ever found you.”

“If the cult is so terrible, why are we wasting another second talking about rescuing them? Let’s go
“You don’t understand,” Sam bursts out, not caring that humans around them are beginning to stare. “Cassandra won’t give up. She’ll hunt them down. Hannah and Beth, she’s their sire. And Beth…. I’m not even sure you’re enough to convince her to leave the cult. I’ve never seen a fledgling so loyal to her sire. And Cassandra needs that. She won’t let Beth go. She won’t give her up.”

“Cassandra sounds like a real piece of work, you know,” Josh snaps. “And you… you… left my sisters with her.”

“Left them? How could you say that?”

“Truth hurts, huh? You left my sisters to fester in a cult so you could get away. You left them to the tender mercies of a freaking psycho. You let Hannah become a monster. You let Beth’s brain become warped.” Josh leans close, a cruel smile stretching across his face. “Oh, but you’re the hero in this movie, right? You escaped! Well, la dee da, good for you. I’m so glad to play a part in your hero epic! Somebody get Scorsese on the line. Oh, wait, but I guess my sisters are just collateral damage, huh. For your star turn?”

“How dare you,” Sam snarls. She knows Josh is teetering on the edge of an episode, and that Sam should be trying to talk him down, but there’s something too bitter about his words. Something tells her this old, ugly grievance has lurked within Josh for a long time.

“Oh I dare. But you know, Sammy, you know what I don’t get? You know the thing that’s a real mindfuck? You still love Beth. And it has to be love, right, because you’ve barely even looked at another woman for thirty-fucking-years. But….you’re going to let her rot so you can save your own skin? Jeez, Sammy, how selfish can one person b—”

Sam slaps him, the sound reverberating around the room. Josh’s head twists and he grunts, staggering away, a red welt already beginning to bloom on his cheek.

“You know what would have happened if I’d stayed in that place, Josh?” She bites her lip hard enough to draw cold, congealed blood. She swallows it with a grimace. “Do you know why I left?”

“You left—”

“I left because I wanted to kill myself in peace.”

Josh blinks, taken aback. He swallows.

“You…you were…”

“I couldn’t take it anymore, Josh. I loved them, I always have, but…everything hurt, everywhere. It was too much. I just….” A lump forms in her throat and her voice breaks. “…I just wanted it to stop.” Tears start in her eyes and she wipes them away, breathing out through her nose. “And I didn’t want them to see me burn.”

“Sam…”

“I didn’t plan to ever come out of that cave. I thought at the beginning, when I first left, that I wanted to keep going, but now I realized I…. I went down into that cave to starve. So I could pay for what I’d done to so many people. I…didn’t know it took so long.” She looks up at Josh. “You’re right, Josh. I’m a coward. But I know that if I’d stayed I would have burned myself up one morning, you’d still be eating rats in a fucking cave, and Hannah and Beth would be under Cassandra’s thumb forever.”
“Sam, I—”

“See you at home,” she says, suddenly desperate to get away from him, his haunted eyes, and the accusations that live beneath them. She leaves, ducking through the crowds until she’s lost him somewhere deep in the arcade, surrounded by happy people playing games that chirp and whistle and flash.

Sam stands in place, watching people moving around her, all with family and friends and lovers to return to after a long day. She imagines a piece of yarn held in her hand and Josh’s, fraying in the middle. When it snaps, it will join all the other sad, severed threads held in her hands.

“Miss?”

Sam looks down to see a bespectacled little girl. She clutches a little stuffed giraffe in her arms. Her eyes are wide and brown. She looks so much like a young Hannah that Sam almost cries looking at her. “Are you okay, lady?”

“I’m alright,” Sam says, sniffing a bit. “You should go back to your mother. Is she here?”

The girl points to a pair of women standing by one of those glass prize boxes with a controllable claw.

“My mommies are waiting for me,” she says.

Something about the women, the loving way they look at each other and at their little girl, makes Sam think of Beth in the ice cream parlor all those years ago, talking about the happy married life they’d have together, if only.

“Well, you should go see them again, yeah?” Sam says. “And be very, very careful talking to strangers in the future, okay?”

“Okay, bye, lady!” the little girl says, skipping over to her mothers, hugging the mom closest to her while the other laughs and snaps a picture of her wife and child.

Feeling old and heavy-hearted, Sam turns away.

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“Oh come on, people, it’s Madonna. How can you not know this?”

Josh takes a sip of his drink, scowling at the contestants on the screen. He’s alone, watching Jeopardy reruns in their apartment. It’s almost pitch black outside, but Josh can sense the sun creeping over the horizon.

Sam’s coming home a bit too late for Josh’s comfort. Not that he blames her for wanting to avoid him.

Sam and Josh both love Jeopardy. Watching it together is a ritual, their one constant. He used to be appalling at it (in his defence, he did spend thirty years in a cave) but now his general knowledge is formidable, and between him and Sam, they’re more than a match for even the best contestant.

Although, honestly, some of the humans are a disgrace to their species. There’s no excuse; Madonna is a goddamn icon.

“What is ‘Vogue’?” One contestant finally asks.
“Oh my god, it’s clearly ‘Material Girl.’ Amateurs.”

He takes a sip of his drink, which has now cooled to almost room temperature. He’s left a Sam a cup of cows blood, heated up and ready in her favorite, god awful Christmas-themed mug.

He hopes she sees the little spread he’s laid out for what it is: a peace offering and acknowledgement that he can, on very rare occasions, be a pigheaded asshole.

He was possibly an even bigger asshole than normal today. He’s sorry for it. All these years, he’s tried to shield his anger from her. Sam didn’t need to see what a bitter, miserable, twisted creature he is.

If she comes back, at least he has a chance to make it right.

He hears footsteps out in the hall, light and nimble. He’s used to a human’s heavy tread, so he sits up straight and tries to smooth out the couch next to him.

“Hey,” Sam says, closing the door behind her. She looks so worn and haggard, and Josh feels his stomach clench just at the sight of her.

“Hey pretty lady.”

“Watching Jeopardy without me? Traitor.”

“There are like, ten more episodes recorded, don’t worry.”

“Great,” Sam sighs, putting her coat on the rack. Anyone who didn’t know her so well would think she’s fine, but Josh can see tension around her eyes.

“As much as I like all things Alex Trebek I might just listen to some music in my room…”

“Sam.”

“Yes, Josh?”

“I’m sorry,” he says, motioning to the couch. Sam sighs, but comes to sit by him, looking at him warily.

“You’re right, okay. I shouldn’t have gotten mad, and said those things about Hannah… and about Beth,” at this, Sam winces, but Josh pushes ahead, undeterred. “And I shouldn’t have blamed you. You needed to get out that hellhole and you did. I’m really grateful for that, every day, you know? ‘Cause you saved me, Sam.”

“Josh,” Sam squirms. She always hated compliments. “I didn’t… it was more like a fluke, that I found you.”

“Call it serendipity, whatever. But I’m glad you did, because eating bugs is just as gross as it sounds.” Sam smiles a little at his weak joke. It feels like a victory.

“I just…” Josh swallows. “I just miss them so much, you know?”

“I miss them too. And we’ll get them back, I swear, but we can’t risk Cassandra finding us. If the twins have any connection to her, we’ll be sitting ducks. But I promise you, the second they really want out, we’ll be there, ready to swoop in.”

“And until then?”
“We wait. I’m sorry. I wish…”

“It’s okay, it’s not as if we’re getting any older. C’mere,” He raises his arm and Sam accepts his unspoken invitation, schooching forward and settling against his side.

They’re silent for a while, watching the episode but not really taking anything in. Next to him, Josh can tell Sam’s brooding, their fight already forgotten as she mulls possible plans in her head.

She’s so cautious. Weighed down by worry and fatigue and a lifetime’s worth of regret. If they stick to her plan, it might be decades before he holds his sisters in his arms again.

He’s not going to wait that long.

Even if it’s going to take months, he’s going to get his sisters back.

He just needs to figure out how.

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Hannah almost forgets to tuck the pendant under the collar of her shirt before she enters the manor’s courtyard, a big, dumb smile on her face. She hasn’t smiled like this, felt like this, in years. She certainly never thought a two dollar butterfly pendant would make her feel like queen of the world. She hums a little Christmas carol under her breath as she walks through the gates, walking through the foyer and waving to Amy and Tamika, seated on the couches.

“Merry Christmas!” Hannah says. Amy nods glumly while Tamika just laughs.

“What? Han, Christmas was two days ago!”

“They used to celebrate it for like twelve days, right?” Hannah replies. “Isn’t that where the song comes from?”

“Well, if you’re hoping I got you presents for Christmas part three, I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Tam says with a smirk. “Speaking of, me and Soph are going to watch the *Twilight Zone* marathon on New Years. Wanna watch with us?”

Hannah thinks of the plans she made with Matt to watch the fireworks from Santa Monica. She hides a secret smile.

“Nah. I got plans.”

Tamika raises an eyebrow.

“Tasty plans?”

“Something like that,” Hannah says with a laugh. “Anyway, I’m gonna go wash up and watch some Netflix for a while. See you guys later!”

Tamika waves. Amy looks away and says nothing.

As she heads down the hall to her room, she thinks about Matt’s hands, how they gesture excitedly whenever he talks about football or dancing or that TV show he likes, the one with the zombies. When Matt gets into something, he loves it with his whole heart and soul. He could light up the town with his passion for the things and people he loves. Hannah’s smile widens as she thinks about all the little things that make him up. He likes strawberry ice cream. He always puts his left foot forward first when he walks. He can’t whistle. He loves movie soundtracks. He always wanted a kitten, but
his mom is allergic. His parents met in college when they were partners for a biology project. His little sister got first place in the science fair last year.

She takes out the pendant from under her collar and admires it, the cheap fake gem in the centerpiece and the cheap metal chain holding it. It’s the most beautiful thing she’s ever seen. She memorizes every curve in the metal, every imperfection in the gem. She wants it to look perfect in her sketches tonight.

The door to her room is ajar. Hannah freezes, listening as someone shuffles inside. They move with the clumsiness of someone unused to the enhanced agility of a vampire. A fledgling.

Hannah pushes the door open to find Emily sitting on the bed, Hannah’s diary held tightly in her hands. She turns it around for Hannah to see the pages Emily was reading, covered in drawings of Matt’s face, his hands, the carefully-sketched curve of his arm.

“Hannah,” Emily says, her voice unnervingly calm. “What the hell is this?”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year!
We are back from hiatus and ready to rumble! I hope everyone had a nice holiday season, and I hope you all enjoy what my cowriter and I have in store for you!
As always, I want to wholeheartedly thank my amazing cowriter holeybubushka. I couldn't do this without her.
Leave a comment if you liked it, and have a safe, happy and bountiful 2018!
Leave the Night On

Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 2014 song of the same name by Sam Hunt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hannah’s eyes are wide, her already pale face even more devoid of color than normal. Her moment of shock has peeled back that constant facade of elegance, and for once, Hannah actually looks like a teenager. As far as being an intimidating monster goes, she’s quite a step down from Beth; the big doe eyes and kicked-puppy expression make Emily almost feel sorry for her.

If it weren’t for the fact that she’s planning to eat Emily’s best friend.

Emily takes off through Hannah’s window, running until she gets to the edge of the courtyard before waiting for Hannah to catch up. The courtyard is done in the style of some fancy Italian villa, complete with a statue of a naked cherub in the center of the plaza. The grassy areas, with their sparse trees, offer some cover from prying eyes. Hannah walks up to Emily, stopping beside her under the shade of a eucalyptus tree.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to play with your food?” Emily asks her. Hannah opens her mouth, flabbergasted.

“Emily, I can explain—”

“Explain what? That you’re drawing shirtless sketches of my best friend for anatomy class?”

“I...no, that’s not—”

“No, you know what? No. Shut up. You don’t get to act all sweet and innocent with me about this shit. I know what you do to men you take a liking to. Word travels fast in this shitty little cult.”

Hannah stammers some unintelligible nonsense for a moment, and Emily wonders how anyone could fall for her femme fatale bullshit. Emily remembers the lines from the diary, her dead heart burning with rage.

Dear diary, I met the prettiest little treat today.

Dear diary, Matt is so earnest. When he gets into something he gestures with his whole body. It’s so cute.

Dear diary, there’s nothing better than dragging out the hunt. There’s no point if this ends quickly.

“Why him, huh? What did he ever fucking do to you? To anyone?”

“Emily, I know what it looks like, but it’s not what you think, I swear…”

“Did he offend you by not bowing down and kissing your feet because he was scared for his missing friend?” Emily sneers, talking over Hannah. “Or is it because you know he’s gonna fall for your stupid schtick and really, really think you love him?”
“Emily, please—”

“Cram it, you freaking spider. I’m not done. How dare you target him. How dare you try and make him fall for you. What, do you find that kind of thing funny, you sick whore?”

Hannah raises a hand to slap her, but Emily holds up the diary, her hands on each side, ready to rip it in half. Hannah pauses, then lowers her hand.

“Listen, I don’t know what your deal is, but if Cassandra finds out you’ve been courting a guy for way longer than we’re supposed to, all the creepy sketches and shitty love poems in the world won’t save you from burning. Not that it wouldn’t be funny to see you try.”

Hannah regains her composure, her eyes burning with undisguised hatred. She looks like a kid who got her Lego set smashed. All her little traps and games ruined.

“If you show her this, they’ll go after him too,” Hannah says. “And anyone who’s connected to him.”

“Exactly,” Emily says. “Which is why it’s good for us both if you keep me from showing her. Oh, and before you even try it, skank, if I find out you’ve harmed a hair on Matt’s head, I’ll take this straight to Cassandra and we can all have a laugh about it while you burn.”

Hannah looks like she wants to interpret that as an invitation to rip Emily’s throat out, but thankfully there’s a nifty little rule in the clan that states if your name isn’t Cassandra or Ashley, you kill humans and humans only. Emily doesn’t know why that rule had to be written in the first place, but she’s guessing it probably had something to do with Bev.

Conflict rages across Hannah’s face for a few seconds, her eyes full of fear and anger and guilt before her shoulders finally slump.

“Okay. What do you want me to do?”

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“One pomegranate tea for the sweet little lady in black,” Matt says, winking as he puts a plate with a kettle, teacup, tea bag and honey down in front of Hannah and pours the water into the cup. Steam rises gently and Matt stifles a chuckle as Hannah looks from the cup to his arms to him, a coquettish smile on her face. It’s her typical, shameless flirtation, but Matt can’t help but notice something off in her eyes. She seems apprehensive, quieter than usual. He’s about to ask what’s wrong when another patron calls him to her table.

Hannah’s started to come in every night, just before closing time. She sits at the same booth, orders the same cup of tea, and plays the same jazz tune on the joke box, humming along to a sweet, sultry love song and sipping her tea like a girl in some sappy Victorian romance novel.

Sometimes he can’t even believe she’s real.

“Matt,” Aki calls from the counter, “you wanna count the till while I clean up out here?”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Matt says, heading over to the counter and trying not to look at the table near the opposite end of the shop. Jack is there, again, like he didn’t go on some crazy tirade the other day and call Matt’s best friend a soulless demon. Matt would kick him out, but he’s still a paying customer, and Matt strongly suspects Jack doesn’t have anywhere else to go.

Aki brushes past him as he gets close to the register. She moves too fast for him to get a good look at
her face, but Matt’s pretty sure he saw the faint presence of tears in her eyes.

Then again, if he had just received the news that his older brother had been bled almost dry and left in a ditch, he’d be crying too.

He finishes counting the till early. There’s a faint scratchy feeling in his throat, the kind he always gets at the very beginning of a cold. He clears his throat and rubs his neck, heading back into the locker room to get some water. The locker room is small and utilitarian, with off-white walls and a small water cooler in the back. It’s only point of interest is a bizarre, out-of-place poster advertising some weird anime he’s never heard of. He doesn’t know if it was put up as a joke, or if one of the day shifters genuinely enjoys Japanese cartoons about pink-haired girls with comically oversized tits.

Either way, it’s an eyesore.

He’s spending so much time consciously trying not to look at it that he almost doesn’t notice the envelope sticking out of his locker. He hesitates, looking around for any signs of the sender and finding none. The envelope is small, cream-colored, and unmarked. Inside is a short note scribbled in very, very familiar handwriting.

*Hey there Incredible Sulk*

*I’m safe but don’t look for me*

*Be very very careful. Dangerous people are looking for you.*

*Tell mom I miss her. Love you*

*E*

“The Incredible Sulk.” A dumb nickname Emily always called him whenever he was being moody or sulky. Even when he was mad at her, the silly name never failed to cheer him up.

Emily’s the only one who’s ever called him that. She’s the only one who even knows about the name, period.

That can only mean one glorious thing. Emily is alive. She’s *alive*, and she’s safe, and she’s sending him messages.

Matt’s fairly certain his heart is about to explode. He bounds back into the cafe and grabs Hannah’s hand, taking her back to the locker room before Hannah or Aki can asking what the fuck is happening. Hannah looks at him, the anxiety he saw in her eyes now everywhere in her expression.

“Matt…? What’s, uh, what’s wrong?”

“She’s alive.”

“What?”

“She’s alive!” Matt almost yells. He pulls Hannah into a joyous hug, pulling away only long enough to show Hannah the note. She takes it from him and her frown deepens.

“Oh…Matt, are you sure this is really her? I, I mean, maybe the people who took her want you to, you know, stop looking.”

Matt shakes his head.
“Em’s the only one who ever used that nickname. I doubt the kidnappers bothered learning that detail.”

“But,” Hannah protests, “even if it is her, she told you to not go looking for her. These people who took her, they sound like really bad news.”

“I know,” Matt says. “And Emily is almost always right. But I’ll be damned if I let my best friend stay cooped up in some asshole’s basement any longer. C’mon, we gotta take this to the police! They can scan it for fingerprints and—”

“Matt, no.”

“But—”

“Matt, the police all think you took her. If you walk in with a note supposedly from Emily, which is now covered in your fingerprints by the way, do you really think they’ll believe you?”

“But it’s the only clue we’ve got,” Matt says. “Risking arrest is better than doing nothing.”

Hannah looks at him for a long time. There’s something in her eyes that Matt can’t interpret. Then she sighs.

“Okay,” she says. “Matt, do you trust me?”

“Of course. Why?”

“I know a guy who’s studying forensics at UCLA. He’d probably be able to figure out whose DNA is on the envelope, but it would take a while.” She looks away from him. “You can keep the note.”

“Are you sure that will work?”

Hannah gives him a firm nod.

“Positive.”

Matt nods, trying to keep his hands from shaking as he gives her the envelope. Hannah slips it carefully into her back pocket. Matt breathes out, feeling like an overloading socket.

“She’s alive,” he repeats, like he’s praying for it to be true. Hannah offers him a weak, trembling smile.

“I hope you’re right,” she says.

Matt keeps the note close to his chest until he gets home. He folds it, as gently as if he were handling silk, and places it next to the framed photograph of him and Emily.

He’s not sure how many more days without Emily cracking jokes with him in the school hallways he can take. Still, there’s nothing to be done until Hannah tells him the results. Matt breathes in and out, slowly, listening to his heartbeat and trying to imagine Emily’s heart, somewhere out there, beating in time with his.

She’s alive. That will have to do for now.

She’s alive, she’s alive, she’s alive.
If Hannah was a human girl, she’d be certain she’d be able to hear her heart, hammering away in her ears.

She wasn’t sure she wanted to see Matt again so soon. She did what that brat Emily told her to do. She delivered the note, leaving it practically in plain sight where even Matt, sweet, bumbling, determined Matt, would find it. Then she relayed the whole gruesome conversation back to the clan’s newest fledgling in painstaking detail. Emily’s satisfied, even pleased, in her snotty, smug way. She thinks she’s doing Matt a kindness.

Hannah knows better.

Even though it almost physically ached to leave him alone, Hannah thought it would be wise to give Matt space. Emily’s given him hope, and as Cassandra says, hope can make a fool out of anyone. Of course, with that in mind, Hannah doesn’t leave him alone entirely. She still watches over him, lurking in the shadows, making sure he didn’t decide to go confront the nearest gang in his pigheaded rush to save Emily. If she’s not there to catch him, that heart of his is going to get him into trouble.

Still. Like she’s one to talk. The minute he texted her, asking her to come over, she couldn’t drive over here fast enough. Like some ravenous fledgling, eager for their first drop of blood.

She sees Matt’s car in the driveway, but not his parents. Just as she suspected, he asked her over at a time when they would be alone.

Despite herself, she feels a small fissure of excitement run through her.

She’s spent more than her fair share of time imagining all the things they could do once they were finally alone.

Matt’s house is a fairly nondescript place without a lot of distinguishing features, except for a gnarled oak tree. One of its many curves branches is situated right outside the only room that has its lights on.

Hannah grins.

She springs up, wrapping her hand around the lowest branch. The tree has many easy footholds. Even a human wouldn’t have trouble, and within seconds she’s where she needs to be, right outside Matt’s window.

She stays silent and still, but his attention is elsewhere. He’s standing at his mirror, fussing over his letter jacket, dusting it off and adjusting it, like he hasn’t worn it in ages and wants it to look just right. He needn’t worry. It fits snugly over his broad, strong shoulders, accentuating everything it should. He bites his lip, his sweet nervousness warming her cold body.

Hannah waits until he turns away, finally at peace with how he looks. Matt drags his eyes up from the floor and towards the window and then -

She bangs on the glass. “BOO!”

“Argh!”

“Sorry,” Hannah mouths at him, grinning as he comes towards her.

“Hey, you scared the crap out of me,” he says, opening the window. He looks a little grumpy, and it takes all her willpower not to kiss the pout off his face.
“Sorry. I saw this tree and I couldn’t resist.”

“That’s okay, many a girl has used it to get in here. Well, ah,” Matt stumbles, perhaps catching her bemused expression. “Not that many girls. Mostly Emily, to be honest, but that’s because she has a weird aversion to front doors. It’s not like… Loads of girls have… I’m not like some…”

“I know what you are, Matt,” Hannah says gently, wanting to put him out of his misery. He smiles back at her, gratefully, his eyes running over her face. Good. She took time over her appearance, spending hours ensuring she was heavily made up but not too made up, all her accessories meticulously matched to go with her outfit. And if the glazed look on his face is any indication, she did a good job.

“So, uh,” this is always an awkward question. “Are you going to invite me in?”

“Oh, shit, yeah,” he says, slapping his forehead. “Come in, come in.”

Hannah takes the hand he offers her and delicately makes the small leap from branch to window sill, and just like that, she’s in Matt’s room.

Old Hannah would send him an inviting smile, batting her eyelashes but always staying just out of reach. She’d wait and tease, reeling him in so closely until he’s putty in her hands. Now, though, she doesn’t know what to do with herself, her arms feeling heavy and useless at her sides, not even having the courage to look Matt in the eye.

Instead, she looks around. In the corner there’s a pile of musty smelling clothes, and near it, an ancient video console next to a second hand television that’s seen better days. There’s a simple desk, with a bulletin board hanging over it, filled with pictures of Matt and what looks like other boys his own age. Probably his old football team.

Her stomach clenches when she sees a picture of Matt and Emily. It’s a small polaroid, a battered old thing, taken with a cheap camera a year or so ago. Matt’s beaming, his large arm draped over his friend’s shoulders. Even though she looks flushed and disgruntled at being out in the sun, Hannah can detect a ghost of a smile tugging at Emily’s lips.

They look so hopeful and sweet and bright and young and if Hannah still had a working heart she’s pretty sure it’d break.

She winces and looks away, hoping he doesn’t catch the guilt on her face.

“So, uh, I was planning on giving you the grand tour. So. This is my room. Obviously. Sorry it’s such a mess.”

“No, it’s fine,” she says, looking away, her eyes darting towards the other side of the room.

Towards his bed.

He follows her gaze. A nervous laugh bubbles up from Hannah’s chest.

“Here we are, then.”

“Hannah,” Matt says quietly. He bridges the gap between them, taking her hands in his.

She’s seen that look before on the faces of a hundred men, the same base yearning in their eyes, but on Matt it’s somehow a thousand times more attractive. She sucks in an unnecessary breath. When she licks her lips, she finds they are dry.
“I’m really glad you came over,” he says.

“Me too,” she whispers, and just like that, he’s pressing his lips to hers.

Hannah almost wants to cry because finally she’s doing what she’s wanted to do from the moment she set eyes on him. Matt’s lips are soft and full and sweet and when he opens his mouth to deepen the kiss she feels like she might be falling.

They stay still for a few minutes, kissing languidly, but Hannah is starting to feel a bit impatient. He seems cautious, like she’s a blushing ingenue, which is ironic to say the least. But she doesn’t want to think about that, doesn’t want to think about how little he actually knows about her, so she pulls him forward, kissing him firmly and growling a bit into his mouth.

It feels so good to finally be pressed up against him. Matt groans a bit, letting her take the lead, pushing himself flush against her, his body tight with anticipation. He’s so earnest, not wanting to go too hard too soon, but she can feel the slight way his hips jerk forward, trying to rub himself against her, and Hannah thinks there’s nothing on this green earth she wants more than to shove him down onto the bed and fuck him through the mattress.

He pulls his mouth away from hers and starts kissing down her neck.

“Hannah,” Matt groans, his breath hot on her skin.

She moans in response, feeling a hot flush bloom on her cheeks. She always eats before she sees him, it’s safest that way, but even now she can feel the pounding of his heart, feel the blood pumping in his veins. She ignores the tiny voice in her head saying, stop, stop, tugging at Matt and bringing his lips back to hers in a messy kiss. It’s wonderful, like every fantasy she’s had about him but more, and before she can help it she’s tearing her mouth from his and kissing his ear, his cheek, his jaw. His neck.

She licks at the skin, tasting salt on her tongue, enjoying the way his blood thrums under her lips. She closes her eyes, thinking about him gasping underneath her, squirming and crying out as she enters him like he’s entered her, the two of them locked in an embrace until, until, until…

Hannah yelps, pulling away from Matt and stumbling away. She closes her eyes and then wishes she didn’t as she imagines the shock on Matt’s face as he bleeds out underneath her…

When she opens her eyes Matt’s looking at her, his face caught between arousal and concern. His lips are shiny and soft, and despite everything, her whole body is screaming at her to kiss him again.

How stupid can she be? To think...her feelings could overpower the yawning hunger of another kind.

“Hannah,” Matt says, stepping forward. “Are you okay?”

No.

“Yes.”

He frowns. “You sure?”

“Oh, absolutely,” she moves to pick up her bag. “I should go, though.”

“No, wait, did I do something wrong, or…”
“No,” Hannah stops, puts her hands on his face. He’s been nothing but good to her right from the beginning, back when she didn’t deserve his kindness. “You’re wonderful.”

He wraps his big arms around her, firm and insistent but loose enough that she could wriggle out with ease. “Then stay.”

Her eyes flicker down to his lips, and he’s moving forward, and surely it would be safe to give him just one more kiss...

“Matt?”

They spring away from each other.

The door is open and there is a girl, no older than eleven, staring at the two of them with knowing eyes.

“Lily, can’t you knock? What are you doing here?”

“Mom and dad got take out and I was going to ask if you want some but I didn’t know you weren’t alone. Hi,” she sticks her hands out.

“Uh, hello,” Hannah tries to recover, feeling mortified that she didn’t hear the rest of the Taylor-household come home. She takes Lily’s hand and shakes it. “I’m Hannah.”

“Lily. I see you’ve met my dork of a brother.”

Next to her, Matt scoffs, but she ignores him, recovering her poise and smiling down at the precocious human. “He is a little dorky, isn’t he?”

Hannah hears heavy footsteps on the landing. It sounds like an adult human is approaching them. She straightens up, adjusting her clothes and lip gloss and hopes she doesn’t look as unkempt as she feels.

“Matt?” a woman, who must be Matt’s mother, enters the frame. Her eyebrows shoot up when she sees Hannah. “Oh, hello there.”

“Hi. I’m Hannah. Matt’s friend.”

“Oh, that’s lovely.” The woman shoots Matt an arch look. “I’m Michelle. Matt’s mom.”

“It’s lovely to meet you, Mrs. Taylor.”

“Call me Michelle,” to Hannah’s great relief, Mrs. Taylor looks pleased, and not dismayed, that she discovered a girl in Matt’s room. “It’s been a while since Matt had a…. Friend over. Why don’t you join us for dinner?”

Hannah’s stomach drops to her shoes. “Oh no, I can’t.”

“Honestly, we’d love to have you join us, Hannah.”

“Oh, really, I have an appointment, I should be going…”

“It’s just some Vietnamese take out but we have have enough to feed a village. Please. I insist.”

“Um,” she scrambles for an excuse, racking her brain but coming up empty. God, it’s just like her to fold under pressure. When she glances at Matt, he smiles at her encouragingly.
“Sure,” she gives in. “That would be lovely.”

It’s not the worst thing she’s experienced in her unlife, but it’s close.

Matt’s parents are lovely but they’re peppering her with questions and Hannah hates how easily the lies roll off her tongue. The Taylors are easy to impress, believing her ruse that she’s a French major at UCLA. She always wanted to be an actor, and the role would almost be fun if she wasn’t using Matt’s family as her stage.

She stares at her uneaten food. It gleams under the kitchen’s cheap fluorescent lights.

“I’m learning French too,” Lily says excitedly. “I’m going to study in Paris for a year.”

“I thought you were going to be a scientist?” Matt asks fondly.

“I’m going to be a French scientist!”

“A` quel point je pense que tu vas être génial,” Hannah says to Lily.

“Wow. That was flawless,” Lily gasps.

“I’ve been learning French for a while,” Hannah smiles. Over forty years, to be exact, but the Taylors don’t need to know that.

“Lily, are you going to stop bombarding Hannah with questions and start eating your food?” Mr. Taylor asks.

“I’m being polite.”

“Yeah right, you’re not hungry because you’ve been had too many Abba Zabbas,” Matt scoffs.

“I have not!”

“It’s okay, Lil, I’m hooked on them as well,” he teases, a cute smile on his face. Hannah stares at her plate, hopes no one catches her blush.

“No, um, sorry, I was too busy answering questions, but it smells delicious.”

In actual fact, it smells like rotting moss and vinegar. She glances down at the rice noodles and vegetables. It’s been a while since she’s seen something so unappetising. It looks like slimy, green sludge, but both Taylor parents are watching her with interest. She remembers Matt saying his parents are nurses. Great. The last thing she wants is for them to get the wrong impression.

She shovels a mouthful into her mouth, trying not to retch when the noodles slide down her throat. Before she can linger over damp, vinegar-like taste, she shovels another mouthful into her mouth, then another, then another, trying her best not to gag. She can barely stand to chew, swallowing each mouthful as soon as she can.

She can feel the food squelching around the base of her stomach.

*Just a few more bites and you’ll be done.*
She does so, choking down on the last of dank sludge, feeling relieved that the Taylors seem satisfied. They exchange a few more pleasantries, and when Matt sends her a sweet smile, Hannah almost forgets that she’s probably minutes away from throwing up all over the table.

“I’m sorry,” Hannah finally chokes out. “I have study group, so I really should be going.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Taylor stands up. “Would you like some to go?”

“No. I mean… no, it’s fine, really. Thank you again. It was lovely meeting you all.”

“Bonsoir,” Lily says.

Hannah smiles despite herself. “Bonne Nuit, Lily.”

She says her goodbye to Mr. Taylor. In that time, Matt, chivalrous to the last, is waiting by the door, but before Hannah can get to him, she feels Mrs. Taylor’s clammy hand on her arm.

“Hannah,” she says softly, pulling Hannah out of Matt’s eye-line. “I just want to thank you.”

“What for?”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve heard about his friend Emily,” Mrs Taylor says, and Hannah’s stomach turns over. Again. “This is the first time I’ve seen Matt smile since she….disappeared. So. Thank you. For being there for him.”

“Really, it’s fine,” Hannah squeaks, backing away. She feels herself crumbling under Mrs Taylor's understanding gaze. “It’s no trouble.”

She almost trips over herself, stumbling around like she’s some fledgling, but she doesn’t care. Matt’s by the door. He frowns when he sees her.

“Hannah, you don’t look so great, do you need me to get my parents to have a look at you?”

“No, I’m fine, really. I think I should go.”

“Okay,” he shucks off his jacket, wrapping it around her shoulders. “You’re shivering. Put this on.”

“No, Matt -”

“I’m serious. Are you sure you don’t want -”

“I’m fine,” she interrupts, voice firm. “Really. Thanks for a really lovely night.”

“Yeah,” he smirks. “It, uh, was pretty good, wasn’t it?”

Hannah’s stomach gurgles, stopping any prospect of a flirty goodbye right in its tracks. She shivers.

“I better go.”

“Oh,” Matt looks disappointed, but leans into her, looking for a kiss.

“Okay,” she says, waving awkwardly, stumbling away. “Bye!”

It hurts to see his face fall when she turns and practically power walks away, but she thinks Matt would take that over Hannah throwing up over his shoes.

She gets into her car and manages to make it round the block until she pulls over, tires screeching to
a halt. She makes it to the curb and manages to slump to the ground before her stomach rebels. She throws up, again and again, until her throat is raw. It takes a few minutes of retching but finally she’s thrown all the human muck up, along with most of the blood wine she drank before she came over.

Sh flops on her back, smelling the damp earth along with the sour stench of her own sick. Hannah pulls Matt’s jacket around her, shivering violently. She hopes the worst is over.

Eventually she pulls herself up and gets into her car. She feels sweaty and faint but at least she’s sure she’s not going to hurl again. She’s about to drive off, preferably to somewhere that has a shower since it’s not a good idea to arrive to the mansion looking like she’s caught the Spanish flu when she hears her phone buzz next to her.

Matt: Hey so, I know I’m supposed to play it cool and txt you tomorrow, but whatever. I had a really good time tonight :)

Hannah slumps back into her seat, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Just what on earth has she gotten herself into?

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Beth wakes up with a stiff neck and a bad mood. It’s the second time this week that she ended up dozing off on the couch while watching some bad movie and trying not to think about anything. On the TV screen, Harrison Ford stands at the edge of a dam, screaming that he didn’t kill his wife.

This channel is always playing this stupid movie. As if anyone needed a reminder about how macho and noble men believe themselves to be.

So many movies these days are a love letter to violent, controlling masculinity. All the women are wives, mothers and sexpots waiting to be put in their place. Beth can’t believe she ever liked movies at all.

(Of course, it was never about the movies, not really. It was about going with her, watching the emotions play out on her face as she watched the screen with those wide, beautiful eyes of hers).

Beth yawns, stretches, and turns the TV off. The light that filters through the covered windows is the watery blue-grey of pre-dawn.

Shit. She slept through the whole night. Cassandra’s gonna feed her to Ashley if she keeps this up.

She heads to her room, hoping she’ll be able to force herself into sleep through the day. Her head throbs and she’s poised to rip the head off of the first person who bothers her.

“Beth!”

Beth swallows a curse and manages a tight smile as her sister runs up to her.

“Hannah, what are you doing up? It’s late.”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Hannah says, but her tone is light, teasing. Hannah’s face is practically glowing, and her eyes are so bright they almost look human. Around her neck, Beth notices for the first time, is a little butterfly pendant, cheaper than anything else Hannah owns. Hannah seems to notice that she’s looking at it, and tucks it self-consciously under her shirt collar. “I was just, you know...uh, out late. Lost track of time.”
Beth raises an eyebrow. She doesn’t know what Hannah’s playing at, wearing some cheap pendant like it’s a priceless heirloom and nearly getting herself burnt alive for lack of a sense of time. Her hair is even gleaming in the barely-there morning light, like it’s been freshly washed. Why would Hannah bother to shower somewhere else, instead of in her own bathroom? This whole thing... it isn’t like her.

Unless…

“Well, don’t make a habit of it. That’s dangerous, okay? What if you hadn’t made it back?”

“I know, I know,” Hannah sighs. “Don’t get your shorts in a twist. I’ll be more careful.”

“Excuse you, I’ll do whatever I want with my shorts,” Beth says. Hannah makes a face, amused and slightly disgusted, and Beth hits her, lightly, on the shoulder. “Not like that, you weirdo! Geez, get your mind out of the gutter!”

“No, I totally get it, Bethany. You and Diane can do whatever you want with your shorts. Just spare me the gory details.” She grins slyly at the look on Beth’s face.

“Hey!”

“What’s that even called? Reverse cougar-ism? Either way, gross.”

“Like you’re one to talk about grossness,” Beth snipes at her. “In any case, I’m gonna go to bed and wash my brain out with bleach so I can forget my own flesh and blood calling me a reverse cougar.”

Hannah sticks her tongue out at Beth.

“Goodnight, loser.”

“Night, dummy.”

Hannah walks, practically skips, toward her bedroom. Beth stares at her sister as she leaves. Hannah seems to be walking on air, filled with a sugary light that Beth hasn’t seen in her since Mike.

Mike.

Beth’s eyes widen as she considers the grim possibility of another man ensnaring Hannah’s heart. After all these years, the ice in Hannah’s veins still isn’t thick enough. Just like her. Like Sam. Not to mention, if Cassandra realizes Hannah’s still soft enough to love, she won’t be kind.

If Beth’s gut is right, she’s going to have to do something about Hannah’s quarry, and soon.

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“Beth? Are you alright?”

“What?” She’s zoned out, staring blankly at Diane’s impressive collection of bric-a-brac on the shelf on the other side of the room. The items look like an accumulation of stuff from around the world. A statue here, an exotic looking plate there, all a sign of a life well-lived.

Diane is staring at her, concerned.

“Sorry,” Beth clears her throat, taking a sip of her wine. “I spaced.”

Diane cocks an eyebrow. “Unlike you.”
“I know.”

They stay silent for a few minutes, sipping on their drinks. It’s comfortable. It’s one of the things she likes most about Diane. She doesn’t try and push things, shove her nose in places it doesn’t belong. She’ll happily talk till the cusp of dawn about Descartes, the civil rights movement, or about American horror films, but their own lives are left untouched.

Beth thinks it’s easier for them both, that way.

Still, maybe because she’s feeling uncharacteristically maudlin, or maybe because she knows Diane isn’t going to tell anyone, but she’s feeling like perhaps tonight it’s okay to share.

“So, uh,” she clears her throat, putting her wine down on the table. “I was actually thinking about my sister.”

“Your sister? I didn’t know you had one.”

“Yeah. A twin, actually.” Had she never told Diane about Hannah? That seems impossible, but then again, if they’re not exchanging ideas, they’re exchanging….other things. Beth smirks, glancing at the clock on Diane’s wall. Plenty of time. She wants to draw the night out, savour Diane one last time.

“I see,” Diane smiles, placing her drink down and sending Beth a mischievous look. “Well, almost nothing gets under a gal’s skin more than her sister.”

“Christ, no fucking kidding,” Beth grumbles. Diane snorts but waits, letting Beth come to her.

“She’s…” Beth thinks of Hannah. Thinks of how on the surface nothing has changed, except everything. She thinks of the dumb, blissful smile that’s practically glued to her face. She thinks about the cheap, nasty looking trinket she wears on her neck, how she shuns all her friends to spend her time doing...god knows what. She thinks of how she was behaving last night, sneaking in just before dawn. “She’s acting strangely.”

“How so?”

“Just… I think…I think...she might be...I think there might be a man in the picture.”

“A man?”

“Yes,” Now that she’s saying it out loud, the horror makes her cool body shiver. “I think she thinks… it’s serious.”

“Oh?” Diane’s face is neutral. “You don’t approve?”

*If it’s as bad as I think, I’m the least of Hannah’s problems.*

“No, uh… I think he’s bad news. He’s going to….get her in trouble. With our… mom.”

“Your mom?” Diane stretches the last word out, with her charming southern lilt. Beth guesses the accent is Virginian, but Diane has never said where she’s from.

“Yeah.”

“Your mom’s...stricter with your sister than she is with you? I mean, she sure doesn’t mind you staying out till real late.” She grins, her smile making the laugh lines around her eyes stand out. “Associating with unscrupulous ladies.”
“Don’t flatter yourself,” Beth teases. “We both know I’m the unscrupulous one.” She flutters her eyelashes at Diane, just so, enjoying how the smattering of freckles on her nose practically glow when she blushes.

“It’s just…” For once, Beth isn’t sure how to spin this lie, to make someone outside the clan understand their very specific circumstance. She doesn’t think she’ll be able to, so she settles for the almost-truth instead.

“My sister has no experience with dating. She thinks she’s so sophisticated, but she’s still...so naive. I’ve spent most of my life running after her, making sure she doesn’t get in over her head. But this guy… he doesn’t know her. Not really. He can’t. And he’s just going to get her into trouble, and I can’t always be there to protect her.”

“Hmmm. So you’ve met him? You know he’s bad news?”

I haven’t met him yet, but perhaps I will. “Trust me. I know.”

“Beth, most people will say you should let your sister make her own mistakes, that’s it not tenable for you to spend the rest of you life runnin’ after her. But I suppose, if you think this guy is dangerous, you should intervene.”

“You think so?”

“Hell yes. My sister is a sanctimonious, Republican-voting bore, but if I thought some man was going to do her harm, I’d do anything to help her.”

“Thanks,” Beth takes a gulp of her wine, already feeling anxious about what she might have to do. The risks she’ll be forced to take. “I think you might be right.”

“I often am,” Diane laughs, taking a deep sip of her wine, licking her lips in way that hovers somewhere between sophisticated and obscene.

And just like that, the atmosphere pivots, becoming heavy and charged. Beth tries to turn her thoughts of Hannah and the impending clusterfuck away, focusing instead on the magnificent woman less than a metre away on the couch. She’s intelligent and witty and experienced in all the ways that count. It’s the only reason Beth hasn’t become bored.

Beth cocks and eyebrow, making Diane squirm for a few seconds before finally sliding her fingers underneath the strap of her dress, enjoying the way her human voice hitches when she does so. Beth smirks, pulling her in for a lingering kiss that leaves Diane breathless.

“Don’t say that, Diane. I like it when you’re bad.”

Diane actually gapes a bit, totally flustered by a bit of cheesy flirting, so she takes advantage, pulling her forward until she’s on top of her, her warm body pushing Beth into the couch.

“Are you working me up?” Diane asks, propping herself up on her elbows, staring down at Beth with a delightfully naughty twinkle in her eyes.

“God no,” Beth jokes, but pulls her down for a heated kiss anyway.

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Los Angeles is beautiful at night. Beth likes that the night sky is lit with flickering lights, the place heaving with life even in the dead of night. It makes her feel slightly more connected to the human
world. Like the night isn’t just for creatures like her.

She takes a deep hit of her cigarette. It’s a habit she hasn’t been able to kick. She was a smoker even back when she was human (then again, everyone was a smoker back then). It’s not something she does all that often.

Nicotine is not her drug of choice.

Smoking is an excuse to stretch this night out longer. She’s satisfied and a little sore but in a way that’s pleasant and right about now is when she’d either ask for round two or say goodbye. Diane never asks her to stay. She’s smart enough to know what this is.

Well. What this used to be.

She messed up, came back to see Cassandra with Diane’s scent on her one too many times. Not that there’s a prohibition on this, but she likes to have some secrets of her own, even if in retrospect she should have realized it’s futile to keep anything from Cass. She’s given up trying to figure out how her sire knows everything. She just does. So when Cassandra told her, firmly, that six months was long enough and that she had to end it. Well.

Beth’s not going to argue with a direct order.

There’s a gun in her bag. A gun and everything else needed to make it seem like this is a robbery gone bad. She keeps telling the others that times have changed, and if you’re not going to target the world’s dregs then you need to make it seem like your victim is one of life’s constant tragedies. A car crash. Or a botched mugging. Anything except a neat bite mark and a human being drained dry.

She’s never been one to revel in violence. That always seemed a bit squalid to her. Even back in the 90s, back when she and Jess did things to human girls she’s not exactly proud of, she never made her victims suffer. When a girl came back to the mansion it was all pleasure with only a quick spike of pain. Drawing it out never sat right with Beth, somehow.

God. She sounds like her when she talks like that.

“Beth?”

Beth starts. She’s been brooding so much she didn’t hear Diane calling from her room. Beth shakes off her thoughts, making sure she looks unfazed by the time Diane comes out to meet her on the balcony. She’s wearing a lovely purple dressing gown, satin by the looks of it, her cherry blonde hair tied up in a windswept bun.

“Oh, there you are,” Diane says, voice still a bit hoarse. “Got enough for two?”

Beth hands her a cigarette. They smoke together in silence.

“You have no idea how much I needed this,” Diane says, after a while.

Beth isn’t sure if she means sex or the cigarette, so she stays silent.

“You probably don’t….”

“What?” Beth asks, before she can stop herself.

“Have you ever had someone you wished could go away, but they can’t?”

Beth takes a hard hit on her cigarette, likes how the smoke burns her throat.
“You probably haven’t,” Diane glances at her, before scoffing and looking out at the city. “You’re young though. You’ll have time for that.”

“Who do you wish could go away,” Beth blurs out, hating herself a little when the words stumble from her mouth.

*Stop dragging this out.*

“My...ex wife,” Diane says, slowly, like she’s still not used to saying the words.

“You had a wife?”

“And you have a twin.”

“Touche.”

They laugh, spell broken. It’s only a moment respite, before Diane is frowning, lost in her own thoughts again.

“I move around a lot. For my work,” Diane says, flicking some ash away. Beth stares, wondering whether she should interrupt, put her plan into motion before it’s too late.

*Let her finish the cigarette. I owe her that much.*

“I’m around during semester, but when I’m not with my students, I’m on book tours, conferences… you would be surprised how many horror scholars there are in the United States. If I’m going to stay at the forefront of my field, I have to go to every damn conference, shake every priggish man’s hand, just to ensure I’m not left behind. Vicky knew all of this before she agreed to come with me to California. I’m not shy about coming forward, as you know.”

Beth smirks. Diane catches it, tips of her mouth curving up into a wicked smile.

“Later, sugar, if you’re still keen.”

“So, uh, what’s wrong now?” Beth coughs, thankful there’s not enough blood in her to blush.

Diane frowns. “She’s back in Roanoke. With our son.”

“Your son?”

“Mhmm. And you know, I’m there for him. I bring Nate up here whenever I can, or go down to that awful place, as if I didn’t spend my entire adolescent plotting to escape Virginia. But recently, and I have no idea what’s prompted this, Vicky’s become so bitter. Blaming me for always moving around. Never staying in one spot. Saying I’m a bad mother.” She scoffs, stubbing her cigarette out vigorously on the railing, and a part of Beth is screaming, *do it now, do it now,* but she’s rooted to the spot, unable to take her eyes off Diane.

“She knew me, right? She knew what the deal was early on. I didn’t lure her under false pretenses, that’s for sure. But….fifteen years later, she wants me to be a different person, all of a sudden. But I haven’t changed. She has. Do you have any idea how frustrating it is, to still love someone, even when they resent you? Even though you’re the same damn person they fell for in the first place?”

“No, I don’t…” Beth stutters, stomach churning. She feels light headed, thrown off her axis, all of a sudden. Like she’s missing something, a thought that slips away from her whenever she reaches for it.
“I hope you don’t know what this feels like. I hope you find the girl of your dreams. I’m sure you will. Clever girl like you. You’ll be batting them away with a stick” Diane winks, hand resting on the curve of her hip. She’s shaken off her dark mood, and now she’s back to the woman Beth first met, confident, mercurial and too clever for her own good.

“Look at me, crying on your shoulder like that. Let me make it up to you, darling.”

She reaches for her. Beth bats her away. She’s angry. Angry at how presumptuous Diane is. Angry that tonight, of all nights, she decided to unload her secrets.

“I’m not your darling.”

“W-what?”

“You think you know me, child?”

“Beth—”

“You think I’m some girl for you to play with? A distraction?”

“Beth… I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about…”

“Of course you don’t. That’s the point. You have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

“Beth, I’m sorry…what have I done?”

“Just…. Stay away, okay? You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

Diane stiffens. Beth can smell the first lick of fear in the air.

“Beth, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have put my baggage on you, I know that’s not how we work. How about you come inside and I’ll call you a cab and we can work this out in the morning.”

Her eyes are soft, understanding. Almost sweet. Almost like...

Fuck you, Diane.

“Beth…”

“Maybe I should make myself clear. I’m not just some wide-eyed college coed looking for an adventure. I’ve killed more people than I can even remember, and I watched them suffer and die. I enjoyed it.” She bares her fangs. “I’m the monster you teach your students about.” She picks up her bag from where it rests near her feet, pulls out the gun, and snaps it in two as easily as a human breaking a toothpick.

Diane’s mouth opens, to scream or to abjure her, Beth doesn’t know, but before her breath can even leave her lungs, Beth pushes herself off the balcony.

She free falls all two stories, feeling the air and Diane’s shouts rushing around her. But she’s no clumsy fledgling. She lands on her feet, like a cat, catching her bag in one smooth motion before scampering off into the night.

She’s pretty sure she’s a shaking mess by the time she finds her car. Not her usual one, it’s a black van, the type the clan’s allowed to use when the occupant needs to…avoid using their usual car. She gets into the driver’s seat, certain she can still hear Diane’s screams ringing in her ears even though Diane’s apartment may as well be a world away. Even as Beth revealed herself to her, there had
been concern, even pity, amidst the terror in Diane’s eyes.

She should go back.

She can’t go back.

Shakily, Beth slides her keys back into the ignition, hoping against hope that for once, Cassandra won’t be able to read her like a book.

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Usually, Matt would spend New Years Eve with friends at some boozy, overcrowded party. His teammates loved to throw massive parties whenever they got the chance, inviting as many pretty girls as they could. Matt had always stayed near the edges and corners of the room, watching from afar as couples made out against walls or on couches. Before Emily disappeared, Matt had figured he’d spend this New Years with her, drinking cheap beer and watching the Times Square countdown on TV.

He wonders where Emily is. If she even knows what day it is.

He stops his car outside an otherwise ordinary looking building on the outskirts of the UCLA campus. Even at this distance, he can hear the faint thrumming of music. Hannah said the party was big, but Matt had no idea it would fill up an entire ten-story dorm.

He looks around the otherwise deserted campus. No sign of Hannah. He takes out his phone and checks the time. He’s right on time, and it wouldn’t be out of the ordinary for Hannah to be running a little late. Even so, he should text her just to make sure she’s okay.

He’s so focused on the message he’s typing that he doesn’t hear the police car pulling up behind him.

“Matthew Taylor?”

Matt turns to see a two familiar looking men in dark over coats. They get out of the car, both of them staring at Matt, a cold professional gleam in their eyes.

It takes him a second before he realizes they’re two detectives who first questioned him, back when Emily first disappeared. He’s spoken to them once or twice since then. Enough to know they’re the lead detectives in Emily, Jason and Katie’s case.

“Detective Schultz and, uh, Detective Sloane, right? What are you guys doing here? Do you have a lead on Emily?”

“Something like that,” Detective Sloane drawls. He flashes his badge at Matt.

“Matthew Taylor, you are under arrest on suspicion for the murders of Katherine Bridgeport and Jason Green.”

Chapter End Notes

You guys. I think Beth just broke up with Diane.
Thanks again to my co author, who took on some of the less fun parts of this chapter with her usual aplomb. Also, you may have noticed, there's an end date to this now, and everyone's worlds are starting to collide.

As always, thanks to all those who have left reviews in the past. It really has helped spur us on, knowing there are people following this story. It's a tremendous help and I know for a fact it puts a smile on both of our dials. SO, if you enjoy making us smile, then please leave a review or a kudos (guys, 99 kudos. 99!!!!!)

Finally, next up is the story's final interlude. It will be completely written by my co author, and the POV will focus on a major character whose perspective we have not seen yet. I know the plot of this interlude, and guys, I can say this cause I'm not writing it, it's SO AWESOME. So, if you've been skipping interludes, please, read the next one. It'll be worth your while. Promise.

Thanks, as ever, for reading.
July 1848

The Great Salt Lake Desert, Utah

Sally Meeks doesn’t know what lies in Hell, but she guesses that the Salt Lake Desert is pretty close.

During the day, the dry, blistering heat rips the water from their bodies and melts the salty ground into a gummy marsh that the wheels sink into almost regularly. The oxen snort and groan as their drivers force them forward. When they circle the wagons, she helps Ma and Pa count up their meager provisions. They’re almost out of meat, and they exhausted their supply of fruit weeks ago. All their medicines save for a half-filled bottle of ammonia are gone. And they’re down to a single canteen of water. It’s only enough for one of them.

She looks between her parents. Ma is pale and thin, her chapped lips in a thin white line as she looks at Pa. They’re having one of their silent arguments, looking from the canteen to Sally to one another.

Sally’s tongue feels like a dead, bloated snake. Her throat burns every time she swallows, and her hands are cracked and bleeding. She picks at one of the scabs on the back of her hand until Pa slaps her wrist.

“Don’t do that,” he grunts. “Last thing we need is another infection.”

Sally says nothing, waiting until her father gets out of the wagon and heads for the captain’s wagon. Sally moves over to one of the dresses in the back of the wedding and distracts herself by sewing up one of the holes in it. She licks her lips and swallows, but all it gets her is salt in the cuts on her lips and a fresh pang of soreness in her throat.

They’re going to die out here. Ma and Pa don’t think she realizes that, but she saw Mary Wilkinson die, eyes rolling back in her pox-scarred face. Only the Lord can save them now, and if the Lord decided little six-year-old Mary should be carried to Heaven, what chance do the rest of them have?

Ma told her stories of Heaven. How there’s cities of gold and forests filled with the sweetest fruits you could ever imagine. How her grandma and grandpa will be waiting for her there, looking young and happy. There’s no chores in heaven, no skinned knees or tasteless meals or teachers’ belts against her knuckles. She wonders if she’s good enough to get in. She stole a bit of candy from her friend Percy once. No one saw but Jesus. As she sews she mutters a little prayer under her breath, a soft plea for forgiveness.

Minutes later, she feels a calloused hand touch her shoulder. When she looks up, she sees her Ma, the canteen held in her trembling hands, a weak smile on her face.

“Happy birthday, my sweet girl.”
“Ma, no, you’re sick—”

“My sweet girl, if only one of us gets to see the California coast, I want it to be you,” Ma says. Her voice is little more than a hoarse whisper. Before Sally can protest, Ma puts down the canteen and ducks out of the wagon, limping over to where they other families are starting a measly campfire. Sally sits there, watching the sun fall over the horizon. Night will sap the heat from everything. She can already begin to feel the chill in her fingers and toes.

More time passes. Sally looks at the canteen and her throat burns.

She hears a woman’s sobs as she drinks the last of the water. It’s warm and stale but as it runs down her throat, it might as well be honey from the Promised Land.

When Ma and Pa come back to sleep, Sally avoids their eyes. The next day, only a few miles from the edge of the desert, Ma dies.

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April 1856

Los Angeles, California

The only people who come to her Pa’s funeral are Sally and the debt collectors. The man made no friends drinking himself to death and racking up gambling debts to virtually everyone in town. Pa was never a sober man, but Ma’s death turned him into something the Temperance Society would put in one of their pamphlets. It’s a grim sort of irony; her mother died for lack of anything to drink, and her father died soaked in drink. After the service, one of the collectors, Ezekiel, walks up to her, worry-lines deep set in his forehead and his grey mustache twitching.

“Evening, ma’am. My sincere condolences. I think we should discuss your financial circumstances in the wake of your father’s passing. Will you join me at the bank?”

The meeting is a long and painful one, with no ways out of the financial hell her worthless father plunged her into. Eventually she loses focus and lets her mind wander, watching Ezekiel’s mustache twitch in time with his monotone prophecies of financial doom.

On the way out of Ezekiel’s office, she sees a man she vaguely recognizes as the bank owner’s son, Nathaniel Harrison. She eyes his suit, sharp and clean, clearly imported from somewhere distant and exotic. His hair is short and gold, and his beard is nearly trimmed. He smiles, the carefree sort of smile only rich folks wear.

“Sally Meeks. Heard your pa left you with some...inconvenient circumstances.”

“I...I’m not at liberty to discuss—”

“Hate to see a pretty girl like you be so encumbered. How’d you like to be free of all that?”

“Mister Harrison?”

“Go walking with me tomorrow, Sal,” Nathaniel says. “I want to show you what you could have if you become my wife.”

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November 1858
Nathaniel comes home smelling like alcohol and expensive perfume. Sally knows what that means, just as much as he doesn’t care that she knows. Everywhere he walks he reeks of it, fixing his servants with challenging looks whenever he catches them staring. Sally stares at the floor of their bedroom, counting the stitches in the rug, as he undresses.

“You’re late.”

Nathaniel flashes her an insouciant smile.

“Come on, Sally, I was at the saloon. You can’t begrudge a man his pleasure.”

“Oh? And what…pleasure did you and your friends get up to?”

“Just a couple of rounds ale. Or ten.” He laughs at himself, stepping out of his pants and looking at her with half-lidded eyes.

Sally flushes, but stares back at him, challengingly.

“Oh now, now, if it was any man but me, a look like that would scare him away.” He wraps an arm around her waist, pulling her forward until she’s flush against him. He’s hard already, and when her eyes widen he leers down at her.

“Come on, Sal, be a good girl. How else are we going to make a son?”

His breath tastes like sour brandy but it’s something, at least, to break the monotony. He pushes her down on the bed. She goes willingly, hands gliding across warm and familiar skin.

His kisses are hard and she winces as their teeth clack together. She tries to slow it down, trying to make him remember the heart-stopping heat that once burned between them. The ale makes Nathaniel forgetful though. His hands are cold, his touch perfunctory.

It hurts a bit when he enters her, but she grits her teeth and tries make the best of it, grinding up against him, yearning for a friction that will satisfy them both. Just when it seems like her body is yielding to him, the first embers of arousal beginning to ignite Nathaniel groans, biting down harshly on her neck, emptying himself inside of her before going still.

She almost wants to scream in frustration, but she bites her tongue, still seething when he rolls over and is silent.

Sally tries to turn him over, to find some kind comfort in his arms but he won’t be moved, snoring so loudly the walls shake.

She is still, searching for sleep that won’t come. Eventually, she leaves, walking out into the hallway. When she can’t sleep she likes to look at the moon, count the stars in the nights sky. She probably knows them all by heart by now.

A noise behind her. Sally whirls around and sees Maud, Nathaniel’s sneaky little rat, skulking in the shadows.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m- I’m sorry miss, I went to get a glass of water—”

“Did I give you permission to have a drink of water?”

Maud’s eyes are wide, afraid. Sally almost sneers. Insipid, sniveling little thing.
“N-no. No.”

“You should scamper back to your room, then.”

“Yes, Miss.”

She catches her wrist. The girl looks at her, clearly afraid. It makes the anger inside of her roar to life.

“Yes miss, what?” She digs her nails into the girl’s milky white skin. Maud whimpers.

“Yes Miss. Sorry, Miss.”

“Better,” Sally hisses, releasing her. In the gloom she can the red marks from where nails sunk into her skin.

Maud sniffs, looking like she’s about to cry. For a second, Sally stops, and is ashamed, but before she can say anything else, Maud turns on her heel and scurries away. Sally watches her go, a satisfied smile tugging at her lips. At least someone in this wretched mansion actually does what she tells them. Most of the servants heed Nathaniel’s word over hers, and act on his orders like he’s Saint Paul incarnate. Whenever she tries to leave the mansion without Nathaniel, someone stops her, giving her some inane task to tie her down until her husband comes home. Maud is just as willing to be one of her jailers, but at least she’s weak enough for even Sally to overpower.

Sally turns to the hallway mirror, glaring at her reflection. The woman she sees there is soft and meek. Spineless. A girl who couldn’t put her mother’s needs before her own, who couldn’t stop her father’s rages, who can’t do anything in this mansion but sit around and prepare another one of Nathaniel’s lavish parties.

If she could, she’d rip away her breasts and demand the Lord strip her of her worthless, enfeebling sex. If she could be without the burdens of Eve, she could have saved her mother and father from their weakness and she wouldn’t be trapped in a gilded cage, playing wet nurse for her idiot husband.

She sighs as she heads back to bed. Tomorrow will be another day of party planning and attempts at conception. Something needs to happen soon. If she’s barren, Nathaniel will run out of uses for her.

Sally curls up under the covers, draping an arm across her husband in a vain attempt at feeling like she used to.

She can worry about her withering womb tomorrow.

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Time passes. Nathaniel spends more time chasing his ‘pleasure’ at the brothel.

Sally while aways her days staring at all the impossibly beautiful things in her impossibly beautiful home.

She knows squalor. This is better than scrabbling for scraps on the street. Her mother always said that when the Lord gives you water in the desert, you don’t complain that you didn’t get wine.

She should be happy.

She is happy.

She thinks she is, anyway.
December 1858

Usually, Sally doesn’t have much to say at parties. Nathaniel keeps a close eye on her, never letting her out of his sight and pulling her away from any conversation with another man, no matter how old or married he is. Sally has her own opinions on Nathaniel accusing people of adultery, but she keeps them under her tongue. The ballroom is over-dressed in Christmas decorations, children plucking at the ornaments and baubles while their parents look away. The men wear silk hats and finely fashioned suits from the Orient. The women wear muted dresses of purple, brown and red, with feathered hats atop their heads. They talk and laugh and shoot annoyed glances at the servants whenever the butlers don’t replace their drinks fast enough.

Sally doesn’t know who’s worse: the upper class twits or the shiftless servants who let everyone else walk all over them.

Suddenly, Nathaniel groans, the sound kicking Sally out of her reverie. She looks at her husband, whose face is flushed with drink.

“Nathaniel? Are you ill?”

“Ah, it’s no trouble, Sal. I just need to rest. Take me to bed and send these folks away, will ya?”

Sally nods, carrying her husband into the bedroom and looking away as he flops clumsily onto the bed, muttering something unintelligible. She walks back into the ballroom, eyeing the grandfather clock in the foyer as she goes.

It’s only eight o’clock. No time to end a party just because the host can’t hold his liquor.

Without Nathaniel around, conversation becomes much more enjoyable. She talks with Mr. Goldsmith from the mill for a while about the new settlers coming into the city, and then with Dr. Tillman, who patched up soldiers fighting Indians on the frontiers. Eventually, she makes her way over to a tall, red-haired man, dressed modestly in a simple dark suit. His beard is neat and trimmed, and his eyes are the greenest eyes she’s ever seen. Like the hearts of forest sprites carved into perfect green circles around slightly dilated pupils. He smiles warmly as Sally approaches. She feels something strange twinging deep inside her chest.

“Mrs. Harrison,” the man says, extending his hand. “I don’t believe we’ve met. My name’s Edmund Brown. I’m a friend of your husband’s.”

Sally takes his hand and shakes it. His grasp is firm but not crushing, and his fingers are surprisingly calloused for a wealthy man.

“It’s mighty fine to meet you, Mr. Brown.”

“Oh, please, call me Ed,” he tells her. “Titles aren’t necessary for friends.”

“Oh? We’re friends all of a sudden?” Sally asks, surprised when the question comes out light, teasing.

Ed smiles. His teeth are immaculately white.

“We can be.”
She barely pays attention to the other guests at the party. Her heart feels like it’s beating free of her chest, her palms all sweaty every time she glances over in Ed’s direction and sees him looking back at her, green eyes alight with mischief.

She knew what would happen before it begun but it didn’t make it any less exciting, her and Ed sneaking off into the parlour, closing the door tight behind them. It’s almost inexcusably reckless, but Sally knows that Nathaniel has taken whores to bed in her house, right under her nose.

Well. Two can play that game.

She can’t calm her beating heart as she comes down from her high, her skin ablate with a heat she hasn’t felt in years. She slumps down into the couch, satisfied, as Ed slides his fingers away from the apex of her thighs.

She expects him to flip her over, to slide inside her roughly and finish himself off. Instead he holds her close, planting lingering kisses on her clavicle, her jaw, her neck.

“You jewel,” he murmurs against her skin. “You jewel.”

She’s shivering again, yielding to the languid brush of his fingers, the soft look in his eye.

“Ed?”
“Yes, Sal?”

“Stay,” She swallows. “Stay. Just a little longer.”

“Oh?” he presses against her. Sally can feel his manhood, hard and ready, against her thigh. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she hisses, pulling him into a heated kiss. “Yes.”

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When she first begins to vomit in the morning, neither of them make anything of it. Then the fatigue comes, and the swelling, and finally she’s able to convince Nathaniel to bring in Dr. Tillman. The aging physician comes to see them, his hands moving with the practiced ease of a man who’s seen far worse than anything most folks could think of. When he’s done examining her, he adjusts his thick, round glasses and looks to Nathaniel, a smile on his weary face.

“Mr. Harrison, I believe your wife is with child.”

Nathaniel is ecstatic. That night they dance, laugh, and make more passionate love than she’s gotten from him in years. When they’re done, he even holds her for a while before he rolls over to sleep. Sally wishes comparisons to Ed would stop filling her mind as she watches him. She takes a deep, nervous breath and tries to quiet her mind enough to rest. But if this fire still lives within her husband’s heart, maybe she can rekindle things between them and they can both stop looking for pleasure outside of their own bed.

That is, as long as Nathaniel never realizes he’s not the father.

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October 1859

Dr. Tillman had told her that childbirth would come with pain; more pain than she had yet
experienced in her twenty-two years of life. She had prepared for this, of course; chloroform, the same treatment used by Queen Victoria herself, was imported from the east. The first part of labor she performs without anesthesia; each push sending fiery tendrils of pain through her abdomen. Finally, Dr. Tillman readiness the treatment, and Sally felt her muscles relax. As she breathes in the gas she feels queenly, like she and the royals of England were not so far apart in esteem. Sleepily, she watches, more than feels, the child be brought into the world, hours later. Dr. Tillman calls Nathaniel into the room after wrapping the baby in swaddling clothes and giving it to the mother.

She doesn’t have much time to prepare for her husband’s reaction; he opens the door and strides in, paternal pride on his face as he walks.

“You have a beautiful little girl,” Dr. Tillman says. Both he and Nathaniel are oblivious to Sally’s anxiety until Nathaniel holds out his hands expectantly. Sally’s heart sinks as she hands her daughter over to him. Nathaniel looks upon her, his smile slowly turning into a frown as he takes in the baby’s features.

Even as a newborn, the girl’s slick hair is visibly red. And her eyes are the kind of green they’ve seen only once before, in one man.

And it’s not Nathaniel.

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The divorce happens so quickly the papers almost don’t have the time to slander her name on every page. The high class ladies in town eat it up, of course. They’ve been itching for her fall for as long as Nathaniel deigned to marry the daughter of the town drunk. Nathaniel throws her and the baby out without so much as a penny to their name. With no one but a baby and nothing but the clothes on her back, Sally walks to the townhouse near the edge of the city, trying to hold onto whatever dignity she has left as the townsfolk stare at her.

When the servant opens the door, Sally nearly shoves him aside. The doddering old butler stammers out an explanation for why she can’t come in before an achingly familiar voice cuts him off.

“Let her in, William.”

The hall is as beautiful as she remembers it, and inside stands Ed, his face white, pained.

“Ed.”

“We should go upstairs,” he tells her. “Away from my wife and children.”

She sits in the room they so often shared, so many euphoric, passionate nights together. Now the bed they slept in seems solemn and stiff, the walls dull and grey, the carpet old and unremarkable. Ed sits on the bed beside her, looking into her eyes. She holds the baby up to him, lets him find his own eyes in her.

“Her name’s Annabel,” she says. “Little Annie. She has your eyes. See?”

Ed looks at the baby’s face for a long, long time, then he looks back up at Sally, resolution in his face.

“Sal. She can’t stay here. And neither can you. My reputation—”

“Your reputation? Ed, Annie’s an infant! She didn’t ask for any of this. Please, just take her in. I don’t care what happens to me, just don’t—”
“Sal. If I take in that baby, everyone will know where she came from.”

“They already know where she came from! Please, I know all of this is...embarrassing, for both of us, but Annie is innocent in all of this. Please give her a chance.”

“They don’t know where the baby came from, they suspect. I’m not about to seal my reputation’s own demise by admitting the bastard is mine. My wife would leave me. I’d be a laughing stock. I’d never see my children again.”

“Annie is one of your children, Ed. How can you turn your own child away?”

“This isn’t easy for me, Sal. I’m sorry about all of this. I truly am.” He looks away, out the small window, and sighs. “There’s...a poorhouse not far from here. They will take you and your child in.”

“A poorhouse.”

Ed makes a simpering expression. Gone is the gentle, confident man she knew, replaced with this vain, snivelling coward, who could look upon his own child and condemn her to a life of misery and squalor.

“I’m sorry, Sally, but—”

“Spare me your self-righteous pity,” Sally spits. “Directions to the poorhouse. Mighty generous of you.”

“Here, let me give you something, some money, a jewel even—”

“Get away from me. I don’t need your charity!”

Sally stands up and storms out, holding Annie in her arms, not bothering to look back.

The poorhouse Ed described is cold and drafty, with thin-faced, judgemental women watching Sal over as she works, doing textile and domestic work she hasn’t done in years. In the meantime, her daughter grows, her hair getting long and pretty, her hands fanning out like the wings of a bird when she runs, her laughter filling the cold halls of the place. She names every animal she sees and makes up stories about where they go and what they do. Every night Sally falls asleep to the sound of her little girl telling the tale of Wilfred the goose or Jessie the coyote.

When she was with Nathaniel, she lived in a world of endless comfort and luxury, but with no one to love. Now, even with an aching back and pitiful rags for clothes, she feels richer than the kings and queens of Europe. As long as Annie is there to tell her silly fables and tell her she loves her, she needs nothing else.

February 1863

Sally had seen smallpox before, out on the trail. Men, women and children covered in blistering boils and scars, moaning and vomiting and dying only to be thrown in shallow graves for wolves to dig up and eat. She had thought she’d seen the worst of it when poor Mary had died in her Ma’s arms back in Utah, fragile and sickly and reeking like a midden.

But, as it turns out, smallpox doesn’t discriminate between the frontier and the city. And when it hits the poorhouse, all those overworked people crowded together, it takes everyone it can get its wizen hands on.
Annabel is three years old, still babbling more than talking and with a baby’s wide, innocent eyes, when she first tells Sally her stomach hurts. Pretty soon after that, the nurses have taken them both into quarantine, locked away in some poor excuse for a hospital while people all around her lie under their blankets and shudder as the disease ravages their bodies. The fever burns inside her, making her head feel like it’s about to burst and slicking her hair with sweat. When the blisters come, spreading all over her body, there’s nothing she can do but watch herself waste away. Whatever remains of her pride melts away the day she vomits into a bucket by her bed, in full view of the doctors who mutter to each other in worried tones.

Finally, one day, she forces her aching muscles to listen to her. She forces her way out of bed, her body screaming all the way, and limps over to her daughter’s bed, lurching like some hideous contraption with rusted, heavy joints. Every movement sends a jolt of pain through her body, and her stomach lurches again. Her throat feels as dry as it did on the trail, back in the desert where she signed her own mother’s death warrant by taking the last of the water for herself.

She let her mother die for selfishness. She can’t let the same thing happen to her daughter.

Annie’s cheeks have lost their roundness; nearly all the fat from her body is gone, leaving a pale, gaunt, pox-ridden child behind. She coughs weakly as her mother approaches, and reaches for her with a skeletal hand.

“M-ma…ma…”

“I’m here, my darling,” Sally says, ignoring the doctors’ protocol and holding her daughter close. She can feel her child’s bones jutting out just under her skin. “Your ma’s here.”

“Cold…”

“I know, darling, I know…”

Annie sniffs, trembling in her arms. Cold tears drop onto Sally’s hand, and she’s not sure if they’re from her or Annie.

She brings her lips to her daughter’s forehead, tasting blistered skin and sweat. Her daughter sobbed weakly, and Sally pets her pretty red hair, whispering a lullaby as her daughter shivers and cries.

“What are the wild waves saying Sister, the whole day long, that ever amid our playing, I hear but their low lone song? Not by the seaside only, there it sounds wild and free; but at night when ’tis dark and lonely, in dreams it is still with me…”

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Annie is thrown in a pauper’s grave, nothing but a cheap stone marker to remind the world she even existed. Sally sits by the grave and cries until her body has no more tears to lend to the act. The grass beneath her feet is obscenely green, and there isn’t a cloud in the sky. In the streets, children play, watched over by loving parents. Annie is dead, and the world goes on parading like nothing is wrong.

Devils, all of them. She’d sacrifice them all to whatever dark god would listen, just to have Annie back in her arms.

That night she doesn’t go back to the poorhouse. The halls still echo with her daughter’s happy laughter, every inch of that place tainted by the ghost of her. Instead, Sally walks, and walks, and walks, until her legs feel like they’re about to buckle under their own weight. She’s walked to the edge of the hills, where some lavish new mansion has just been built. She imagines herself living
there, tended to by servants, no husband to tie her down or dissatisfy her in bed, and Annie, sweet little Annie, naming the stars and chasing butterflies in the backyard.

Sally’s knees buckle and she sits down on the side of the cobbled street, watching the sun set over the hills. The sky changes from blue to lilac to violet before she feels the exhaustion tugging at her consciousness. Sally lies back, not caring if a horse runs her over as she rests. She feels worthless, alone, void of purpose. Here, without any family and without any drive, she sees no reason to exist.

The last thing she expects, as she lies alone on the dirty ground, is for a handsome man in a fine, tailored suit to walk up to her and hold out his hand.

“Let me help you, poor woman.”

“What…?”

A cold hand grips her wrist and pulls her upright. This man is tall and handsome, black hair and pale skin and strange, dark eyes that don’t widen at the sight of her pox scars. He places a hand on her shoulder.

“I’ve heard about you. What terrible trials you’ve endured. This city let you and your daughter suffer for the sake of their own pride and amusement.”

Sally doesn’t know how he knows so much, but she’s too tired to care. She nods slowly.

“Bastards…”

“I could end your suffering. Make you a queen.”

The man’s dark eyes narrow, and suddenly Sally feels a chill. Of course this man is just like Nathaniel. Taking a poor woman to bed as a proof of his charitable spirit, and dumping her on the street when he has no further use for her.


“No…”

“No?”

“No. I don’t…I don’t want your pity, or your money, or your love. Leave me be.”

The man just laughs.

“Oh, my dear. I’m terribly sorry.” He leans in close, and when his mouth opens, Sally can see that his canines are unnaturally long and sharp, like the fangs of a snake. “You don’t have a choice.”

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She wakes on a bed, her lungs burning and her stomach screaming with an insatiable hunger. The bedroom she lies in is dark and old, the walls lined with red and gold, oil painting staring down at her with long dead eyes. A fire roars in the fireplace, and bathes the tall, half-dressed man standing in the center of the room, staring her down. She recognizes him immediately, even without his fancy suit. It takes Sally a few moments to realize that she’s naked, and that the look in the man’s eyes has a frighteningly familiar hunger.

“Sally Meeks,” he says, his voice low and silken. “You must be starving.”
It takes a few moments to find her voice. Her throat feels like it’s caked in rust.

“Who...who are you...?”

“I’m Fabian,” he says, moving closer to her, his dark eyes glinting in the firelight. “But you can call me Master.”

“I...”

Fabian pins her on the bed, kissing her collarbone before biting down. Sally bites her lip to keep herself from screaming.

“The others have been less than grateful. But you’ll be a good girl, right? You just play along like a sweet little bride, and I’ll let you eat. How does that sound, little lady?”

“Come on, Sal, be a good girl. How else are we going to make a son?”

“I’m not about to seal my reputation’s own demise by admitting the bastard is mine.”

“I could end your suffering. Make you a queen.”

The faces of men flash before her eyes, all of them piggish and callous, sneering at her and telling her to roll over and be good while they took and took and took. In each man she knew there was nothing but hunger. Her father longed for drink, Ezekiel for money, Nathaniel for an heir, Edmund for praise. And now this bastard wants to defile her, to take whatever few scraps of her pride remain and eat them, and he expects her to just swoon and let him have his way with her.

To Hell with him.

With all of them.

Fabian surges up, ready to kiss her again, when she strikes, her teeth piercing his throat and tugging, the wet sounds of tearing flesh echoing through her skull until the trachea comes away in her teeth, tasting of fetid, rotten blood. Fabian gurgles, clutching at his ruined throat, and lunges at her, his eyes wide with pain and rage. Sally spits the trachea in his face, aiming her fist as he reels, and punching through his chest, feeling bone and muscle give way until she finds something that feels like a heart.

Sally grips it and squeezes, hearing a satisfying squelch when she crushes it in her hand.

Fabian lets out a choked squeal, then crumbles into ash.

She stares down at the body, dragging air into her lungs until she realizes she doesn’t have to. She shivers; her body is icy and still, with no pulse under the skin. She can feel sharpened canines when she runs her tongue over her teeth.

She slumps to the ground, overcome by the horror of it all, and sobs for long moments. She cries and cries until she doesn’t any tears left and is reduced to hiccupsing through dry tears. Just when she thinks she can’t get any more pathetic, life debases her even more.

Sally closes her eyes, tries to come to her senses. She doesn’t know where she is. Where that...creature took her. All she knows is that she’s exhausted and terrified.

And so hungry. So, so hungry.

Her fear has ebbed away, replaced by a yawning want that’s almost frightening. Her stomach feels hollow, and it aches for something she can’t name.
It’s not fair. She doesn’t deserve any of this. She feels like she might start to cry again, like some snivelling little girl, when she hears a low sound. She cocks her head. She’s not sure what it is. A cry? A moan? Perhaps a whimper.

She listens.

There it is again. This time Sally can definitely hear it. A choked, pained moan.

She’s moving before she can stop herself.

She slips down the hall. Faintly, she realizes she place is enormous, and decorated with a kind of opulence that makes Nathaniel’s home seem quaint in comparison. But that doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is those sounds, made by some pathetic, whimpering creature, drawing closer to her with every step.

The door is solid and heavy. When she was just a girl she wouldn’t have even tried to wrench it open, but now it takes only takes one strong push. Sally grins. Whatever that fiend did to her has made her strong. Powerful.

A gust of decaying air hits Sally before she can squirm away. The room reeks of piss and shit and fear.

And blood.

Through the gloom she sees her. A girl. Maybe eighteen or nineteen, arms shackled to the wall behind her. Her skin is sallow and sweat makes her lank hair stick to her forehead. Her lips, chapped and red, open and shut wordlessly. Like she’s praying.

Sally sneers. Gormless girl. As if God cares.

The door shuts with a bang behind her. Sally moves forward, feeling stronger and more purposeful with every step.

The girl drags her eyes away from the ground, blinking stupidly. It takes her a second, but she catches Sally’s gaze, shivering violently. She bites her lips, gnawing at the crusted dry blood. It makes Sally’s stomach ache.

“Please,” the girl rasps. “Please help m—”

She doesn’t finish her sentence.

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May 1863

The humans are everywhere tonight.

People are out and about, basking in the early evening light. There are so of them, milling around enjoying the nascent summer ambiance.

The world is alive to her in almost excruciating detail. If she looks to the ground, she can make out every grain of dirt crumbling under her feet. If she takes an unpracticed breath she can smell the stench of sweat and smog and sex in the air. There’s a couple of girls across the road from her, gossiping. If she wanted she could focus in on them and discover all their secrets.

It was almost too much for her at first, but now she knows better. For the first time in a long, long
time, she considers herself lucky.

She has been reborn. Left Sally Meeks behind like a dead snake skin. The woman she is now, elegant, charming, filled with power, is worthy of a new identity, a new name. A name she crafted after pouring over Fabian's books, one that intrigues and commands respect. A name unworthy men will curse with their dying breaths, burning their tongues as they utter it.

She's eager to try it out.

A young man bumps into her, not even bothering to apologise as he does. Ordinarily that would warrant special attention, but tonight it's fine. She’s fine. In her world there’s more important prey.

She’s where she wants to be within minutes, standing outside a house that, while still handsome, has seen better days.

She ascends the stairs, lingering outside for a few long seconds.

Oh, how she wishes she could savour this forever.

Still. She’ll always have the memories.

*Knock. Knock.*

It takes a few times, but within minutes a harried, but pretty, maidservant answers the door. She doesn’t recognise her, which is good. It’s easier this way.

“Hello, Miss?”

“I’m here to see Mr. Harrison. I’m his cousin. May I come in?”

The human gapes, a bovine expression on her face.

“Mr. Harrison is not expecting any visitors, ma’am.”

“Well, I’ll only be a moment. I’ll just drop off an invitation. A family do. I’ll just place it on the dining room table. I know the one.”

The girl frowns. “He really doesn’t wish to be disturbed.”

“Dear. You’re new. But I’ve known my cousin for a very long time. So let me be clear. Mr. Harrison may be… an exuberant character, but he is devoted to his family. And if you deny him the opportunity to see his beloved relatives, including his ailing aunt, then he will be most displeased. And I think we both know how he behaves when he’s displeased with his servants, hmmm? So be a good girl and let me drop off this letter in peace.”

The girl wants to argue, but eventually thinks better of it, stepping aside and mumbling for her to ‘come in.’ She’s all smiles when she crosses the threshold.

“Thank you.” She almost purrs. “You’ve been most helpful.”

There’s a satisfying snap as the girl’s neck breaks, body collapsing to the ground like a sack of cement. She steps over it, sighing and shaking her head. It’s almost a shame to waste all that blood. If only there was a way to store it.

Well. That’s a puzzle for another night.
She makes her way up the stairs, drawn towards a familiar groan.

She grins. Almost there.

When she opens the bedroom door she’s treated to quite the sight. In the gloom she can see Nathaniel’s pale back, his hips jerking backwards and forwards as the bedsheet pools around his waist. She can’t see the girl, but she can hear her, moaning in a nauseatingly girlish voice and he pants and grunts above her, the bed squeaking under their weight.

Perhaps she should wait until they are finished. It’s only polite.

As she suspects, she doesn’t have to wait long. Nathaniel cries out, pushing himself inside the girl entirely, before slumping on top of her, resting his head in the crook of her neck, his weak human body panting from the exertion.

Nathaniel’s whore pets his hair while the two of them try and catch their breath. They stay still for long moments, in a sordid tableau. Finally, the girl stirs, sensing something is amiss. Her eyes flit to the door before widening in horror.

“Miss?!” Maud cries, trying to make herself decent.

Nathaniel rolls off Maud, grabbing at the sheet and turning to look at her.

“Who-” he blinks, before his mouth drops open almost comically. “Sally?!”

“Oh no, Nathaniel,” she says. She bares her teeth, fangs glinting. “It’s Cassandra now.”

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October 1935

When the doors of the cinema open, people spill out like rats from a sewer. Cassandra weaves her way through the crowd, doing her best to ignore the enticing scent of fresh, hot blood. Her meal will have to wait; her quarry tonight is a very special target.

The girl is tall and lanky; tanned and athletic compared to her soft, fair sister. She stoops a little as she walks, as if trying to make herself look shorter. Her companion is almost comically small compared to her, with shabby clothes and a dirty blonde mop of hair. While the taller girl doesn’t dress particularly ostentatiously, anyone can see the stark difference in wealth.

They meander down the street, and Cassandra can sense the magnetism between them. They move almost like they’re dancing together, stepping in time to one another’s beat, always coming close but never quite making contact, eyes darting away before looks last too long, fingers brushing before their hands move away.

She’s seen this abnormality before, heard it spoken of and condemned. The Devil’s possessing influence, folks said, driving women away from the marriage bed and into the arms of Lilith.

Cassandra, too, has fallen. She has tasted the spirits of Hell and found it sweeter than any communion wine. She, all of them, walk in a world abandoned by God. The poor and destitute line the streets, prosperous banks fall to ruin, and far across the world the innocent are slaughtered by the monstrous men in power. One must either succumb to the demons that flood the world, or join them.

The girls dart into a homely little ice cream parlor, one of the only shops remaining on this street, and Cassandra follows them, careful to move as lightly as possible, stalking her mark as subtly as a
shadow. She sits at a booth across the floor from the booth where the girls sit, ordering hot fudge sundaes and laughing about the film.

It’s an odd invention, film. Cassandra doesn’t really get the point of it. Still, now that humans have figured out how to add diegetic sound to their films without the use of an organ, excitement seems to have rekindled, especially since it’s a convenient escape from the economic armageddon outside.

The taller girl, Beth, fiddles with her spoon for a few seconds before taking a bite of her ice cream. Cassandra’s been watching her for a while. Beth’s the daughter of a major Hollywood magnate, but judging from the way the man treats her, it would be easy to mistake her for his secretary. Cassandra’s sources tell her Beth is the one who does the majority of her father’s paperwork, and is in charge of watching over two siblings, one of whom is consumed with sloth and lust, and the other of whom is an idiot. As far as that family goes, it’s readily apparent who the brains of the operation is.

Cassandra’s own family is still small, about ten girls in all. What fledglings they sire often die young, and the ones who make it have a dangerous tendency to become complacent after the first decade. She had been impressed with Frances, who was refreshingly bright, and Beverly, the only one mad enough to volunteer to join their ranks, but neither of them truly had the potential for greatness that Cassandra sought.

Beth, from Cassandra’s observations, has proven to be loyal, smart and organized. Her clumsy unconscious flirtations with her friend belie surprising charisma and a cunning wit. Compared to Frances, who is passable but intolerably rigid, and Beverly, who’s a useful attack dog but has all the intelligence of a dish rag, Beth is an ideal candidate for a truly successful right hand woman.

Beth’s companion, Sam, gets up for a moment and walks toward the counter to ask a question. Beth watches her, and Cassandra notes the mixture of longing and deep, profound shame in her eyes. Shame so overwhelming that the poor girl must be practically breaking her own mind to bury the cause.

Though the girl lives with the couple that birthed her, in truth she has no parents. No family, except for this silly girl who’s too naive to even recognize the lust lurking inside them both. Cassandra feels a stab of pity for her. She of all people should know how it feels to be unloved and unwanted.

Eventually the girls leave, and Cassandra watches them go, biting back a smirk.

The party is in three days’ time.

Beth’s remaining heartbeats are running low.

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Turning the child is easy. Framing her brother is even easier. The presence of her vapid sister is an unwanted complication, but if it helps keep Beth rooted to the clan, then Cassandra will have to accept the presence of a dead weight, at least for now. In the middle of the initiation arena, the twins lie on the ground, facing one another. Perpendicular to them lie their sacrifices. The old man, Robert, looks utterly impotent without his little entourage. He’s a bald, scrawny old man, with none of his children’s natural charm. Cassandra wonders how anyone could take such a mediocre man seriously.

And next to him, feebly stirring, is handsome, idiotic Mr. Munroe. According to Beverly, he actually managed to kill Frances with a lucky blow to her chest. Unfortunate, but then again, Frances had
been growing complacent. She’s sure Beth will be more than ready for the task of overcoming her.

Michael’s mistress’s pendant gleams dully in her hand, still crusted with dry blood. Cassandra
smirks. It’s too bad Michael had to waste his adulterous urges on a run-of-the-mill mortal woman.
She envisions him, squirming underneath her, naked and flushed and bleeding, helpless under her
power. What a pretty picture that would be. But, alas, he is not her dinner, but the spare’s.

Provided the spare is strong enough to follow her instincts.

She hears a groan, sees the old man trying to get to his feet. Cassandra clears her throat.

“Good evening, Mister Washington.”

Bob Washington looks around, confused, before his eyes rest on Hannah. What little color had
remained there before drains from his face.

“Oh...oh god...Hannah…”

He collapses in grief, cradling his older daughter and crying into her chest. Next to this pathetic
scene, Beth sits up, coughing and choking as her body adjusts to its new state.

Her father doesn’t notice.

“D...dad…?” Beth rasps. Bob, not appearing to have heard her, buries his face deeper into Hannah’s
chest. “Dad...what's wrong...Hannah? What, what happened to Hannah? Dad…?”

Beth stumbles over to Bob, trembling and shuddering. Shakily, she puts a hand on Bob’s shoulder
and shakes him. He turns for the first time, looking her up and down with blurry, tear-stained eyes.

“Beth, how did this happen? How could this happen?”

“Dad…”

“You were supposed to be watching her! You were supposed to protect her! How could this
happen?! How…?”

“Actually, Mister Washington, I believe caring for your own children is your responsibility. Or did
you forget about that?”

Bob and Beth look up at her, and Cassandra fights a smile when she sees the flicker of fear in Beth’s
eyes.

“Cassandra Rosencrantz…”

“A parent is supposed to keep his children safe and healthy, but you never bothered. Too busy
making your precious films and throwing ball after ball celebrating yourself.”

“That’s not true!”

“Is it now? If you truly loved your children, why couldn’t you accept the differences in your son
instead of hiding him because he ’embarrassed’ you? Why did you thrust all the duties and
responsibilities onto your youngest daughter? Why do you mourn only one of your children, when
two of them are dead?”

“What?”
“Check Beth’s pulse, Mister Washington.”

Amusingly, he seems to obey her without a second thought, taking his child’s wrist and feeling for a pulse.

“What are you?”

“Dad…”

“How fitting that your daughter became the creature in your films. A vampire, and a very hungry one, right Beth?”

Beth stares at her, horrorstruck. Her eyes are wide and black, her hair a tangled mess. She chokes back a sob.

“Listen to your instincts, Beth. What do they tell you?”

“I…”

“Get away from me, all of you!” Bob yells, throwing Beth’s hand away. “Demons! Damned monsters!”

“Dad…” Beth swallows a sob. Cassandra watches her hands curl up into fists.

“Don’t bother, Beth. That man isn’t your father. He isn’t anyone’s father. I don’t think he ever was. Now, end him, or I’ll have to let you go.”

“I…”

“It’s almost dawn, Beth. I’m sure you know what that means.”

While Beth gapes in horror at her, Bob turns and runs, searching feebly for a way out. Beth runs after him, grabbing his shoulder and tugging him back, unaware of her newfound strength. There’s a crack and a scream as Bob falls back, his shoulder dislocated. Beth jerks back in horror, staring at her trembling hands. Bob rolls onto his side, curling into the fetal position.

“Mister Washington, I find it rather ironic that you call your child a monster, considering what you were planning to do to Joshua.”

“What?” Beth asks, looking up at her. Eyes all wide, afraid.

But curious.

“What is it that you humans do to those who have an unfortunate attraction towards those of their own sex? Oh, that’s right. You lobotomize them.”

Beth turns grey. Bob stares at the ground, avoiding eye contact.

“Do you deny it, Mister Washington?” Cassandra asks. Beth stares down at her father, her lips pressed tightly together. She sniffs quietly.

“You don’t understand. I was trying to help him.”

“You would do that to your own children,” Cassandra says, placing extra emphasis on the word ‘children’. Beth, just as Cassandra was hoping, backs away from her father, repulsed. Bob lurches towards her, his good arm pitifully reaching for her.
“Beth, honey, please…”

Beth slaps his hand away, hard enough to draw blood. Her eyes widen as the little red bubbles bloom on the back of her father’s hand.

What happens next is too fast to see.

By the time Beth’s done, her father’s corpse is virtually unrecognizable. His limbs have been ripped away and discarded, leaving uneven, pinkish stumps feebly leaking blood onto the floor. There’s an ugly red hole where his throat used to be, and his eyes, nose and cheeks were scratched into pulp during Beth’s feeding frenzy.

Already, Cassandra can feel her heart swelling with maternal pride.

One of her girls throws Beth a towel, and Beth, utterly numb it seems, washes away the blood as best she can. Beverly and Mildred carry the remains of Bob Washington away from the arena, down into the pit.

Beside the drying puddle of blood, Michael Munroe begins to wake.

March 1936

Her up-and-coming lieutenant is taking longer to adjust than she’d hoped.

It’s been about half a year since the little incident with Frances, and Cassandra’s been left to manage a troubling power vacuum until she can trust Beth enough to promote her. Bev’s been a catastrophic pain in the ass, constantly whining about how she doesn’t understand why she’s not by Cassandra’s side, and Cassandra has found herself wishing that oaf Munroe had somehow managed to kill both Bev and Frances.

Beth talks to no one save her sister, and when Cassandra comes to see her, she’s sullen and laconic. The other girls whisper to each other about what bores the twins are, conveniently forgetting their own periods of depression and fear right after their transformation.

Everyone’s reluctant to embrace what they are. At first.

Cassandra knocks on Beth’s door, paying close attention to her fledgling’s tempest of emotions as she opens the door and looks out, brown eyes wide. Curiosity, guilt, fear, resentment, and a begrudging respect battle for supremacy in the roiling chaos of her young mind. Her grip on the edge of the door tightens until the tips turn white, and Cassandra can sense the way Beth’s muscles tense, adrenaline coursing through her veins.

Beth has a proud, strong spirit. It would be easy to destroy it, but far more rewarding to tame.

“Hello, Cassandra,” Beth says tersely.

“Beth. I’d like you to come hunting with me tonight.”

Beth presses her lips together. Her brow furrows. The waves of her emotions curl and crash.

“…Alright.”
Cassandra waits for Beth to gather her things and walk out with her, dressed presentably in a simple black dress. It clashes with Cassandra’s own luxurious furs, but Beth’s always shown a considerable discomfort with femininity. On other hunts, Cassandra has sensed Beth’s longing whenever she sees the men’s tailored suits in shop windows. Beth is a creature of longing, like anyone else. Give a woman what she longs for, deep within her heart, and she will drink from a thousand broken necks for you.

On their way out, Cassandra spots the spare sitting alone in the foyer, looking utterly out of place. Beth offers her sister a smile as they pass. The spare returns it, weakly.

Beth and Cassandra make their way into town, moving quickly and quietly, eschewing the still-wealthy remnants of the city for the festering, Depression-scarred hives of misery further from the hills. The people here are easy targets, their removal from this world a mercy to themselves and everyone else around them.

It’s a good thing too, because they’ll need a lot of them.

“Beth, I’m sure you’ve noticed that we’re running low as of late.”

Beth swallows.

“Running low?”

“Darling, please don’t feign stupidity. It’s unbecoming.”

Beth sighs. They both know full well about the blood wine shortage. It’s nothing critical, but it’s driving her girls to hunt more and more, and if they kill too much game in this city, they’re going to get noticed. Beth avoids eye contact with her sire as she carries a sack full of empty flasks, jars and bottles.

She’s a clever girl. She knows what they have to do.

A little boy in rags walks over to them, his big, sunken eyes wide as saucers in his head. He shakes a little cup wordlessly, and Cassandra can hear the faint jingle of one or two coins rattling around inside of it.

Beth stares at her feet. Cassandra senses guilt and shock within her. She’s never been this close to the ravages of the Depression before. The boy looks from Beth to Cassandra, then, his face falling slightly, he leaves, running into a dirty alleyway. Cassandra sees no sign of any parents.

There’s a second stab of guilt in Beth shortly after the first, but this one feels more personal, entangled in memory and regret.

She misses Samantha. No doubt that girl has done her fair share of begging on corners.

“Remember, Beth, we’re only taking adults. No children.”

Beth nods silently. Her eyebrow twitches in the half-light.

“I’ll help you at first, and then I want you to take over and do most of it. Consider it an evaluation.”

“I was never very good at tests,” Beth mutters.

“But this one comes with a reward. Something you’ve been craving, I think.” Cassandra lets Beth peer into their connection, tug at the threads of her intent. “If you do this for me, you’ll have my
blessing to pass our salvation onto another.”

A light breeze blows scraps of paper across the dirty street, curling and twisting in the wind, and in that moment they both know exactly who Beth has in mind.

After one of the bits of paper stumbles a drunk man, his eyes glazed and teary as he paws for the pieces with a scarred, meaty hand. A tarnished wedding ring glints on one finger.

“Well, then,” Cassandra says, indicating the drunkard with a nod, “let’s get started.”

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She helps her at first, pointing out men drinking alone and women standing, none-too-subtly, on street corners. They avoid anyone who looks like a mother, and seek with gleeful prejudice anyone who might be a father.

There are devils in every man, but it’s not until he seeks to reproduce that the devils become him.

Eventually, Cassandra starts hanging back, watching from a distance as Beth seeks out and corners new targets alone. An angry looking man in his twenties follows Beth’s come-hither calls behind the back of an abandoned brewery, where she slams his head against the wall so hard his skull cracks open. Cassandra can see what looks like brains as Beth opens one of the dead man’s veins and gets to work.

The rest of the victims meet similar fates. A bald, pale man. A middle-aged prostitute. A big, burly maintenance worker. All of them slaughtered and bled like pigs. Like animals.

The horror in Beth’s mind slowly dulls with each kill.

An elderly beggar barely resists as Beth cuts his throat, draining the blood into a flask. He has long, ragged white hair and a patchy beard that turns a sickly shade of scarlet as his own blood splatters all over his unwashed face. Cassandra is about to step out and congratulate her when she hears a shrill scream. She and Beth turn to find a young woman, eighteen or nineteen at the most, her raven hair and off-white clothes a disheveled mess as she screams in horror, her eyes on the corpse, and the bloodied girl standing over it.

Cassandra doesn’t even have to say anything. Without hesitation, Beth charges, grabbing the girl by the neck and crushing her trachea in one fluid motion. The girl collapses to the ground, her eyes bulging as she feebly clings to life. Capillaries burst in her eyes as blood thick as syrup springs up between her lips. Beth watches for a second or two, expressionless, before crushing the poor girl’s skull under her heel.

Cassandra walks over to Beth, sensing horror and pain twisting and writhing under her calm facade like frothing tigers in a cage.

“You did well,” she says, taking the bag from Beth and counting up filled bottles. “Oh, this is more than enough. And hardly anyone worth missing in this district. I’m sure they’ll find some convenient scapegoat.”

Beth says nothing.

“Beth, I sought you out because I saw something in you. Something your parents never saw. You have such potential, such promise. You just need the opportunity to realize it. And, as you’ve demonstrated here tonight, you have all of the resourcefulness and ruthlessness most of even my girls lack.”
“Ma’am?”

“Beth, I would like for you to be my second. Help me run our clan and make it better. Help me fight the corruption in this wretched city and carve out a place for women like us to finally thrive.”

More chaos brews in Beth’s mind. She looks at Cassandra, a splash of blood beginning to dry and crust over on her cheek.

“If I’m your second, does that mean I can help choose who…”

“Yes. You will help me find the right girls to make our clan even greater. Starting, of course, with a fledgling of your choice.”

Beth’s face flushes.

“I...Yes, okay. I accept.”

Cassandra smiles, giving Beth’s bony shoulder a little squeeze. Beth doesn’t flinch away from the touch.

“Good girl.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait! I had a nasty case of writer's block while writing this interlude, but I hope the final product was worth the wait! The next chapter won't be nearly as long of a wait. It's almost done, in fact.
I'd like to thank my co-writer, who wrote most of the next chapter and helped me write some of the scenes in the story when my writers' block was at its worst. I don't know where I'd be without her.
Leave a comment if you liked it, and, as always, thanks for reading.
Matt squirms in his seat, heart still slamming against his chest. He reaches for another sip of water, then stops, second guessing himself, concerned his nerves will somehow damn him.

“Matthew, Matthew, Matthew,” Detective Sloane sighs, shaking his head. “We’re really trying to help you out, but you’re in quite the pickle.”

Matt rubs his face tiredly. “I’ve been here for almost an hour. What more do you want to know?”

“We’d like to know more about you and Jason, Mr. Taylor. From all accounts the two of you had a strained relationship,” the other detective, Schultz, says.

“The guy was a bit of a dick but I didn’t have a massive problem with him.”

“That so?” Detective Sloane asks, stroking his hideous moustache thoughtfully. “Your school transcripts say you assaulted him on campus.”

“Uh, I- “ Matt flushes. He looks down at the pock marked table. “I didn’t mean it to get so out of hand. I was mad about what he did to Emily.”

“That prank was a dick move,” Detective Sloane agrees. He leans close to Matt, all-sympathetic, and Matt has to restrain himself from sneering at his transparent good-cop routine. “Emily’s your friend. It’s only right you defend her.”

“Agreed. So. Can I go now?”

“As we informed you last week, Mr. Green’s body was found washed up on Pescadero beach. Blunt force trauma to his neck and massive blood loss,” Detective Schultz says. Matt winces. He remembers when the news filtered into school, the grief stricken look on his classmates’ faces.

“Yeah.”

“In our inquiries some of Jason’s friends allege that you sent the deceased a text message, saying you, and I quote: ‘would kill him if anything happened to Emily.’”

Matt feels his stomach drop out from underneath him.

“Did you send that message, Mr. Taylor?”

“I, uh,” he tries to resist the urge to wipe the sweat from his brow. “I was really mad. Emily was so upset after that freaking stunt he pulled, then she went missing, and I just sent it without thinking.”

“Thanks for telling us the truth, Matt, we appreciate it,” Detective Sloane says sympathetically. “Do you want anything, a snack or a drink of water?”
“I want to go.”

“Not just yet, champ. See, the way we see it is, Katie and Jason, they played this awful prank on Emily. We’ve all seen the video, so no need to go into detail. But Jason and Katie play this prank, right, and then next thing you know,” he snaps his fingers. “They’re dead.”

“I don’t understand what this has to do with me,” Matt says, hoping his desperation hasn’t seeped into his voice.

“You’re a smart guy, Matt. You see how this doesn’t look good for you. But if you tell us the truth, we can help you.”

“I have told the truth,” Matt snarls.

The detective share a long look. Matt wishes he could upend the table in front of him and shake them both until they come to their senses.

“We found evidence of a struggle at a park Jason liked to go to,” Detective Sloane finally says. Matt grits his teeth. His patronising tone is putting him on edge. “Our forensic team canvassed the whole area.”

“Yeah? What did you find?”

“DNA evidence that puts Emily Davis at the crime scene,” Detective Schultz says.

Matt gasps, slumping back into his chair. He wishes he took up the offer for a drink because he feels woozy all of a sudden. He ignores the detectives, trying to concentrate on sucking air into his lungs instead.

Emily. No. How?

“You...you guys don’t think Emily could have done this?” He finally rasps.

“Not alone, no,” Detective Schultz says bluntly.

“Matt,” the other detective sighs, leaning forward and clasping his hands together, looking at him the same way his coach did when he screwed up a play in training. “Come on. We know you didn’t plan this. You’re not that kinda guy. But you have got to start looking out for yourself, now. Okay? So we need you to choose the right option. The smart option. Start by telling us everything you know.”

Matt glowers, his own anger coiled and ready to strike.

“Matt, how about you start with telling us whether you have had any contact with Emily since she disappeared?”

Matt thinks back to Emily’s note tucked away in his room. Hannah made him promise not to tell anyone about it, but every episode of SVU has told him it’s not smart to conceal something that huge from the police. He has nothing to hide. Surely they’ll see this is all a big misunderstanding. That every second they’re interrogating him is a second they could be spending on figuring out how to rescue Emily from whatever seedy basement her psycho captors are keeping her in.

He opens his mouth, about to tell them about the note, when Hannah’s voice flits through his head. Matt, the police all think you took her.

He pauses, looking at them closely for what feels like the first time since he sat down. They look
professional, unflappable, but it doesn’t take long before he spots the eager gleam in their eyes.

“I…. haven’t been in contact with her,” Matt says eventually. “Because she’s missing .”

“Matt,” Detective Schultz sighs, wearily. “I have to tell you right now, we’re convening an out-of-court session to get a search warrant for your car and your house.”

“Unfortunately for you, we found the one judge who was working on New Year’s Eve, kid,” Detective Sloane quips.

“Exactly. So. How about you tell the truth. It’s of critical importance to your future that you are upfront with us. Right now.”

“Matt, I promise you, we can help you if you just tell us the truth. We’ll find it out eventually, but I’d like to hear your side of the story first.”

“So,” Detective Schultz picks up a pen, hovers it over a piece of official-looking paper. “When did Emily get in touch with you? Did the two of you formulate a plan together?”

“What the fuck?” Matt roars, springing to his feet, looming over the two detective. A small, twisted part of him enjoys how their eyes widen in fear. “I already fucking told you, I don’t know where Emily is. I do sure as hell know she didn’t kill anyone. So, how about you idiots stop wasting your goddamn time and fucking do your jobs and find her!”

It feels good to finally put these morons in their place but his euphoria ebbs away when the detectives smirk, looking like Matt just handed them an early New Year’s present.

Which he supposes he did, in a way.

“Quite a temper you got there,” Detective Sloane drawls, grinning up at him. Matt balls his fist, wishing he could smack the self-righteous look off that smug arsehole’s face, when -

“Did you gentlemen really think you’d get away with talking to my client without me?”

A man, tall and imposing with greying dark hair and a sharp suit, strides into the room. The interrogation door clangs shut behind him.

He ignores Matt, who is gaping at him, instead handing Detective Schultz his card.

“You’re from Sammler and Scott?”

“Yes. And Mr. Taylor is my client.”

“You’re not my-” Matt starts, before shutting his mouth when the lawyer sends him a sharp look.

“I don’t think we’ve ever seen a lawyer from Sammler and Scott down in these parts. You sure you’re not lost, counsellor?”

“No, Detective…Sloane, is it? Well, it’s late, and we all have places we’d prefer to be. So. Are you charging my client, or not, detective?”

Matt tenses. The two detectives glance at each other, the first hint of disappointment flickering on their faces. Matt almost swoons with relief, letting out a breath he didn’t even know he was holding.

“Excellent,” his lawyer, says. He takes Matt by the arm. “Come on, Mr. Taylor, let’s go.”
“We’ll be in touch. This conversation is not over,” Detective Sloane calls out.

“I don’t doubt that,” the lawyer says, yanking Matt none-too-gently out of the room.

Matt’s legs are jelly, but the lawyer seems to predict that, leading him over to a bench on the other side of the room. Once Matt is settled, he strides towards a nearby water cooler, filling up a small styrofoam cup.

“So. Matt. My name is James Norton. I’m an attorney at Sammler and Scott.”

“Uh. Nice to meet you, I guess.”

“You probably need this,” James says, handing him the cup.

“Thanks.”

James takes a seat next to him. “Once you recover from your heart attack I want you to know these schmucks don’t have anything on you. They’re desperate. They haven’t even found Katie’s body yet.”

“They have a warrant,” Matt mumbles, his head swimming. The water is helping a bit, at least.

“Yeah, right, if they had a warrant, I’d know about it. But I do think they’re trying their best to get one, so you should be prepared for that.” James shifts, pulling his phone out from his pocket. It’s the most expensive looking smartphone he’s ever seen.

“I’d prefer to get out ahead of this investigation, so we need to get your story straight. Can you meet on the second? We have a lot to go through.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Matt snaps. He knows he shouldn’t lash out at this man, but being accused of murder hasn’t put him in a generous mood. “Look, I appreciate what you did for me back there, but unless you’re prepared to be paid in pancakes, you can’t be my lawyer.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” James laughs. “Your girlfriend already paid my retainer.”

“Girlfriend?”

“She’s just over there,” he points to the other side of the room, where Hannah is waiting, shifting on her feet and staring at him with anxious eyes.

James leans over, seemingly unfazed at Matt’s shocked expression.

“You don’t need to worry about a thing, Matt. You’re covered. Oh, and the girl? She’s a keeper.”

He claps him on the shoulder, like his teammates used to do at the end of training. He gets up, smoothing his suit out, dark eyes flickering around the precinct, like he’s a quarterback plotting his next move.

“I’ll be looking over some documents tomorrow, but like I said, I need to see you on the second. My number is on this card.” He hands it to him. Matt tries not to gape at the fancy gold script. “Give me a call, okay? Oh, and Matt?”

He blinks. “What?”

“Happy New Year,” James grins, winking at him, before turning on heels and striding away, only pausing briefly to nod towards Hannah.
When Hannah gets to him she pulls Matt into a fierce hug, squeezing him so hard it’s a struggle to draw breath. He drops his head, nuzzling her neck, closing his eyes and breathing her in.

“Matt,” Hannah says. She sounds broken. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he whispers. The adrenaline that once surged within him has begun to seep away, leaving him shaken and hollow. “You’re here. So it’s okay.”

“Matt,” Hannah pulls away, and to his surprise, her eyes are watering. “I never wanted you to get mixed up in this.”

“Me neither,” Matt jokes, feeling a bit better when Hannah offers a weak smile in return.

“Matt…”

“Hey,” he interrupts, squeezing her hands. “Thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do. Trust me.”

“God.” He sighs, looking at the hustle and bustle of the police precinct, glaring at anyone who even looks at him twice. “This. Blows.”

“What?” Hannah laughs.

“I’m serious. Fuck this place. Let’s go somewhere. Anywhere.”

“Matt, you’re in shock, are you sure you want to do anything, I mean…”

“Hannah, just for one night, I want to forget about the police and the dead bodies and all the other crazy shit in my life right now. Okay? You with me?”

Her smile is soft, sad. “Always. Where do you want to go?”

“Didn’t you say something about Santa Monica fireworks?”

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Matt’s still a little shaken, and he doesn’t think crowds will do anything to assuage his nerves, so Hannah takes him to a little spot, a cove, a few miles away from the beach. Even though they’re well away from all the tourists and from the beach itself, Hannah’s still found a tiny vantage point where they’ll be able to see the fireworks. The forest looms over them, wild, tangled and dark but somehow he finds it tranquil. He takes a swig of the can of rum and coke that Hannah bought, thankful, yet again, he’s dating a girl who is older than him.

“This is lovely,” he says, peering across the gully through the windscreen of his car.

“It is,” Hannah sighs, resting her head on his shoulder. Matt closes his eyes for a second, enjoying the feel of her body so close to his.

“You said you used to hike. Did you ever go up to places like this?”

“Yeah, I used to, with my sister and S-, our friend, our childhood friend. The two of them enjoyed hiking more than me, though.”
“I bet you kept getting distracted by all the pretty flowers. I bet you stopped and smelled everyone,” he teases.

“Shush, you,” she squeals, but wriggles so she’s even closer to him.

“I’m not usually one for all this….nature, but you found a pretty great place.”

“I’m full of surprises.”

“You are,” he says, voice low. Hannah blinks, looking surprised. She shouldn’t be. She’s not the only one who knows how to flirt.

“I am?” she asks, all innocent.

“Mhmmm. And I’m gonna find out all your secrets.”

“Matt!”

“Like…..hmmm… I bet you’re a beekeeper in your spare time. Like, that’s why I haven’t been to your house. It’s because you live in a tiny cottage filled with bees.”

“Matt! I do not!”

“Or maybe you’re a spy,” he teases. “For the French government. That’s it! A French spy. Bonsoir, Bonsoir!”

“It’s Bonsoir, dork, and you are making no sense,” Hannah giggles. Matt sucks in a sharp breath. Her eyes are so dark, glinting prettily in the gloom.

“I’d like to go your house, one time,” he croaks, his mouth inexplicably dry. She’s so close, head against his shoulder, and he wonders if she can see the ache on his face, can feel how much he wants her.

“You would?”

“I’d like to go anywhere. As long as I could be alone. With you.”

“Me, too,” she gasps, sitting up and brushing her warm fingers across his face. “Me too.”

It’s still thrilling when he kisses her. He tries to play it cool, kissing her gently and sweetly, treating her with the care she deserves. Hannah’s impatient, though, deepening the kiss and pulling him close. He groans and they surge forward together, barely breaking for breath.

“Hey,” Hannah says, so quietly that he can barely hear her over his pants. “Did anyone ever tell you the backseat of your car is really….roomy?”

“Fuck,” he groans. He feels himself getting hard at just the implication. “Uh, are you sure -”

Hannah giggles, kissing him sweetly, before wriggling between the seats in an effort to get to the back of his car. He stares at her ass, because, hello, what a view, before snapping out of it, stumbling outside before yanking the passenger door open, moving faster than he even thought possible.

Hannah’s waiting, lounging on the back seat, looking at him with half-lidded eyes. He’s frozen for a second, scarcely believing his luck, before Hannah reaches over and tugs him on top of her.

He lands heavily and he’s about to apologise when her mouth is on his again. There’s nothing
languid or sweet about their kisses now; it’s all hot and desperate and needy. Underneath him, Hannah shifts, spreading her legs, lifting her hips up. Instinctively he grinds against her, the silence being filled with their groans of pleasure.

He pulls his mouth away from hers, breathing heavier than he ever has in his life. He kisses her check, the lovely curve of her jaw, taking an earlobe in his mouth, biting down gently, enjoying how Hannah sighs and shudders underneath him.

“Matt,” Hannah whines, hips jerking forward, both of them moaning as she rubs up against the swell in his jeans.

“Fucking hell,” he gasps. Her nipples are hard, and he can feel them through her sheer black top. He drags the pad of his thumb around one, feeling it stiffen under his touch, wishing it was his mouth instead.

“Fuck,” Hannah groans, pushing him off her. An apology is about to stumble from Matt’s lips, but he doesn’t get the chance, not when Hannah’s hands are flying to his belt.

“Don’t stop,” she says, rubbing him through his jeans. He’s hard, almost painfully so, but he closes his eyes, enjoying her touch, those long knowing fingers running up against the length of him. She strokes him through his jeans a few more times, and he’s about to ask her to stop, because, well, he’s been on edge for months now. This could be over before it’s even begun. She answers his unspoken question, pulling her hands away from him, and while he aches for her touch, he’s grateful.

“Matt?” her voice is shaky.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t stop, okay? Please.”

And fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck. This isn’t how he envisaged this. He wanted to make love to her for hours, in the comfort of a bed, not fast and dirty in the backseat of his car. But he can’t refuse her, not when her hair is messed up and her lip gloss is all smeared, and definitely not when she starts to unbutton her shirt.

“Oh, Jesus.”

She smirks, slowly undoing one button, then another, making a show of it. He can’t breathe.

Finally, there’s no more buttons, just her shirt, half off her body, and there’s so much smooth pale skin he almost doesn’t know where to look.

His heart is hammering so loudly in his chest, he wonders if she can hear it.

“Matt. Please.”

They’re kissing again, hard and with purpose. She shuffles a bit, enough so he can move in next to her, lying on his side. They spend long minutes kissing before his patience breaks, sliding a hand up her torso, enjoying the dip and curve of her waist, before palming her breast through her bra. Matt’s no expert, but he’s pretty sure this is lingerie. He wishes he could appreciate it but he’s more concerned about getting it off.

“Matt, oh, god, yes,” Hannah hisses, arching up into his touch. Before he can moan in response, she’s kissing him again, before dragging her mouth to his jaw. His chin. His neck.
He groans, hips jerking helplessly as something sharp scrapes across the base of his neck. He’s about to moan her name when Hannah stills next to him.

“Hannah,” he pleads. “Don’t st-”

He doesn’t get the words out, not when Hannah pushes him off the seat, and is out of the car before he even has time to blink.

“What? Hannah. Hannah?” He awkwardly sits up, hands scrabbling to do up his fly, stumbling outside. He blinks, heart racing.

He can’t see Hannah anywhere.

“What the hell,” he mutters, wiping sweat from his brow. “Hannah? HANNAH!”

She’s nowhere to be found. He kicks the nearest rock, wincing as a shot of pain scythes through him.

It’s only then he feels something hot dribbling down his neck. Frowning, he puts his hand to it, and his fingers come away wet.

With blood.

Blood?

Was that why Hannah ran away?

He hopes not, since a little over-enthusiastic biting is nothing to be ashamed about. It was clearly an accident, and if his semi-hard on is anything to go by, he’s not complaining. He takes out his phone, and is only a little surprised when he sees a text from Hannah.

Hannah: Sorry :(

Matt: Hannah! Wtf. Why did you run away?

Hannah: I thought I hurt u and I freaked. Sorry.

Matt: Where are you?

Hannah: I’m safe. My friend is nearby and she picked me up. I’m so, so sorry.

“Fuck,” he hisses. Now she’s safe he feels relieved and annoyed in equal measure.

Matt: Look, if u want to bail, or want to stop, just tell me, okay? I promise I won’t be mad. Just don’t do that again, okay? I really freaked.

He stares at the screen, the little dots on his phone stopping, then starting, as Hannah struggles to
respond. Eventually, his phone beeps.

_Hannah:_ I know. _It won’t happen again. Sorry_

_Matt:_ That’s okay. I had fun though. _Thanks for taking my mind off things._

_Hannah:_ Anytime. Happy New Year, btw xxx

Matt grins, wondering how one little message could make him smile like a loon.

It takes at least ten minutes to get back to his car, but at least he won’t get lost since there’s only one path in and out of this place. It seems darker as he enters the forest, the sky as black as ink. He can’t hear much except the creatures shuffling in the undergrowth and his own shallow breaths. He shivers, suddenly feeling like this place has becoming less inviting and more foreboding.

Eventually, the trees give way, opening up to the clearing where his car is parked. In the distance he hears the fireworks, a kaleidoscope of colors bursting across the sky, 2015 beginning in style.

He’s so taken by the beauty he almost misses what’s right in front of him. When he notices it, his blood runs cold.

The bike rack that sat on top of his car is now a twisted pile of metal, resting a metre or so away. He’s not sure how, but someone must have torn it completely off, and tossed it away like it was nothing.

He walks closer, trying to figure out any clues, when he sees it, a message, keyed boldly into the side of his car, the implications clear.

_S-T-A-Y_

_A-W-A-Y_

_F-R-O-M_


Jess is uncharacteristically quiet when they get back from their “hunt”. They got back earlier than usual, and without even thinking about it, they’d decided to go into the living room and watch whatever’s on TV. It’s weird, just lounging around with this girl she’s so used to seeing with blood on her lips, but quiet, lazy comfort suits Jess, as she stretches, catlike, on the couch.

It’s becoming easier, being with her. There’s a simplicity to her life that never used to exist. She doesn’t have to worry about the stress of college applications, about petty high school drama or the financial burdens she placed on her mother. Now it’s just her and Jess, going out, eating, going home, repeat.

If it weren’t for the cold gaze of Cassandra keeping them all trapped under her murderous thrall, it might actually be a decent life.

Well. “Life.”

Jess yawns and leans to the side, resting her head on Emily’s shoulder. For once, their emotions are
in an equilibrium of relative contentment. On the TV, an old Disney movie, the one about bears, plays, though neither Emily nor Jess is paying much attention.

Emily doesn’t much care for kids movies.

She hears footsteps outside, slightly muffled by the closed door. It opens, and Beth peers in from the hall, looking stony as ever. Despite Beth being blighted with an apparently permanent case of stick-up-the-ass syndrome, Emily notices a look of fondness in her eyes as she looks at Jess. Emily ignores a brief pang of jealousy. Beth’s eyes shift to Emily’s, and they stare at each other across the otherwise empty living room, the faint din of the movie the only noise.

Finally, Beth offers a curt nod, closes the door, and leaves, her soft footsteps fading after a few seconds.

She seems distracted lately, Beth. Pacing around and muttering to herself and ignoring things she would ordinarily go into a rant over. Jess seems concerned about it, but they’ve never talked about it, and Emily’s not about to go and ask Beth herself.

“Hey. Emily?” Jess mumbles sleepily.

“Yeah?”

“Nothing,” Jess mumbles, avoiding her eyes.

“No, tell me,” Emily cajoles.

“It’s fine. It’s stupid.”

“Don’t be a bitch,” Emily says, smirking when Jess rolls her eyes in response. “Come on, spill already. And don’t test me. I’m warning you, I’ll wait for all of eternity if I have to.”

Jess laughs a bit, nestling into Emily’s shoulder. It’s odd, the connection between them. Even if Jess’ concern wasn’t writ large on her face, her anxiety, her fear, her yearning, she feels it too, or at least a shadow of it. She wonders if it’s the same for Jess, wonders if her sire and can peer into her heart and see her secrets.

“It’s just,” Jess’ voice sounds small, almost timid. “I’m sorry. For...doing this to you...without asking.”

Emily almost shakes her head in bewilderment. Jess is excellent at a great many things, but contrition is not one of them. She’s a master at making things not her fault. To hear Jess apologize so bluntly, without making excuses, throws her a little.

“Oh. Um. Well,” Emily struggles for the right words. “Look. I can’t forgive you—”

“I know.”

“No, Jess. I can’t forgive you yet. I’m still, like, processing all of this. Like, you changed my life, permanently. Everything’s different now, and I never wanted that.”

Jess says nothing. She bites her lip a bit, her eyes closed.

“But,” Emily continues, “I get that you genuinely thought you were doing me a favor. I just...really wish you’d asked first.”

“I know...”
“Look, we can work all of this out. Talk things over. But…” Emily pauses and looks around for any signs of cameras in the room. Finding nothing, she sighs and continues. “...But, before we do that, we need to get out of here.”

“But—”

“If we stick around it’s gonna end badly for both of us no matter what we do. Eventually, that crazy whore or one of her minions is going to figure out we’ve been playing her.”

“Emily…”

“I’m serious,” she takes Jess’ hands in her own and squeezes. “Let’s...let’s see if we can, like, get us and the twins and Tam and Soph all in one of the cars to ‘hunt’ one night and just get the fuck out of Dodge. Pick up my mom and Matt and, Jesus, I dunno, go north, I guess. To Canada or wherever. Hide out in some resort town and feed on stupid drunk tourists.”

“I dunno, Em…”

“You’ve never been outside of California, right?” Emily asks. “Me neither. C’mon, what’s the point of being an undead creature of the night if you can’t go shopping in New York once in a while? Or like, let’s go sightseeing. Go to Montreal and the Grand Canyon. Have some seasons for once in our lives.”

Jess looks down, hiding the faintest beginnings of a smile on her face.

“I’ve never seen snow…”

“We can night ski. Watch the snow fall. Make snowmen and be all cute and shit.”

“Cute and shit? Now that’s a romantic proposition if ever there was one.”

“Hey, c’mon, I’m trying,” Emily protests, giving Jess a mock-serious nudge. “I’ve never been much of a romantic.” She pauses, her brain kicking her when she realizes exactly what she just said. “Not that I was, you know, trying to be. Romantic. You’re the one who said it was romantic, so, like, who’s projecting now?”

Jess giggles.

“Oh, yeah. It’s me who’s projecting.”

“Definitely you.”

“Tootally me.”

“Good, glad we have established that Emily, as usual, is right.”

“God, like you’d actually ever let me forget that.”

“Exactly.” Emily smiles despite herself. Jess should stop being so...distracting. She can’t let her charm her way out of this. Not when the stakes are this high. “Hey, I mean it though. We need to get out of here, like, yesterday.”

“Emily…”

“Come on Jess,” Emily sighs. Her sire is a lot smarter than she lets on, but Emily wished she wasn’t so blind to the sword of Damocles that’s practically hanging over their heads. “It’s too risky to stay.”
“It’s too risky to lea-”

“Goddamnit, Jess!”

“No, Emily, listen,” Jess challenges, lifting her head off Emily’s shoulder and staring back at her defiantly. “It’s too risky to leave unless we plan it.”

Emily gapes at her, for once completely speechless.

“Look,” Jess sighs. “You haven’t been the first one who has wanted to leave. There’s been five other girls who have tried since Sam left. All of them have been captured… and handed over to Ashley. So. If, or, when, we do this, we have to plan it out. Find a way to convince the twins. Plan the best time to leave, figure out the quickest way to get your mom and Matt. Cause if we get even one thing wrong, Emily, then we’re freaking toast. And I… I can’t lose you, Em.”

Emily’s throat feels awfully dry. When she swallows, it almost hurts. “I can’t lose you either.”

“Good, then it’s settled,” Jess hands are clammy, but Emily squeezes them anyway. “We can start planning. But not tonight. Tonight, I just want this. Please?”

“Okay,” Emily says quietly, opening up her arm to let Jess snuggle against her side. “Okay, I can do that.”

It takes her hours to get back to the mansion.

After the first droplets of Matt’s blood dribbled into her mouth, she ran. She ran so fast and for so long her limbs ached and sweat was everywhere, caked into her hair, trickling down her face, under her glasses and sliding down her neck.

She stops running by the time she gets downtown. Santa Monica is packed to the brim with revellers. Everyone is cheering, giddy and with what the new year will bring. All around her people are hugging and dancing with their friends under the flickering fluorescent lights of downtown Los Angeles.

She can almost taste their optimism.

Well, that and Matt’s blood.

A few droplets were enough to whet her appetite. To be frank, the hunger is always nagging away at her, a yawning chasm that can’t be filled. Even after a good feed, when she’s brought a man to her lips and drained him dry, it only delays the inevitable. Within days she’s out again, hunting, prowling, wanting.

There are so many people out tonight it wouldn’t even be a challenge. A dissolute drunk, a drug-addled reveller, hell, even a party girl. New Year’s Eve is basically is free-for-all. Even Cassandra lets her hair down, encourages them to go outside and drink their fill.

She’s hungry. Running that fast and for that long would take it out of anyone, even a seasoned vamp like herself. But, strangely, despite being surrounded by prey, she finds she doesn’t have the appetite for it.

She’s at the gates of Mansion when her thoughts turn back the source of her heartbreak.
She’s a goddamn idiot. Bev and the others, they’re always quick to tell her she’s a fool, the spare twin who shouldn’t even be there, and after tonight, who can argue? How reckless can she be, practically begging Matt to fuck her, even though she knew the risks. How stupid to even entertain for a split second taking Matt to bed? How can she trust herself, when she’s never managed to spare a man before? She’s not sure if it’s even possible for a vampire to restrain her natural instincts, not when she’s so close to that meaty, heaving mass of veins. Not when every single atom in her body is aching for blood.

It’s too risky. Hannah’s got to find a way to curb her instincts before she can even think of putting Matt in danger again. Until then. Well. Matt’s better off frustrated than dead.

Before she knows it, she’s back at the door of the Mansion, slipping her key in. The place is huge, and even with her superior senses, she can’t hear everything that goes on behind closed doors. In all likelihood the place is semi-empty anyway. Most of the girls go out for some fun on New Years. Nothing but dancing, debauchery and death. Hannah’s sure there will be a lot of grieving parents tomorrow.

Hannah frowns. Where did that thought come from?

When she enters the second lounge room she sees Sophie and Tamika, curled up around each other, watching the Twilight Zone. They barely even notice that she’s there, too wrapped up with one another, content to just be and it takes every ounce of Hannah’s willpower not to scream in frustration.

Jess is usually good for a distraction. She’s always knows just how to cheer Hannah up but then again, she’s probably cloistered away in Emily’s room right now. Jess thinks no one has noticed how close the two have become. How even though Emily sighs and huffs and is still a know-nothing bitch, she hangs off Jess’ every word, looks at her with barely disguised affection in her eyes. It might take a year. Hell, it might take two, but sooner rather than later they’ll fall into each others arms and Jess will have what she’s always wanted.

How wonderful that must be.

She stomps up towards her room. She doesn’t think she has the patience for company anyway. There’s solace in solitude, that’s for sure. She needs to figure out exactly how she and Matt are going to proceed. How Hannah can keep him happy. And safe.

She opens her door, deep in thought, so much so that she doesn’t realize she isn’t alone until she shuts the door behind her.

“Hey Han,” Beth’s sitting on the bed, a tight smile on her face. She holds up Matt’s letter jacket. “Mind telling me what the fuck this is?”

“Uh,” she scrambles. “Uh, it’s…. A trophy.”

“A trophy?”

“Yes.”

“A trophy?”

“I said that already. Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Because I’m not an idiot. And because you don’t keep trophies.”
“Well, he was a treasured kill!” Hannah snaps, stomping her foot. Her eyes are already watering, so she looks away and hopes to god her sister doesn’t see it.

“Oh, he’s treasured, all right, but he’s not a kill. In fact, I would bet anything this lump of muscle is alive and kicking right now.”

“What?” And there’s something knowing about Beth’s tone, and in her choice of words, that make alarms go off in her head.

“You heard me,” Beth sneers. She drops the jacket and approaches Hannah. “You think I haven’t noticed how out of it you’ve been these past few months? Not going out hunting with the others, not staying in and being with your friends, wearing cheap fucking trinkets and coming home at the crack of dawn...smelling like… boy.”

“Beth!”

“God, you reek with it now!” Beth snarls. “What the hell are you trying to pull, Han?”

“I,” she hates that she can’t stop her eyes from watering. She’s a stupid, soft hearted fool. “I didn’t mean for this to happen, Beth.”

“What were you thinking?”

“You don’t know him, Beth. He’s sweet and kind and...and he’s not like other men.”

“You do realize I’m duty bound to turn you in for this? Take this straight to Cassandra.”

Hannah’s stomach twists.

“Will you?”

“No!” Beth looks hurt by the question. “I would never do that, Hannah. Never.”

“Then why are you being like this?”

“Because I want to protect you! All I’ve ever wanted is to keep you from getting hurt.”

“I won’t get hurt because he won’t hurt me,” Hannah pleads, standing her ground. The air is fraught between them, but that doesn’t matter, not when Matt’s safety is at stake.

“Hannah, do you know how batshit crazy you sound right now? This can only end two ways. Bad. Or way worse.”

“It doesn’t have to!”

“Please don’t make this harder than it has to be,” Beth begs. “If you care about this boy like you say you do, then end it. Delete his number from his phone and forget about him.”

Hannah flinches, the words hitting her like a blow. “What? How can you even say that?”

“Because I know the risks! Jesus fucking Christ, Han, what if it was Bev who figured it out? Or Amy, or Wren, or god-fucking-forbid, Cass? Huh? What would happen then? How can I protect you then? Best case scenario; you’ll be down in the pit for a month, and Matt will be in the playroom with Ashley.”

“How….how do you know his name?” Hannah whispers, taking a step away from Beth.
Her sister at least has the decency to look guilty.

“Hannah, I didn’t have a choice. I had to make sure my suspicions were correct.”

“How dare you!?” Hannah gasps. She’s balls her fist, trying desperately not to scream and let the rest of the mansion in on her secret. “How dare you stalk him.”

“Like you haven’t? I’m pretty sure you’ve stalked him plenty of times. I’m not sure your knight in shining armour would appreciate that.”

“Shut up! Just shut up! What do you know? You can love whoever you want. When you get bored of Diane you can leave her be and then sire the next cute blonde who needs saving.”

Beth flinches, looking hurt, and Hannah would feel bad if she wasn’t so angry.

“You’ve gotten to love, Beth. I haven’t got that. I haven’t ever gotten to love anyone. You had Jess. You had Sam. Don’t take it out on me just because they both left you.”

Beth gapes at her, looking more anguished than Hannah has seen in decades but somehow her hurt stokes Hannah’s anger even more.

“It’s not fair. Why do you get to love someone? Matt is perfect. He’s sweet and gentle and brave and charming and he makes me feel alive for the first time in forever and it’s not fair that I have to hide him like he’s a dirty little secret. He’s all I’ve ever wanted and I am not letting you take him away from me!”

“Is that right?” her sister sounds shaken. “Think about this, then. You’ll have to tell him the truth when he starts wondering why you won’t go out with him during the day or why you won’t invite him back to your place, or how, you know, you don’t fucking age.”

“Well,” Hannah stutters, her head swimming. She bites down on her lip, forcing her tears back and squaring her shoulders. She’ll be damned if she let Beth win this. “I haven’t figured it all out yet, but I will.”

“Or, think about this, then,” Beth is starting to look angry again. “How many men have you murdered? How many men have you lured to your bed only to discard them when you’re done? You’re a hunter, Hannah, and he’s prey. How the hell is that even supposed to work?”

“We used to be human, Beth. We aren’t so different. They think and feel and love just like we do. You were that way once, we all were! Why do we have to treat humans like they’re cattle anyway?”

“Because we can’t live unless they die, Hannah! There’s no middle ground! Either we hunt them, or we starve. There is no alternative!”

Memories of Willa, Hannah’s poor fledgling, creep uninvited into her mind.

“I can’t live knowing my survival means innocent people die, Hannah. I’m sorry.”

“That...that doesn’t…” Hannah starts. Her hands shake and her throat burns. She’s a child again, crying and hoping her big sister will protect her.

She’s been an undead creature for almost eighty years but she hasn’t changed at all.

“Hey, hey,” Beth whispers. Hannah’s hands are covering her face, trying to stop her tears from going everywhere. She feels her twin’s cool hands gently clasp her wrists.
“Get away from me,” Hannah sobs.

“Please, Hannah,” Beth begs, voice thick with tears.

Hannah doesn’t have the energy to resist when Beth pulls her forward into a hug. She nestles her head in the crook of Beth’s shoulder, her vision blurred with tears.

“It’s not…it’s not fair.”

“I know,” Beth chokes out. Beth rests her cheek, slick with tears of her own, on Hannah’s head. “I know this isn’t fair, Hannah but really, I swear, you’re not missing out on much. Love has…love has ruined me.”

Hannah squeezes her eyes shut, her own choked sobs mirroring her sister’s.

She wishes they weren’t so broken.

“I’m sorry, Hannah. I am. I wish I could change it. But everyone else doesn’t matter in the end. Not really. Not when we have each other.”

“Yeah,” she says dully.

They stay still, locked together in an embrace for hours. Or minutes. Hannah can’t tell. Time has so little meaning, after all. Eventually she extracts herself from her sister’s arms. Beth looks awful, her face red and splotchy. And eyes that look as haunted as that awful night when Sam ran away and everything crumbled and turned to ash.

“Beth, do you….do you think you can stay here tonight? I’m not sure I want to be alone.”

“Of course!” Beth smiles through her tears. “Just don’t steal the blanket like you always do.”

“I won’t,” Hannah says. Her voice is grim, but if her sister notices, she doesn’t say. They crawl into bed. Hannah feels exhausted, like a dirty dishrag wrung dry.

She wants nothing more than to sleep.

But she can’t. Not yet.

Eventually, Beth slips into unconsciousness, her body cool and silent. Hannah waits, too anxious to move, before finally grasping the last of her courage.

She finds her phone and tiptoes out into the hallway. It’s early. There’s no one there yet, thank god.

She pulls out her phone and pulls up Matt’s number.

I need to see you tomorrow night. 10pm. Outside the fancy bar we went to first night we looked for E. It’s urgent. Please xxx

She slips back into her room. She swears, for a split second, Beth’s eyelids twitch, but surely Hannah’s mistaken. Fear has made her paranoid. She slides back into bed and pulls her sister close.

It feels good to hold her.

While she still can.
Chapter End Notes

It's a 2 for 1 vampire special! Here's the reason we took so long: we were writing two chapters at once!
Anyway, we're nearly at the end of it now. The climax fast approaches. What will become of Hannah and Matt's forbidden tryst? Will Sam and Beth meet again? Will Ashley return to herself? Will Cassandra finally be defeated? Stick around to find out!
Once again, I'd like to wholeheartedly thank my co-author, who wrote the vast majority of this chapter. She's as passionate as she is talented, and I am forever grateful for her help!
Leave a comment if you liked it. Thanks for reading!
Fool For Love

Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 2015 song of the same name by Lord Huron.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She can barely stand being in the mansion.

Fooling Beth made Hannah sick to her stomach but she needs her sister off her back while she figures out the best course of action. She’s acutely aware that her unlife is on the line. It’s almost paralysing, and Hannah has to resist the urge to go back to her room and hide underneath her comforter.

A part of her thinks Beth is right. She’s not only gambling with her own life, but with Matt’s. If she’s caught, then perhaps she can plead good behavior, that she’s a model childe gone rogue, but Matt would be made an example of. Just in case any other fledgling is considering flouting the rules for love.

She should leave him alone. But the idea of never seeing him again, of never seeing him smile or to nestle in his arms, is almost too much to bear. There has to be a third way. Somehow she can keep everyone happy. She just has to figure out how.

And she will figure it out.

She’s about to head out of the mansion when Bev steps in front of her, a broad, saccharine smile on her face.

“Going somewhere?”

“Yes as a matter of fact,” Hannah sighs. She doesn’t see the point of goading Bev.

“Well, as much as I’m sure you’re plans were just riveting, you’re going to have to put them on ice. Cassandra wants you.”

Hannah’s stomach flips.

“What?”

“Um, are you deaf as well as blind? She wants to see you,” Bev grins. “In the pit.”

“Oh, okay. Sure.” Hannah tries to act nonchalant, but if the smarmy grin on Beverly’s face is any indication, she’s failed miserably.

“You must have majorly fucked up.” She smirks. “I guess I’ll see you in a month. Have fun!” Bev calls out after her.

Hannah’s never been to the pit. She knows where it is, of course, right in the bowels of the mansion, but she's always made it her business to avoid that miserable place.
She’s not a complete fool. She’s always been afterthought in her sire’s mind. Hannah’s been the happy recipient of Cassandra’s benign neglect. It’s suited Hannah fine, allowed her to flourish without the responsibilities that weigh heavily on her sister. Whenever Cassandra did cast her eye on Hannah, it’s almost never been good. Their first hunt together burns in her mind. It had felt so good back then, but now…

Cassandra stands by the door to the pit, dressed immaculately in a wine red dress and soft black overcoat.

“There you are, little dove,” she says. “I have a surprise for you.”

The door shuts heavily behind them. Hannah hopes it isn’t too obvious how desperate she wants to claw it open again.

“Hannah,” Cassandra says, motioning for Hannah to walk beside her. “We have a lot to discuss.”

Hannah swallows. “We do?”

“Of course! You’re my fledgling, and one of the eldest vampires here. Why wouldn’t we talk?”

Because we never do, Hannah’s mind shrieks.

“Stop looking like you’ve seen a ghost. I told you. I have a surprise. One that I think you, of all my girls, will appreciate.”

Hannah’s chest turns to ice.

“O-oh?”

“Yes!” Right on cue, there’s a heavy knock on the door. The sound reverberates around Hannah’s skill. “Come in.”

The door wrenches open and in comes Ashley, looking thoroughly pleased. She’s not alone, though. With her are two college aged humans, a boy and a girl, struggling against Ashley’s iron grip. It would be comical, these two strong humans struggling against their much smaller captor if it wasn’t so awful.

“Thank you, Ashley,” Cassandra says as the humans are tossed towards the centre of the room. To Hannah’s horror, she sees their hands are tied behind their backs with what Hannah guesses is a thick, old piece of rope. It must chafe something awful. Their mouths are gagged with a simple white cloth, but Hannah can hear them calling out to one another. The boy tries to wriggle towards the girl, eyes desperate as sweat rolls down his face, but Ashley stops him with a boot to the chest.

“Stay,” she growls.

“Cassandra,” Hannah says softly. She tries to clear her mind, wipe away the horror from her consciousness. She doesn’t want Cassandra to read anything into her reaction. “What is this?”

“What does it look like, my dear? It’s a treat, of course.”

Before Hannah can say anything her sire indicates towards Ashley. “Ashley, prepare the boy.”

Ashley grins, a little bit of blood dripping from her teeth as she does.

“Yes, Mother.”
She grabs the boy by his hair, smiling as he lets out a muffled scream of pain, and drags him to the center of the pit, digging her nails into his scalp. He sobs, his tears mingling with the dried remnants of blood and urine on the floor.

“My word,” Cassandra says, walking in a semi-circle around the boy, eyeing him with a languid indifference. “You’ve outdone yourself this time, my sweet girl. What a handsome boy, wouldn’t you say, Hannah?”

“Yes,” Hannah whispers, ashamed. Even now, reduced to cowering on the floor, the boy is still an attractive, broad-shouldered young man, with smooth olive skin and full lips. To his credit, he ignores the three women looming over him and starts to shuffle towards the girl who is cowering in the corner.

“I said, stay,” Ashley snarls, grabbing the boy by his thick hair and twisting until he yelps.

“Young love,” Cassandra sighs, a mocking smile playing on her lips. “Isn’t it so sweet?”

Hannah prays the question is rhetorical. She hopes this is a coincidence, that Cassandra is feeling nostalgic for when they used to hunt together. But there’s something ominous about this scene, especially after her confession to Beth. So she stays silent and hopes her years of feigning interest will serve her well.

The boy glowers at Cassandra, raising himself up to his full height while still on his knees. Ashley is behind him, poised with her fangs out, an attack dog ready to strike but Cassandra seems to be enjoying the show.

“You love her, isn’t it? That girl over there? The snivelling little thing cowering in the corner?”

Through his tears, the boy nods. There’s a tiny spark of defiance in his eyes. Hannah wishes he’d give up, shut down, let it happen and try to block out what pain he can.

“What should I do? Let you both go? Because you love one another? Hmmm? Because that love will fade, as certain as night is to day. You love this girl, I can tell. But the years will dull that love. That pretty face? It’ll be marred by lines, ravished by age. One day you’ll wake up and not even recognise the hag lying next to you. And what then? Hmmm. What will happen to your love then?”

The boy cowers. Hannah can feel his pain, feel his confusion, the burden of defending love all on his broad shoulders.

“What? Speak up, boy. Kids these days don’t know how to talk.”

Before Hannah can even blink, Ashley is brandishing a knife. Even with her honed senses, Hannah missed it. She wills herself to stay silent, even though she hates it, hates that she can’t give the boy even a shred of comfort.
Ashley cuts the boy’s gag. He coughs and splutters, sagging to the floor. Ashley kicks him, laughing as he gasps in pain.

“Well?” Cassandra says. “Hasn’t anyone ever told you not to keep a lady waiting?”

“Let us go,” the boy chokes out. “I don’t care who you are, you crazy bitch, let us go!”

“Ashley, you brought us a fiesty one!” Cassandra claps her hands, positively gleeful. “Isn’t he just, little dove?”

“Yes,” Hannah says dully. “He should know when it’s better to shut his mouth.”

Ashley pouts. “Where’s the fun in that?”


“Now, that’s just rude,” Cassandra chides, speaking as if she’s talking to a child. “You see, we are death. Death incarnate. And tonight, we need the blood of two children. So, unless you want me to find someone to take Lucy’s place? Perhaps she has a sister. Or a mother. A child? I’m sure the three of us could find someone.”

“No!” the boy cries, but his defiance is beginning to wane. He’s clever enough to know he’s at a disadvantage, that his every word will be twisted against him.

“I bet you felt noble, didn’t you? Fighting for your beloved, not bothering to consider her opinion in the matter, not caring whether she wanted to have any agency in this. Maybe she wanted to save you, did you ever think about that? But, oh, that’s not a woman’s place. I forgot, my apologies.”

“That…that’s not…”

“That’s not what? Don’t leave me in suspense!”

“I just wanted to help her,” the boy stutters.

“And in the end, you’ve made everything worse,” Cassandra tutts. “Spare me the excuses of a ‘good man.’ Any man who claims to be one is an even slimer snake than the rest. Don’t you think, Hannah?”

Hannah flinches. She supposes it was silly to hope to be a passive participant in this.

“Yes.”

“I’m not, I’m not trying to cause trouble,” the boy stutters. “We’re just kids, please…”

“Ashley.”

Ashley’s face lights up as her pale hand shoots forward, fingers wrapping around thick hair. She jerks him backwards, exposing his neck towards Cassandra and Hannah. The boy squirms and whimpers, but with his hands bound behind his back he’s as helpless as a newborn lamb.

Somewhere in the corner, she hears the girl, Lucy, cry out, but she’s not the one Hannah’s worried about. Not yet, at least.

Ashley hands Cassandra the knife. Hannah stays still, hopes her face isn’t betraying her as she waits for the blade to piece his jugular.
“You may be a snake, but at least you’re a handsome one,” Cassandra says, voice soft and pleasant again. Leaning forward, she uses tip of the knife to snap open the buttons on his clean white shirt. One button breaks, then another, Cassandra taking her time, enjoying the way the boy flinches everytime knife grazes skin. Finally, after a few long minutes, his shirt falls open, revealing a toned, chiseled chest.

“You can see why I called for you, little dove. Isn’t he just your type? I seem to remember you picking out boys like this, back when we used to hunt together.”

“He’s lovely, yes,” Hannah whispers.

“What do you think, Ashley?”

“Bit too lovely,” Ashley smirks.

“Yes, you have a point. I know…” Cassandra leans forward, drinking in the boy’s horror. “Hold still. This will hurt a lot.”

The boy squeals as the knife pierces skin, Cassandra cutting a thick line across his chest. A tendril of red follows the blade, growing wider and dribbling as the wound opens, spilling blood onto the floor. Not satisfied with half the job done, she slices again, this time across the left side of his chest, the knife sliding through skin and tendon.

The boy sobs in pain. But there’s much, much worse to come. His wounds are deep but still shallow enough to avoid lasting damage.

Hannah can smell the metallic tang of blood hanging heavily in the air. It makes her mouth water, that familiar dark hunger rising up.

“Much better!” Cassandra says talking over the boys sobs. He’s still paralyzed, locked in Ashley’s grip. “Ashley, darling, have a drink and pass him around, will you?”

“Yes, Mother,” Ashley says, twisting the boy around, giggling as she lowers her head to the boy’s chest. A wet, thick slurping sound is punctuated with his screams. Hannah listens as Ashley bites down, the dull crunch of skin and tendon as Ashley’s fangs pierce his flesh. The boy mouths a word over and over, and Hannah blanches when she realizes what the word is.

“Mom,” he mouths. “Mommy, help me.”

Cassandra laughs, the sound high, clear and cold.

“Aw, poor baby. No one can help you now. But, if you would like for your mother to join us…”

The boy hows with grief and pain. He bites down on his lip until it bleeds. Ashley brings her head up from the wound and brushes the boy’s lip with her finger, licking the tiny droplet of blood off the tip. She giggles, then grabs the boy’s hair again, throwing him roughly towards Cassandra. He’s lands heavily on the ground, groaning. Fearfully he looks up into the impossibly old woman’s eyes. She smiles sweetly.

“Would you like this to end? Would you like to die now?”

The boy nods weakly.

“Aw. We can do that, little thing. Just call your little girlfriend over here and you can watch us rip her skin to pieces while you bleed out. How does that sound, Romeo?”
“Why…?” The boy whimpers, wincing as Cassandra picks up him from the floor by his hair and tugs until he’s on his knees in front of her again. “Why are you doing this?”

“We’re demons,” Cassandra whispers in his ear. “We hurt people. Like you, and the rest of your degenerate species. Only difference is that we’re honest about it.” She bites down, sinking her teeth into his neck. The boy lets out another pained cry. His hands tremble as she drinks deep. Hannah watches as tears fall down his face. In the corner, Lucy cries.

Hannah wonders where their families are.

Cassandra lifts up her head after what feels like an eternity, smiling and licking the blood from her lips. She eyes Hannah expectantly as she shoves the boy into Hannah’s lap.

“He’s all yours, little dove,” she says.

The boy looks up at her, his face grey, his eyes watery and red. His bloody lips tremble. Hannah leans in, pausing when her face is beside his ear.

“What’s your name?” she whispers, soft enough that she’s fairly confident Cassandra and Ashley can’t hear her.

“...Oscar,” the boy rasps. His voice is hoarse, broken by screams and sobs.

“Please close your eyes, Oscar,” Hannah whispers, trying to keep her voice soft and kind. Oscar complies, closing his eyes and bracing himself. “Relax, please;” Hannah whispers, and slowly, he does, shoulders drooping, his breath slowing. “I’m so sorry,” she says, caressing his chin and the top of his head, and, in one fluid motion, snapping his neck. The boy’s breath stops, and he goes limp in Hannah’s arms.

Lucy screams.

“Aw, you broke him,” Ashley whines, staring at Oscar’s corpse.

“Don’t worry,” Cassandra says, patting Ashley’s head and not breaking eye contact with Hannah. “His girlfriend will last longer.”

“May I…?”

“Go ahead and get a head start, my sweet girl,” Cassandra says, voice soft but eyes cold. “Hannah here is clearly unwell. I’ll see her out.”

Hannah says nothing, feeling utterly numb as Cassandra tugs her roughly by the wrist to the wrought iron stairs. The look says get out and Hannah is only too happy to comply. Distantly, she can hear Lucy whimpering, crying as Ashley says something soft to her.

She’s just leaving the pit as those whimpers turn to screams.

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It’s times like this he wishes he had a cigarette.

He’s never smoked, of course, but if he did, it would probably take the edge off his nerves. He stands outside the entrance of the wine bar, heart thudding in his chest.

There was no denying the urgency in Hannah’s message, nor the fact that something undeniably weird is going on. He’s never made enemies, but now his car is getting keyed and his sort-of-
girlfriend is sending anxious messages in the night.

That’s not even taking into account his still-missing friend and pending murder charges.

He blows out a breath, gathering his frayed nerves.

*Vino* looks just like he remembers, warm and intimate. He doesn’t stick out like a sore thumb this time, making sure he fits in with the clientele with his dark jacket over jeans an ironed dress shirt. The place is busy, there must be almost eighty or so people here, mostly young couples casting heated looks over the rims of their glasses.

It takes him a few minutes to spot Hannah. She’s sitting with her back to him in a booth, staring down at the table and even though he can’t really see her face in the gloom he can already tell she’s deep in thought.

He approaches. Matt’s about to call out to her when -

“You’re here,” she says, not looking up.

“Uh, yeah,” he says, frowning, slipping into the booth and sitting opposite her. “Good hearing.”

To his surprise, Hannah looks worn, her face so pale it almost has an unnatural, waxen sheen to it. He wonders whether she’s still ill.

“Hey, so, I got your message, obviously. What’s up?”

“Can you come away with me? Tonight?”

Matt leans away, shocked. He wasn’t sure what was going to come out of her mouth, but it wasn’t that.

“Why?”

“I-I can’t tell you, yet,” Hannah says, glancing around. Matt follows her gaze. He can’t see anything suspicious, but her anxiety is rubbing off on him.

“Matt, I know things have been weird lately. But I promise, if you leave with me tonight, I’ll tell explain everything. I swear.”

“Hannah, I can’t,” He says, feeling a little guilty when her face falls. “I have work tomorrow.”

“Matt, you’re a model employee. Skip it!”

“I can’t. I can’t ask Aki to cover for me, not when she’s barely holding it together after her brother died. And my boss won’t be able to get someone in on this late notice, not so soon after New Years.”

“Matt. Please. I - I promise it won’t take long. I’ll drive us somewhere, to a motel. And I-I’ll...tell you everything.”

“Everything,” he frowns. That’s ominous. These last few months have been one strange occurrence after another, and the more he thinks on it the less random the pattern becomes. He wishes he was clever enough to figure it out, to piece the puzzle together but as Emily always teased, he’s all brawn and no brains.

God. He misses her.
“Hannah,” he says slowly. “Something’s going on with you, isn’t it?”

Hannah looks down. Across from her, he sees tears beginning to pool in the corner of her eyes.

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Hannah, it’s okay. I know this is scary. But you have got to tell me what’s going on. I can’t protect you otherwise.”

“Protect me?” She laughs. It’s a harsh, almost unkind, sound.

“Of course!”

“You can’t protect me, Matt.”

“Let me try, at least.”

“No, you can’t,” Hannah says, voice breaking. “You have no idea. God.”

“Then tell me what’s going on. Is there someone after you? Telling you that you can’t see me?”

“Sort of.”

“Sort of? What does that mean?”

“My family…They don’t like outsiders. And I’m worried, if they knew about us, they’d get…mad.”

“Okay,” Matt mutters, a shiver running down his spine. He wonders if she’s involved with the mob, that’ll he wake up tomorrow with a horse head in his bed. “Look, Han. I don’t care what you’re mixed up in. I’ll protect you. I promise.”

“Jesus…”

“What?”

“Just…I don’t deserve you, Matt.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true,” she bursts out, tears sliding down her face. “You don’t get it. You’re good. You’re so good. You’re so good and…I’m not, Matt. I’m bad, I’m a horrible, despicable thing-”

“Hey, don’t say that, please,” he says, reaching across the table and taking her hand. He blanches. The room is warm, but her hands are like ice.

“Hannah! Jesus, what the hell? Are you sick?”

“You could say that,” Hannah says bitterly.

“Do you need a doctor?”

“There’s no cure for this.” she kicks at the floor, frustrated. “I told you, I can’t explain everything to you. Not out in the open like this.”

“Okay,” he says, trying to sound calm. She’s lost. She’s lost and scared and she needs him. He’s not a smart guy, or talented, but he’s strong. He’ll shoulder her load if he has to.
“Okay?”

“Okay,” he repeats. “My parents are working the night shift tonight so I have to take Lily to band practice tomorrow. But I’ll pack a bag and as soon as I finish work we’ll meet back here. We can take my car if you want. Or yours.”

“And we can go? Anywhere?”

“Anywhere.”

There’s a pause. A strange sort-of-yearning expression plays on Hannah’s face.

“You know,” she whispers. “Sometimes I look at you and don’t believe you’re real.”

“Oh,” he mumbles, swallowing thickly. He sets his mouth into a hard line, hoping he doesn’t blurt out something stupid like I love you.

“I’m sorry,” Hannah continues. “I’ve brought this on you. I never wanted you to get mixed up in this. I swear, I, I’m just so, so sorry.”

“Hannah. It’s okay. I’m your guy. Best man in a storm. Or the port in the storm. Look, whatever. If there’s a storm, I’m your guy,” he grins, relieved when Hannah finally sends him a genuine smile. “I know you might be involved in some fucked up shit. But you don’t want to be in it anymore. And that’s good. That’s where I can help. Okay? We’ll work it out. And until then…let me buy you a drink.”

“A drink?” There’s that coy smile again. “Maybe I want to buy you a drink.”

“Well, sorry, I’m an old fashioned guy. And ladies first,” he gets up, giving her cold hand a final squeeze. “Strawberry daiquiri, right?”

She smiles through her tears. “Right.”

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They normally stay up until three in the morning, but Lily’s band practice is early so he calls it a night at one. Hannah throws her arms around him as soon as they’re outside, squeezing him so tight it’s a struggle to breathe.

“Tomorrow. Ten fifteen or so. Outside here.”

“Yeah.”

“Be careful,” she says, pulling away and looking at him seriously. He stares into her dark, dark eyes. “I’m serious. Don’t go anywhere alone. Don’t even get out of your car unless you absolutely have to. As soon as it’s dusk, stay indoors, go straight to work and then meet me here. Okay? Promise.”

“Okay. Don’t worry. You’ve got me a on a leash.”

Normally that would provoke a flirtatious response, but Hannah isn’t even looking at him, running her eyes instead across all the people behind them.

It’s a Friday. People are everywhere, enjoying the unusually warm night. Finally, after a few more searching looks, Hannah lets him go.

“Where did you park?”
“Just over there,” he points to a spot ten feet or so away. There are least six people, a group of 30-somethings milling around and exchanging pleasantries before going home. “Don’t worry. My car is just there and I’ll go straight home.”

“Okay,” she kisses him, sweet and soft. She’s still cool to touch, but when she pulls away he feels all warm and flushed anyway. “I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too.”

They say goodbye, Matt watching Hannah disappear into the night. He’s unsure how to feel, hovering somewhere between being freaked out and thinking Hannah’s being paranoid. He sucks in a breath, shaking his head. His mother always said he worries too much. Whatever he needs to know, he’ll find out tomorrow, and then he and Hannah can go about finding a solution. He’ll pack a bag for a couple of days. Whatever it is, surely it won’t take long for the two of them to come up with a plan and Hannah can come back to Los Angeles with him, safe with the knowledge that, if nothing else, he’ll protect her.

And once he helps Hannah, then he can get back to trying to help Emily.

It’s going to be okay. It has to be.

His thoughts are broken when he hears a girl cry out. Glancing up, he sees the same group of six or so people gathered around something, speaking in hushed, nervous voices. Someone is filming, while a girl has her hands over her mouth.

“Hey,” Matt calls out.

Before he knows it, he’s running up to the group, jostling the onlookers aside, stomach dropping to his knees when he realizes whose car they are gathered around. He whirls around, balling his fists and glaring at the group surrounding him.

“Who did this?”

“Not us,” one guy, who has the decency to put his phone away, says. “We were about to go home when we saw it. Sorry.”

“This is, like, way fucked up,” another adds.

“Fuck,” Matt mutters, hands flying up to grab at his own hair. He turns around, hoping in vain that his eyes are deceiving him, but no, there it is. A message, scrawled across his windscreen, written in a sticky red substance that he prays isn’t blood even though it probably is.

The message is clear and not at all subtle.

F-I-N-A-L

W-A-R-N-I-N-G

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Anxious thoughts buzz and swarm like flies in Jess’s brain. Since her talk with Emily in the living room the other night, Jess has been keeping an eye on Cassandra, and she’s begun to see something in their leader’s eyes that she never had before.

The cold, careful gleam is gone. What remains is something dark and mad, curling and pounding in
the dark maelstrom of her dark blue eyes.

Something is off. Something’s snapped inside Cassandra’s mind, and she’s more aggressive and paranoid than ever. At least three girls have been thrown into the pit for minor offenses in the past three weeks. No longer is Cassandra in her room or study; she’s out killing personally, and messily, something she hasn’t done in years. The other night, she and Ashley dragged in some couple and tortured them personally for hours on end. Cassandra came out hours later, covered in blood and gore and smiling her usual serene smile.

There’s a thickness to the air that Jess hadn’t noticed before. It’s humid and electric, the calm before the storm.

Emily’s right. They need to get the fuck out.

Her fledgling’s in her room, as usual, looking tired as she opens the door. There are bags under her eyes, and the color’s gone from her face.

“Jess?”

“You look like shit. What happened?”

“Nice to see you too,” Emily replies. She looks away. “…I haven’t been sleeping great. I feel watched.”

Something in Emily’s harrowed expression makes the hairs on Jess’s arms stand on end.

“Can I come in? I wanna talk.”

Wordlessly, Emily nods. She stands aside while Jess enters Emily’s room, a sparse, barren place compared to everyone else’s places. Emily’s clearly not bothered to add any personal touches, and left the place feeling like an overpriced hotel room, complete with the mindless abstract art on the walls, put there long before Emily was even born. Emily sits on the bed, watching Jess warily. When Jess opens her mouth to speak, Emily raises her hand to stop her.

“Whisper,” she tells her. “Don’t want anyone eavesdropping.”

Jess complies, fighting the urge to look around for lurking spies or hidden cameras. Just a few weeks ago, she would have found the idea of being watched ridiculous, but now, she’s not so sure.

Cassandra’s paranoia is rubbing off on all of them.

“Em. How much stuff do you have with you?”

“Just the stuff you bought me,” Emily tells her. “Clothes and things.”

“Good. We should try to pack light, I think.”

Emily’s eyes widen.

“Pack?”

“Yeah. You’re right, people are going batshit here. We need to get out before the shit hits the fan.”

“It only took me six months to convince you people here are crazy,” Emily says, a small smile slowly forming on her face.

“Going crazy. It wasn’t always like this.”
“What, did you used to be vegans?”

Jess stifles a laugh while Emily’s smile grows a little more.

“You’re...you’re serious though, right?” Emily asks. “We’re really leaving?”

“Yes.”

Emily stands, and, faster than Jess can blink, pulls her into a fierce hug. The smell of her, sweet and strangely metallic, like old blood on fresh flowers, fills Jess’s nose. Jess breathes it in, surprised by the pleasantness of the combination. Emily buries her head in Jess’s shoulder and lets out a muffled, relieved laugh.

“Oh thank God, thank God,” she almost cries. Instinctively, Jess runs a hand over Emily’s hair. To her surprise, Emily doesn’t back away or shy from the touch.

“We’re not going alone, though,” Jess tells her. “We gotta get the twins too.”

Emily pulls out of the embrace and looks at her.

“How? As much as I’m sure I would enjoy gagging Beth and throwing her in the back of a van, I don’t think that would pan out.”

“We’re not kidnapping them,” Jess says. “Not...exactly.”

Emily raises her eyebrows.

“Oh?”

“We’ll just, you know, invite them on a ‘hunt’ and drive out of town while they’re stuck in the car. They’re not dumb enough to try to jump out once we’re on the freeway.”

“What if they call Cass?”

“They won’t,” Jess says. “Beth never could stand to see me punished.”

“What about Matt and my mom?”

“We’ll pick up your mom from her place, and Matt from his work. Should be able to get to them on the way out of town.”

Emily makes a face.

“Yeah. Just as long as he and Hannah aren’t sitting close together. Actually, maybe we can put Hannah in the trunk.”

“What, are you worried he’ll...”

“Matt’s a good guy. And he’s handsome...and a little dumb. Right up Hannah’s alley.”

“Ah,” Jess says. “Don’t worry, we’ll make sure Hannah doesn’t snack on him.”

“Kick her ass if need be. I would if I could.”

Jess laughs at that.

“Hey now! She’s not so bad, man-eating tendencies aside. She’s a sweetheart, really.”
“A sweetheart who’s murdered how many men at this point?”

“Come on, Em. We’re all hypocrites there.”

Emily opens her mouth, then closes it again. She looks away.

“...Fair.”

“It’ll be okay,” Jess says. “We’ll all be away from this soon. Get a chance to start over somewhere new. Clean slate. Yeah?”

Emily smiles wearing that unusual look of shyness that Jess has grown to adore.

“Yeah.”

“One condition, though,” Jess says. “I’m in charge of our road trip tunes.”

“Oh, God, no.”

“Take it or leave it!” Jess teases.

“I guess you’ve got me in a bind,” Emily huffs. “But you better not play any trash. No Taylor Swift, got it?”

“Endless Taylor Swift. Got it.”

“I hate you.”

“You can’t get enough of me, darling,” Jess says with a wink. Emily rolls her eyes. “Anyway, be ready to peace out by tomorrow night at eight. I’ll come get you.”

Emily nods.

“No one else knows, right?”

“Right.”

“Good,” Emily says. She looks up at Jess, painful sincerity in her eyes.

“Thank you.”

“Of course,” Jess says. *I hope you’re right,* she almost adds. “You wanna go out tonight?”

“Sure,” Emily says.

“Alright, I’ll just go get my things and come right back.”

“Don’t die.”

“I’ll try.”

Jess heads out, trying to move quickly but not so quickly as to draw attention to herself. She’s about halfway to her room when she feels a hand on her shoulder. Jess turns, her muscles tensing, to find an unfortunately familiar face staring her down.

“Good evening, Bev,” Jess nearly spits.
“Jessica, just the girl I was hoping to find,” Bev says. Her mouth splits into a wide grin. “Come with me. Cassandra has an assignment for us.”

As usual, Jack is the last one to leave.

Matt’s closing up shop by himself this time; Aki’s taking time off to mourn her brother. The coffee shop is getting increasingly quiet these days. The stories of disappearances and deaths are scaring folks around here off. Matt cleans off Jack’s table with a rag, trying not to meet the haggard old man’s eyes.

The silence clamps around his chest like a vice.

His hand hovers over the phone in his pocket. Hannah hasn’t been answering his texts all night. He doesn’t want to pester her, but he can’t shake a very, very bad feeling. There’s little in the room to distract him, just the faint sliding sound of his rag across the tabletop.

“But your friend’s not with you.”

Matt doesn’t look at Jack as the old man speaks. A lump forms in his throat.

“Yeah, well, I’m sure she’s just busy,” Matt says, in a tone that he hopes conveys a strong desire to be left alone. Evidently, Jack doesn’t pick up on it.

“You know something, son? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you and her out during the day.”

“I’m sure she’s just a night owl.”

“Think about it, son. Have you ever seen that girl around during the day?”

“I dunno, we don’t really—”

“Has she ever come in uninvited? You ever seen her eaten human food and keep it down?”

“What, do you think she’s a vampire?” Matt asks, a tiny spark of rage edging his words. Jack narrows his eyes.

“Watch your tone, son.”

“Look, Jack, I know you lost your daughter, and I can’t imagine how that hurts. But believing that—”

“Don’t call me mad just because you refuse to believe your own senses. Think about it. Aren’t there things about your friend that just don’t add up? Strange occurrences that you can’t explain?”

He thinks about the bloody warning scrawled across his car.

“Jack…”

“Let me guess: you think I need help.” There’s a challenging glint in the old man’s eyes. Matt shifts his weight, uncomfortable.

“Look, I won’t push anything. I don’t know how you’re feeling, and I can’t really put myself in the shoes of someone who’s lost someone like that. I just don’t want to talk about Hannah. That’s my business. Just drop it, okay?”
Jack sighs heavily, pushing his empty coffee cup into Matt’s free hand.

“You still got that book, right?”

“Yeah,” Matt says.

“Have you read it? It’s important. A man can ward off a vampire if…”

“Garlic, holy water, a stake to the heart, I got it man.”

“If you had read it you would have known garlic, holy water and the like are all lies. Only a gun or a bright light will keep the creature at bay. Christ,” Jack thumps his hand against the counter. “You’re going to be hard to save.”

“Uhhhhhh…Sorry?” Matt mumbles, trying in vain not to roll his eyes. “Look, Jack … I don’t believe in vampires and monsters and stuff that goes bump in the night, okay? So, like, do you want your book back? I can see it means a lot to you.”

“No. Keep it. And be careful. While you still can.”

Matt nods noncommittally and walks back to the counter, washing out the mug and listening to the sound of Jack slowly rising to his feet and walking out the door. The door closes with the soft ring of the bell and Matt lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

Something feels wrong tonight. The air feels slightly thicker, like static is building up. As Matt tidies up he keeps thinking he hears the faint whisper of breath right behind him. When he finally gives in and turns to look, he sees nothing.


By the time he’s finally closed the place up, it’s almost eleven. He’s late. He hopes Hannah won’t be worried. Matt locks the door behind him and hurries to his car, keeping his head down and his hands in his pockets. About halfway there, he hears a voice calling over to him from across the street.

“Excuse me? Sir? Can you help me?”

Matt looks up to see a tall woman in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans standing next to the entrance to a parking garage across the street. She’s in shadow, and Matt can’t make out her features, but she looks slight, and relatively harmless.

“What kind of help, ma’am?”

“My, uh…” The woman rubs the back of her head, evidently embarrassed. “Ugh, sorry to ask you this. My car won’t start and my phone’s dead. Can you help me figure out what’s wrong with it?”

Matt’s not really an expert on cars, but his dad taught him a thing or two about engines, at least enough to get himself out of a basic jam.

“Oh, sure. Where is it?”

“In the garage,” the woman says, gesturing to the entrance. “Third floor.”

Matt does his best to shake off the bad feeling as he follows the woman through the largely empty parking garage, dimly lit by cheap fluorescent lights that flicker as they pass old pickups and minivans. They take the stairwell up to the third floor, Matt trying to scan the woman for any hidden weapons as they go.
He’s losing it, becoming just as paranoid as Jack. She’s just some lady with car trouble, not an assassin.

The woman’s car is the only one on the third floor. It’s also probably the nicest car Matt has ever seen. Sleek and black and aerodynamic, probably made by some fancy foreign designer and costing more than Matt will make in ten lifetimes. The woman walks up to it, putting her hand on the door before turning around, and for the first time, Matt gets a good look at her face.

“Wha...Hannah?”

The woman smiles. There’s little mirth in it.

“Not exactly. Guess Hannah forgot to mention me. I’m a little offended. Usually the whole identical twin thing makes for great first date trivia.” She walks toward him, her eyes dark. “Last chance, Matthew. Stay. Away. From Hannah.”

“No,” Matt says, standing up to his full height. “I don’t know what you and your family are trying to do to her, but I won’t stand by and let it happen.” He walks up to her, puffing out his chest. She looks thin, not terribly muscular, and weaponless. He can take her if need be. “I think you should go.”

The woman rolls her eyes.

“Ugh, for the love of…” She mutters, then looks up at him, her eyes narrowing. A low growl starts in her throat. “...Fine.”

Before Matt can brace himself, she’s already barreled into him, knocking the wind out of him and pinning him to the floor. Matt coughs and splutters as he looks up at the very, very familiar face.

“I can see why she liked you. Shame to rearrange such a pretty face.”

Matt tries to speak, but all that comes out is a weak cough.

“I told you to run,” the woman tells him. “Over and over I told you to just stay away.”

Matt raises an arm to hit her but she slaps it away with all the ease of someone swatting a fly.

“Don’t...you dare...h-hurt her…”

“I’m not hurting her,” the woman growls. Her lips curl back in a snarl, and Matt can see canines that are way too sharp to be real. “You’re hurting her. You’re putting her in danger and what do you care?”

Again, Matt tries to fight her off, but she keeps him pinned with what seems to be very little effort.

“Ugh...she...she’ll...hate you...for this…” Matt gasps. The woman’s expression falters for a fraction of a second.

“...Yeah. She will. But I’d rather she hate me for eternity than lose her.”

Eternity? Matt’s mind is whirring. He stops struggling, going limp as the creature above shifts, hand grasping for something nearby. She glances away, just a second, but it’s enough for him to grab his phone from his pocket.

“What...” Not-Hannah pauses, looming over him with a large rock in her hand. She grins, her long, awful fangs glinting. “Sorry, kid, no 9-1-1 calls.”
“Not gonna call,” he grunts, flashing his phone’s torchlight directly in its eyes.

The creature rears back, shrieking, and it’s the opening he needs. Matt wriggles free, stumbling to his feet.

He takes off running towards where he came. His footsteps echo every time his shoes hit the asphalt. He weaves around an old pickup truck, ducking behind it. Matt chances a look back. But he can’t see the creature anywhere.

He curses under his breath. The stairs are less than five yards away. He doesn’t want to run the other way, back towards...it. The stairs are his only viable escape route. But how can he move without causing a racket?

Fuck it. He’s practically out in the open anyway. He’s not going to be a sitting duck, waiting for that thing to bash in his skull.

Matt takes off racing towards the exit, sprinting so fast his lungs burn. His bad leg cries out for rest and Matt forces through the pain, trying to imagine the end of a football field coming up faster and faster. He’s almost to the end, almost to the touchdown. Almost there. Only few steps and then -

A dull crack. Matt collapses to the the ground, pain scything through him.

He rolls onto his back, coughing. Puts a shaky hand to his head.

Blood. Why is there blood?

“Sorry Matt,” there’s a voice above him. But it sounds funny, like when someone is talking underwater. “I tried to stop this. But you didn’t give me a choice.”

A low, menacing growl pierces the air. He blinks, turning his head towards the noise.

“Beth!”

That voice. He knows that voice. Matt tries to sit up. His head aches with the effort of it.

“Beth, how could you?”

“I did what I had to do. I’ll always do what I have to. Christ, Hannah. I’m trying to protect you!”

“This? You call this protection? I can’t even look at you right now.”

“Don’t you get it? Fuck! Cass will kill you if she ever found this out.”

“Let her try.”

“Hannah, please!”

His vision is spotty, but through the haze he can see the creature standing a yard away. It’s blocked from him, though, by another woman. It takes him a few long seconds to realize that it’s Hannah.

Hannah. Jesus.

He crawls towards her, blinking back the blood that’s oozing into his eyes. She’s in danger. She’s in so much danger. He has to warn her.

“Stay away from him.”
“Hannah,” he rasps.

“Matt, run!” Hannah begs, glancing down at him. Her eyes are wide and desperate, her mouth open, fangs out.

Wait. Fangs?

“Hannah, how are you going to protect him?!”

“I said stay away!”

No no no no no. His head is ringing. He’s woozy from the blow. He’s seeing things. That’s it. That’s all.

“Sis, please -”

“Stay away! Don’t come near us, you hear me? Stay away from us!”

An engine roars. The ground underneath him rumbles with its force. There’s a light too. A light so bright it almost hurts to look towards it.

“Hannah!” A girl calls out. He sees her silhouette, blonde hair almost glowing in the light.

For a long second, Matt can’t hear anything except his own choked breaths.

“....S-Sam?” Hannah whimpers.

“Hannah!” the girl repeats. “Hannah, do you trust me?”

A pause. Matt draws in a ragged breath, trying to stagger to his feet. But before he can blink, he’s been caught. Two firm arms pull him of the ground, as if he weighs nothing, holding him close in a grip so tight it nearly squeezes the air out of him.

One step, then another, and he’s scarcely drawn two breaths from his aching lungs when he’s dumped, like a doll, in the backseat of a car. The last thing he sees before the door is slammed shut is a familiar pair of dark eyes looking down at him.

“Han, get in. Now!”

“I’m coming!”

Matt tries to sit up, even though moving makes his vision swirl and slosh like his head’s full of water. Dimly, he sees Hannah’s blurry image sitting stiffly in the passenger seat. Her blonde companion, meanwhile, slams her foot on the accelerator.

As the car screeches away he looks back and sees the creature who attacked him standing still, staring back at them with a stunned look on its face.

It’s the last thing he sees before he blacks out.

Chapter End Notes
And here she is! Took you long enough, Sam!
In all seriousness, things are finally starting to change in a big way for Sam and Josh.
How will Josh react to seeing his baby sister again, knowing all the things she's done?
How will Hannah react to seeing her brother again, the one she was so sure had died?
How will Matt react to the revelation of his girlfriend's...dental issues?
Stay tuned to find out!
Once again, shout out to my amazing co-writer holeybubushka, an awesome writer who never gives herself enough credit. Pretty much all the Matt/Hannah scenes are hers, and she captures the sweetness of their connection so well. Her mission to convert our readers to Mannah shippers continues in earnest!
As always, leave a comment if you liked it. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 2015 song of the same name by X Ambassadors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Hannah’s mind is a maelstrom of activity, thoughts and opinions battling for dominance as she stares at her former best friend’s tangled mop of blonde hair. She hasn’t aged a day since they were parted, yet still Sam looks older, somehow, wiser. More worn.

When Sam left, Hannah burned away all memory of her. Cassandra said she was a sore that festered and ran and was eventually cleaned away. A diseased, unimportant thing to be scraped off and forgotten about. But seeing her now after all this time, Hannah feels years worth of pent up feelings and regrets breaking through the wall of her repression like water shattering the stone walls of a dam. She fights back tears as Sam looks at her through the corner of her eye.

“I missed you,” is all Sam says.

Hannah bites her lip and nods. No words come to her; none seem fitting enough. There’s a fifty year old hole in her heart that she was only vaguely aware was even there until now. She fights the urge to cry once again as Sam offers her a tiny smile.

In the back of the car, Matt stirs feebly.

“...Where...where have you been...?” Hannah asks.

“There will be time for that,” Sam tells her. “Let’s wait until we get to the safehouse.”

The bright lights of the city give way to quiet, empty suburbs, the dissonant chorus of a few barking dogs the only sound as they drive deep into a quiet, middle-income neighborhood. The house they finally pull up to is a little nicer than the ones around it; fresh blue paint, two stories, and a neat, manicured yard. Sam pulls into the garage, looking around nervously as the door rumbles closed behind them. Hannah guides Matt, still unconscious, out of the car. Sam holds out her arms.

“Can you hand him to me, Han? I’ll put him to bed.”

“I can do it,” Hannah objects. Even knowing that Sam risked her life to save them, she’s still reluctant to leave Matt in the hands of someone else.

“I think you’ll want your hands free in a few minutes,” Sam says with a small smile.

“What?”

“Go into the foyer. End of the hall.”

Reluctantly, Hannah guides Matt into Sam’s arms. She takes him carefully. Matt’s still bleeding, his white jacket collar soaked through with his own blood. Head wounds always looks worse than they are, and Hannah supposes she should be thankful for Beth’s wonky aim as Sam slings Matt’s arm over her shoulders and half-walks, half-carries him out of the garage and into the house.
Filled with trepidation, Hannah follows them.

She follows the hall, through the open doorway into a small but pleasant foyer. Sam leads Matt up the nearby staircase while Hannah’s left standing in the middle of the room, looking around at the prints on the wall, the wooden front door, and the man standing in shadow by the door to what she assumes is a kitchen or a living room. Slowly, the man steps into the dim light, his features impossibly familiar, a face from a lifetime ago.

“...Josh…?”

Josh smiles, the same old smile he had nearly a century ago. He looks the same as he did in every picture from the thirties but his eyes look old and tired, filled with wisdom scraped from the back of terrible hardship. His skin is paler than she remembers, and his eyes are dark.

He’s like her.

There’s a long, heavy pause, the air seeming to get thicker and dryer around them. Hannah’s eyes are glued to Josh, to the miraculous impossibility of Josh, her beloved big brother gone for so, so long.

Suddenly, Josh runs up and grabs her in a tight hug, picking her up and spinning her around the way he did when they were kids. His laugh is the same as it sounded the last time she heard it, decades ago.

“I can’t believe it,” Hannah whimpers. Her throat feels tight and sore. “I can’t believe it…”

“I knew I’d find you,” Josh whispers into her shoulder. “I knew I’d see you again.”

He squeezes her tighter, crying into her shirt, and Hannah can feel heat building up like steam behind her eyes.

“Josh…”

“It’s okay...I’ve found you, it’s okay…”

“Josh,” Hannah says, trying and failing to quell the lump in her throat. “I don’t...you shouldn’t…”

“Hannah, it’s okay…”

“No, it’s not!” Hannah cries. “Josh, I...I’ve hurt people. So many people. I’m not how you remember. I...I’m a monster.”

“Hannah, I know what happened—”

Hannah lets out a loud, choked sob at that.

“No, no, it’s okay!” Josh tells her. “Sam told me what happened. What they did to you. I know it’s not your fault.”

“But—”


“I could have run. I could have left. I could have stood up and said no.”

“Sam did that, and she nearly died. I understand. You were scared. You were trying to keep Beth safe. It’s not your fault you got brainwashed.”
“That...that doesn’t justify...all those people...god, all those people...”

“You can make it right. You can atone.”

“How can I possibly make this right?” Hannah nearly cries. Josh’s persistent smile is frustrating beyond belief. God, doesn’t he get what she did?

“Han, we’re not people. We don’t have an expiration date. That means we have a really, really long time to make the world a less shitty place,” Josh tells her. “And we can start by saving Beth.”

Hannah remembers the pain in her sister’s eyes as they faced off in the carpark. The desperate rage in her voice as Matt tried in vain to reach them.

“She’s in deep, Josh,” Hannah says. “Even worse than I was.”

“I’m sure she’ll rethink things when she sees this old mug,” Josh says with a grin. His fangs look a little too big for his mouth. “Besides, I’d rather risk death by sisterly wrath than leaving her there with that lunatic.”

Hannah pictures Beth alone, facing her sire’s fury with no scapegoat sister for Cassandra to take her rage out on.

Beth has always protected Hannah. Now there’s no one around who will be able to protect Beth.

“You’re right,” Hannah says. “She needs us.”

“Can you bring her here?” Josh asks. “Do you have her number?”

“If I do that, she might bring the rest of the cla—the cult with her.”

“I don’t think she’ll want to bring anyone else,” Sam says, coming down the stairway. Hannah almost jumps at the sound of her voice. Sam’s gotten very, very good at keeping quiet. “She wants this to be between you, her, and me. There’s no guarantee that anyone else who came with her wouldn’t hurt you to get in good with Cassandra. I don’t think she’ll risk it.”

“I don’t know…”

“It’s our only shot,” Josh says. “Unless you plan on storming Cassie’s fort.”

Hannah smiles in spite of herself, imagining Cassandra’s volcanic rage if anyone dared call her ‘Cassie.’

“I’ve missed you Josh.”

“I’ve missed you too,” Josh tells her. He picks her up again and swings her around, laughing with joy. “More than I can ever, ever, say.”

“Josh! Put me down! Put me down!”

He does, eventually. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Sam watching them, a fond, wistful expression on her face. She’s wiping her hands with a cloth. Hannah can taste the faint tang of blood in the air, the scent only partially masked by disinfectant. She pulls away from her brother and sends Sam an anxious look.

“Matt...?” she whispers.
“He’s fine,” Sam assures her. “He’s groggy but alert enough. He just needs to sleep it off.”

“Oh thank god,” Hannah whimpers. She sees her brother and Sam share a look over her shoulder.

“Hey,” Josh says, reaching forward and wrapping an arm around her. She snuggles into his chest and breathes him in. “Tell you what. Let’s just plop down and watch some dumb movie and catch up until sunrise. We can plot at dusk.”

“No horror,” Sam cuts in immediately.

“What’s wrong with horror?! I’ve got all the masterpieces of the genre. Friday the 13th, Halloween, Saw, the Human Centipede …”

“Josh.”

Ugh, fine, nerd,” Josh says, laughing. Hannah nestles closer into her brother’s chest, a bit thrown by Sam and Josh’s easy banter. “We’ll watch some stupid rom-com instead.” He leads them to what Hannah presumes is the living room of whoever’s house this is. “Now come on, Han. I’ve got so much to tell you about.”

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It’s a long way back the mansion.

Beth barely registers the time. The sun is an merciless foe. Even the oldest vamps are not immune, and Beth’s smart enough to know that once you’re trapped outside your fate is effectively sealed. Still, she can’t rouse herself to move any faster, dumbly putting one foot in front of another, stumbling towards home. Shock has made her slow.

She’s playing the scene again and again in her head. How could this have happened? How could she have let her sister get away? Hannah’s committed the ultimate sin, the one transgression from which you don’t come back. Beth has done everything, everything, to keep her safe. Now when the danger is most acute, she’s let her down.

Beth shouldn’t be surprised. She’s always been a disappointment in the end.

Beth will have to make up an excuse for Hannah. If there’s any chance of saving her sister’s life, she has to pretend Hannah’s just lost track of time and is staying out to hide out from the sun. She’ll have to plead carelessness, not insubordination. Or better yet, somehow have no one notice she’s missing at all. It’s a long shot, but it’s the best she has.

Beth’s head hurts. She squeezes her eyes shut, but everytime she does, she sees the scene in front of her. Matt, hurt but alive, Hannah, defiant but scared, and Sam. Sam.

Sam.

She felt her before she saw her. That old connection, reborn anew. Beth thought that primordial bond between them was severed for good. In fact, she thought her oldest fledgling was dead. How else could she not have felt her for nigh on fifty years? But there she was. Radiant, fearless, as always. Seeing her again was the greatest blow of all.

She’s at the gate of the mansion. Finally. Weakly she enters, feeling the first pinpricks of light as the sun begins to rise above the horizon. She’s cutting it fine. If she was out for another twenty minutes, she’d probably start to burn.
She’s not sure she would care if she did.

The hall is empty when she enters, and it’s then she remembers she’s technically on sign-in duty. It’s her job to be back indoors in time to log everyone’s movements, to check that all the other girls are safe. It’s an easier job than normal these days, since all the other girls are quick to comply with Cassandra’s wishes. Her sire has been pitiless of late.

Alex is the only one still around, listlessly staring at her phone. Beth is about to snap at her to go to bed, but she doesn’t get the chance. Before Beth can blink Alex is stammering out an apology and scampering away.

Good. It’s not like she had the energy to talk to her anyway.

She’s about to turn in. She needs to make up a timesheet. She’ll drop the fake document by Cassandra’s draw at dusk and then go about finding Hannah. She has 24 hours to turn this disaster into something salvageable.

“Hey.”

“What?” Beth turns around, feeling slightly relieved when it’s Tamika, and not Amy or Violet or, thankfuck, Bev. Tamika looks knowingly at her.

“You alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“You look like hell.”

“Ugh. Go away, Tamika.”

“No, I mean,” Tamika grabs her hand. The touch is firm but gentle. Beth stops. They’re not close, not like they used to be, when Beth would go out with Tamika and help her find a girl to seduce. But she’s never been an enemy and for that Beth’s always been grateful.

“Just…you look tired. Let me finish the paperwork. I’ll drop it off before dawn.”

“No!” Beth snaps.

“No, I mean. I’ve been in all night. I’ve already checked and everyone has returned home, safe and sound. Everyone.”

Beth doesn’t miss the pleading look in Tamika’s eyes. She stops, and tries to hide her scowl. What’s Tamika playing at? And why isn’t she saying what she means?

“Give me the paperwork and I’ll fill it out,” Tamika repeats, her voice cool and indifferent, but her eyes are alight with an expression Beth can’t quite place.

“Okay.” Beth mumbles. She goes to her room, picks out the sheet of paper from her documents. All the while her mind is remembering all those moments between Hannah and Tamika, how the other vamp took her sister under her wing.

“Everyone is home though,” Beth says, handing it to her, playing along with the other vamp’s charade. “And just so you know, if anyone talks to me about it, I’ll say I checked myself and everyone was back.”

“There’s no need to that, don’t worry, I know everyone is back. So why don’t you go to bed. I have
a feeling you’ve got a big night tomorrow.”

A pause. There’s so much Beth wants to say, but an unspoken gratitude will have to be enough. She’s not sure why she’s so paranoid. But she’s thrived on listening to her instincts, so she may as well keep going now.

“Thanks, Tamika.”

“Any time. And Beth?” Tamika’s eyes darken. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

“Okay.”

The door shuts. Beth sinks into bed, tries not to think about the contempt in her sister’s eyes. Or blonde hair, glistening like a halo in the early-evening light.

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“Fuck’s sake bitch, get up.”

Jess groans, barely having the energy to prise her eyes open. She sits up, bracing her arms against the van’s cold floor and cracks her neck. It takes a few minutes for the horrible reality to sink in that yes, she’s sleeping on the floor of a van, and yes, she’s still stuck inside it with Violet and Bev. Violet’s in the driver’s seat, absentmindedly drumming out a pattern on the steering wheel. Bev lounges in the passenger seat, looking infuriatingly pleased.

“Glad the day is over,” Violet grumbles, her dark eyes meeting Jess’s in the rearview mirror. “I was worried I was going to wake up to you fingering me.”

“Oh please, like I’d be caught dead anywhere near you,” Jess snaps, brushing her sweaty fringe from her forehead. “You couldn’t buy a moldy loaf of bread with your skanky ass.”

“The fuck you say to me, whore?”

“Knock it off,” Bev orders, and Jess actually gapes at her for a second. Has Jess woken up in a parallel universe? Bev is never one to shirk from a fight. Jess waits, thinking it’s a trick and bracing for another insult. Instead, Bev cautiously opens the peephole near the right side of the van. Jess flinches, expecting a small shard of light to penetrate the darkness. Instead Bev pulls away and grins wolfishly.

“It’s dusk, ladies. Our time to shine.”

“Why aren’t you telling me who we’re hunting?” Jess complaints as they bundle out of the van.

“Because,” Bev says. “Where’s the fun in that?”

Jess rolls her eyes. They’ve parked outside an ordinary, double brick single story house. Jess can’t shake the feeling she’s been outside this home before, but then again, she’s spent most of her unlife in the shitty part of town so a bit of deja vu is to be expected.

They’ve parked behind a tree next to the mark’s driveway. Jess peers through the branches. The house is still and as silent as a morgue.

“Any sign of anyone?” Bev asks.

“Not too early to knock,” Bev grins. She nods to Violet, who is sitting in the van. “Violet’s the getaway driver. One blow to the back of the head. We’re to take the human back to the mansion. Alive.”

“Fine,” Jess grumbles, kicking a stray piece of bark from the driveway. Whoever lives here hasn’t bothered to sweep the yard or clean the gutters, giving the house a creepy, abandoned-like feel. “Car trouble story?”

“Works for me,” Bev says, knocking on the door. Jess tenses, wondering what this poor sap has done to Cassandra to warrant all of this.

Bev knocks again.

Nothing.

“Damnit!” Bev snarls, kicking at the door.

“Move over,” Jess snaps, shoving Bev aside. She pounds on the door with all her might. “HELLO? MY FRIEND AND I NEED YOUR HELP! PLEASE!”

A moment passes but nothing. Jess groans, sagging against the door. Great. She’s supposed to be plotting her escape, not wasting precious time doing Cassandra’s bidding.

“We’ve been out here for twenty-four hours,” Bev complains. “When is this idiot coming home?”

“If you would just tell me who it is, then…”

“No,” Bev snarls, and Jess is about to snap back when the older vampire regains her composure. She smirks.

“The human definitely lives here. We just gotta wait a little bit longer.”

“Are you serious?”

“Deadly serious, sweetie,” Bev says, winking. “Don’t worry. Trust me when I say this is all going to be worth it.”

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It’s dusk when Beth wakes from a fitful sleep.

Hannah’s been away for a whole night now, which means Beth has twelve hours left.

Twelve hours to save Hannah.

Her sheets are all twisted around her legs. She must have caught herself up in them while she tossed and turned in the night. She kicks them off herself while staring at the ceiling. The wood-trim design is exquisite, Beth thinks, and dates back to at least the Victorian era. It’s gorgeous, just like the mansion in general, but even in the fraying early evening light she can see the fine wood beginning to decay.

Christ. Beth rubs her eyes. She feels like shit and the night has barely begun. She hopes it’s not a sign of things to come.

Slowly she pushes herself upright. Her mouth is bone dry and her head feels like it’s made of cement and while Beth wishes she could go back to sleep, she needs to get out of here as early as
possible. The quicker she leaves, the less likely it is that she’ll have to answer any awkward questions. Thankfully, she’s almost certain it’s barely dusk. None of the girls are up this early. It’s the perfect opportunity to sneak away.

She’s dressed and ready to get out when—

A loud knock at the door. Beth feels a flash of rage surge through her, hot and thick and definitely not hers.

“Cass?” She whispers.

“Beth,” her sire’s voice is sharp. “Open the door.”

She does. Despite the early hour, Cassandra is immaculately dressed in a light red dress and furs. She looks coldly furious.

“We need to talk.”

They walk beside each other for a while. For a horrible split second Beth thinks she’s being led down to the pit, but thankfully at the stairs Cassandra turns right, walking up towards her room.

Beth’s quiet as they move towards Cassandra’s bedroom. She hasn’t been on the receiving end of her sire’s rage very often, but she knows she’ll make it worse if she starts asking questions.

“Did you really think you could deceive me? Me? After everything we’ve been through?”

“Cass?”

“Don’t act stupid, Beth. It’s not an attractive quality.”

Beth swallows thickly. “I’m sorry, Cassandra, I’m not sure what you’re referring to.”

“Oh. Too many betrayals to remember. I see.”

Beth stays quiet.

“I know,” Cassandra growls, mouth pulled back into an ugly snarl. “I know about your little arrangement with Tamika.”

“What?” Beth stumbles, mind racing. *How? We were alone. How could you have known?*

“I’ve had my suspicions about that one. But she’s always seemed obedient. Everyone’s true colors are coming out now, though. Everyone’s true colors. I’ll deal with Tamika later. You’re the one who has disappointed me more.”

“Cassandra…I’m sorry, I was tired, so I just took her up on her offer, I know I should have - ”

“More lies,” Cassandra snarls. Her voice so sharp it stings. “It’s not the paperwork I care about. Where is your sister?”

Beth freezes.

“Well?”

“I,” Beth’s voice shakes. *Focus. God. Please focus.* “I’m not sure…she…I think she said something about a party on the other side of town. She must have lost track of time and stayed out too late.
She’s probably waiting for nightfall.”

“All very convenient. A little too convenient, for my tastes,” Cassandra says, opening her door, waiting for Beth to trudge into the room before following behind her. “Tell me, Beth. Do you take me for a fool?”

That’s a double-edged question if Beth has ever heard one. “No. Of course not.”

“Then why are you treating me like one? Huh? I’m not some girl that you can discard when you’re done. I’m your sire. I gave you life. I saved you from a miserable existence. And this, this is how you repay me. With lies and betrayal and contempt.”

“No,” Beth protests. She knows she should stay quiet, but the words hurt more than she can stand. “No, Cass, not at all. I….I love you.”

“Love? That’s rich, Beth.” Her sire paces around the room. Beth has never seen her so furious. “If you really loved me, you wouldn’t lie to me.”

“Cass…”

“I know my fledglings, Beth. I know my own blood better than they know themselves. So even though you are too selfish to be honest with me, I still know something is very, very wrong with Hannah.”

“Please,” Beth begs. Tears are slipping down her face and she wipes them away, furious at herself. God, she’s useless. She’s so fucking useless. “Please. Hannah’s confused. But let me fix it.”

“Fix it? Huh? Why should I? When you have shown to be completely incapable of fixing anything?”

Beth chokes back a sob. It’s true. She’s can’t save Hannah. She can’t save Jess. She can’t save Sam. What good is she?

“This is perhaps my fault,” Cass continues. “I’ve been too soft on you. Indulged you for too long. I couldn’t bear to see you suffer. I see now that my kindness has ruined you.”

“Cassandra,” Beth begs, her voice ragged and wet. “I’m sorry. I know I failed you. Please. Please. I’ll do anything. Let me find my sister and bring her back. I swear I can bring her back. I swear.”

“It’s over a man, isn’t it? God, she was always such a soft hearted fool.”

“Yes,” Beth says miserably. There’s no point lying when Cassandra already knows so much. “She’s confused. But I can make it right.”

Cassandra sighs, goes to her desk, picks up a decanter full of blood and pours herself a glass. She stares Beth over the rim, like she’s weighing her up. Beth stands awkwardly, squirming under the scrutiny.

“And the boy? What will you do to him?”

Beth bares her teeth, fangs out.

“I’ll rip his head off.”

“How about you bring him back to the mansion in one piece so we can all have a go?” Cassandra
smiles, although there is no humor to it. Beth’s about to reply when there’s a knock to the door.

“Yes?” Cassandra sounds impatient.

The door slowly opens, and Amy reluctantly walks inside. Her eyes bulge a bit when she sees Beth. Clearly, she expected Cassandra to be alone. She opens her mouth to speak but nothing comes out.

“Well? You can talk openly.”

“I’ve got an update on the mission. The one you ordered yesterday.”

“Ah, yes, the one Jessica is leading. I see.”

Beth flinches. Cassandra catches it.

“Oh, I’m sorry Beth. She’s your fledgling. Should I have asked you first before handing Jess an assignment?”

“No, of course not.”

“Of course not. That’s right,” Cassandra sneers. She indicates towards her desk. “Take a seat. We’re not done. Amy. Follow me outside.”

The door shuts with a bang. Beth sits at the desk, not even bothering to hold back her sobs now that Cassandra is no longer in the room.

She cries. Choked, angry sobs that wrack her whole body. She cries that her cover was blown before she could even begin to save Hannah. She cries because she’s a fool, a damned, snivelling fool who thought she could save everyone.

It doesn’t matter if Hannah hates her for the rest of time. It doesn’t matter. Her safety is all that matters. And she can’t be safe unless Beth betrays her.

And Sam? Sam. How is Sam even alive? She has to keep that from Cassandra, if nothing else. She’ll sacrifice the boy if it means Hannah will be spared. But Sam? How can she leave Sam unscathed?

She shouldn’t care about Sam’s safety. Sam betrayed her, after all. But she does care. The thought of Sam being harmed, after surviving on her own for so long, is too awful to even contemplate.

Beth moves to grab some tissues from the other side of Cassandra’s desk. Her sire isn’t going to appreciate her blubbering. When she reaches over, her fingers graze something that feels like a metal box.

Beth blows her nose, standing up and walking around the other side of the desk. She realizes that as she clumsily reached over to get the tissues she knocked a stack a folders over. Behind them is a little grey box about the size of a jumbo pack of cards. She wouldn’t think anything of it normally, but what catches her eye is the delicate, gold padlock. The box has been recently opened but whoever did it forgot to lock it up again.

Curious, she opens it, gaping at what she finds inside.

USBs. Dozens and dozens of USBs. There must be at least thirty there. Strange. Cassandra likes to pretend she’s a modern vampire, that she doesn’t believe in sticking with the old ways but everyone can see through it. Her sire still uses a typewriter for heaven’s sake, and her room looks like an 1880s
bordello. What on earth is someone like that doing with a box full of USBs?

Before she can think better of it, Beth rummages through it, picking up one from near the bottom of the box before carefully putting everything back to where it was. She sinks back in the chair, shoving her illicit cargo deep into her pocket.

Just in time too. Cassandra storms back in, still looking furious.

“Well. What do we do with you? Huh? You and that sister of yours.”

“Let me fix this. Let me make it right. Please.”


“I will,” Beth says, feeling a flicker of hope in her chest. She gets up, eager to leave her sire’s side. “I promise I’ll bring her back.”

“See that you do, Beth. Because if you both don’t return tonight, I’ll have to bring Hannah in myself. You understand that.”

Beth’s body suddenly feels very, very cold.

“...Yes.”

“Good,” Cassandra sighs, flickering her hand towards the door dismissively.

Beth turns, and is about to scamper away, when—

“I love you too,” Cassandra says, so softly Beth almost doesn’t catch it. “But don’t you dare ever disappoint me like this again.”

“I promise,” Beth rasps, shaking like a leaf as she heads out the door. “I promise.”

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The USB feels heavy in her pocket.

She doesn’t waste any time getting out of the mansion. There’s no point dawdling, not when every second counts. And definitely not when she feels Cass’ eyes, boring into her back, watching her every move.

She needs to get out. She needs to find Hannah before it’s too late.

Still. The curiosity is driving her to distraction.

She’s on her way to Matt’s work. Beth’s texted her sister, but so far there’s been no reply, so the is the best lead she has. It’s unlikely either of them have returned there, but perhaps a co-worker or a friend could let slip a possible location.

But it’s hard to ignore the gaudy, neon sign of a local internet cafe, a block or so away from the carpark where she first confronted Matt.

She’s not sure she’ll get another chance to find out what’s on USB, and in any case, it’s hours before dawn. She can spare ten minutes.
She parks across the road, slouching into the store. Thankfully it’s not too busy, save for about ten or so young men playing some of multiplayer computer game in the corner. She smiles tersely at the cashier, pays for a half-hour session before taking a seat as far away from everyone as she can.

“Whatcha got for me, Cass?” She mumbles, frowning as she attaches the USB. There’s a gold insignia on the front with the letter C on it, and just below, a carving that says 1992.

She opens up the hard drive. All she sees is twelve files. One file for every month.

*What on earth?* Beth thinks, trying to ignore the queasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She clicks on the first. Inside there are thirteen different files. Her stomach clenches when she sees they’re named.


One for every vamp in the household.

With a growing sense of trepidation, she clicks on Hannah’s folder. In it are dozens of videos. Dozens. As if a fever has seized her, Beth sits forward, staring at the screen like she can’t quite believe it.

One video. The angle is from above, right above Hannah’s bed, the camera nestled somewhere in the ceiling. Her sister is getting ready to go out, humming along to some godawful Bryan Adams song. She’s crimping her hair, spending long minutes staring in the mirror and Beth realizes with a jolt that the timeline is true, that Beth hasn’t see that hairstyle on her sister in over two decades.

Another video. Her sister and Beth are lying on top of Hannah’s bed, watching a movie, the pair of them sucking on bloodiscles. After watching, sickened but amazed for a few moments, Beth moves on, clicking on another video, this time she sees her sister is asleep. Then another. This time she fast forwards past her sister sleeping, sees Tamika come into the room, the pair of them laughing and giggling about nothing of note except that Beth can hear every goddamn word, crystal clear.

No. No. No. This can’t be. No.

She clicks on another video. Beverly this time. She’s just as boring on film as she is in the flesh, but once again, Beth can hear and see everything from the vantage point of the camera hidden in the ceiling. She clicks on Amy’s folder. Then on Wren’s Sophiée’s Violet’s.

Videos. Every little moment recorded, every private conversation spied on.

She feels like she might be sick. She thinks she’s stared at the screen for hours, but when she glances up, scarcely ten minutes has passed by.

She sucks in an unnecessary breath, fingers hovering over the mousepad. She can’t look, scared that if she does she’ll embarrass herself by throwing up all over the keyboard.

But reluctantly, painfully, she clicks on her own folder. Just like everyone else, there are dozens of videos.

Swallowing back bile, she clicks on one, sees her sleeping face as she tosses and turns under her covers. She clicks out. Another video. This time she’s not alone. Jess is nestled in her arms, asleep, completely ignorant that their private moment, their sliver of domestic bliss is being spied upon.

She can’t pull herself away. She clicks on another video, this time one that must have taken place...
early in May.

She’s not in her bed. Beth frowns, fastforwarding, noticing how even though nothing is happening, the camera still rolls, recording every minute, mundane detail.

Beth’s door clatters open. She sees herself, her younger self, laughing and running a hand through her slicked back hair as she enters her room, Jess right behind her.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this about a ballet but that was…. actually kinda fun?” her former self grins.

“See?” Jess teases, closing the door behind her. “Told you. I’m right. As always.”

Beth frowns, staring at the screen. Ballet? She and Jess went to the ballet?

“The main girl, the one who played Giselle, she was brilliant. That opening dance was actually...pretty cool.”

“I played the role when I was a kid.”

“You did?” Beth—the other Beth, asks, an open, tender expression on her face.

“Yeah,” Jess smiles wistfully. “I had to stop dancing when I hit puberty. My father didn’t think it was proper. His, um. Let’s just say, his disapproval didn’t stop me from loving it. It was the only thing I did back then that made me feel free.”

“Hey,” her former self says earnestly, moving forward and clasping Jess by the hands. The intimacy makes Beth squirm in her seat, glancing around the cafe, hoping no one can see. “You can dance again. I’ll organise it. It may not be the Los Angeles Ballet, but I’ll get you up in lights.”

“Oh really?” Jess’ smile is wider now, eyes bright against the gloom. Beth stares at the screen, aghast, as memories of this night begin to flood back. “How about before that I give your own, private show?”

“Oh?” Beth, god, herself, smirks. “I’d like that.”

“Nu uh uh,” Jess teases, pushing her younger self away until she falls back onto the bed. Her former self is right below the camera, and while she can’t see her own expression, she can see Jess’, which is sickening enough.

“You can look, honey, but you can’t touch. Not until I say so.”

Jess starts to move, swaying her hips suggestively, slowly approaching Beth with a predatory grin on her face as she starts to unbutton her simple white dress when -

Beth snaps her laptop closed. Some of the other patrons look up, startled. Beth mumbles an excuse under her breath and grabs her laptop under her arm, running into the bathroom. She locks the door behind her and lays the computer down on the cheap tile floor as she lurches over to the toilet, barely making it before a wave of nausea overcomes her, and she vomits.

By the time her stomach is painfully empty, she’s still woozy and she can feel the beginnings of a migraine. She stands up and the world spins around her.

All this time. All this time.

A loud knock at the door nearly makes her jump out of her skin.
“Miss? Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Beth manages. “I’m fine…”

“Are you sure? I—”

“I said I’m fine,” Beth snaps. “Fuck off before you get hurt.”

She hears a sigh, and then footsteps fading into the distance. Beth sinks to the cool floor of the bathroom, listening to the buzz of the fluorescent lights on the ceiling. She expects to cry, or to scream, but nothing comes. Only wave after wave of dull, dry nausea like waves of dust crashing against the walls of her stomach.

Eventually, she flushes her bloody puke down the toilet, swallowing as she picks up her laptop, trying to look casual as she walks out of the room and into the main cafe, grabbing her stuff absentmindedly and walking in a daze toward Matt’s workplace. She’s within ten feet of the entrance when she hears her cell phone chime in the loud, familiar tone that Hannah programmed to only sound when her texts came through.

A simple suburban address, not far from her location, greets her. Underneath is a message. Don’t want to fight. Just talk. Come alone. Please. Love you, Hannah.

A life line. Finally, finally, something is going her way tonight. Beth squares her shoulders, heading back to her car. She needs to clear her head, find Hannah and Sam then….well.

The three of them will have to take it from there.

She turns on the ignition. Faintly, she hears a grunt and a curse from somewhere behind her. She glances at her rearview mirror, sees an old man shuffling towards a nearby car. Beth snorts. Even the homeless know how to steal cars these days.

It takes about twenty minutes but soon Beth is out of the slums and driving into a pleasant middle class suburb. If she had a heart it would be beating right out of her chest when she pulls up close to the driveway of the address Hannah gave her.

Hannah is in there. Even if she wasn’t given the address, Beth can just feel that she is, deep inside in her bones. And if Hannah’s there, Sam’s there too.

Sam.

Beth almost wants to laugh. God, she spent fifty years trying to salve the pain of Sam’s escape. She did her best to wish her fledgling away, ingratiating herself even further with Cassandra, becoming her sire’s perfect pet. She sought out mindless sex, fucking as many women as she could, discarding them when she was done. But always in the back of her mind searching, yearning, for someone to piece her heart back together.

She thought she could have that happiness with Jess. But even though Jess is wonderful and lively and perfect in so many ways, the longer they stayed together, the more her other fledgling loomed over them both.

God. All that effort to forget Sam, and now she’s here. Right back to where Beth started. It would be funny if it didn’t hurt so much.

Beth’s pulled from her thoughts by a bright light. She blinks, the sharpness of it hurting her eyes a little. In her rearview mirror she sees a weathered car pull up a little way behind her.
She shivers. Was she followed? Is one of Cassandra’s goons about to step out, ready for a blood-soaked party?

No. The car door opens and a vaguely familiar man steps out. He’s haggard and old, with dirty clothes and an odd lump under the back of his coat, like an oversized package. Beth hurriedly gets out of the car, hoping he’ll ignore her. But no, he staggers up to her, stopping a few metres away. He stares into Beth’s eyes with his own beady, time-damaged ones.

“Can I help you?” Beth asks, trying and failing to keep the impatience out of her voice.

“You’re her sister, ain’t you?” the old man rasps. “Hannah Washington’s sister.”

Beth grits her teeth and snarls.

“What’s it to you?”

“A boy I know got real close to your sister. Few months later he’s gone without a trace.” His ruined eyes gleam. “I don’t think that’s a coincidence.”

“Stranger things happen,” Beth says calmly. Then—


“You’d know that better than I would,” the old man says. “Bet you know what happened to a lot of missing folks around here.” Beth is about to shove past him when he raises something from under his coat. The mouth of some sinister device connected to a long hose running back to whatever it is he has under his coat. Beth sniffs the air. The sharp smell of propane gas hits her nostrils and she lurches back. Whoever this lunatic is, he’s armed with a flamethrower. “Alexandra Fiddler,” he says. “That name ring a bell?”

“Never heard of her,” Beth lies.

“Now, that’s real odd, seeing as you’re the one who took her,” the old man growls. “Best not to lie, demon. I’ve seen what fire does to your kind.

Kind?

Beth’s eyes narrow. She tries not to glance towards the house, not wanting this lunatic to know where she’s going.

“Answer my question, hellspawn,” he grunts.

She does not have time for this.

“Why don’t you stalk some other girl, creep,” she says, then takes off at a sprint.

He howls in fury. Before Beth can bink, a plume of flames bursts forward. The heat makes her stagger back, slipping on the gravel below.

“Begone, devil!” he shrieks again, pointing the flamethrower directly at her.

Beth stumbles, hitting the curb with the back of her foot, falling back onto the grass. The human strides forward, unleashing another fireball towards her.

Beth twists, rolling to her left, the damp grass sticking to her cheek. A gust heat blows past her, the flames singeing her hair. She scrambles to her feet, staggering away as flames lick her cheek. A
white hot stroke of pain cuts across her face, then fades, the wound already healing. Beth wastes no
time, running at full speed, the man’s mad howling echoing in her ears. She’s so focused on losing
him that she almost speeds right past the house with the address Hannah gave her. She pivots, the
momentum nearly pitching her onto the asphalt, and runs up to the house’s pleasant, nondescript
front door. It looks like a suburban house you’d find anywhere in L.A. Two stories, muted colors,
clay red pipe tile roof, and big, modern windows catching the pale yellow glow of the streetlamps.
Upon closer inspection, she sees that all the windows in view are covered from the inside, shutters
drawn.

Almost no sunlight could get through them.

Beth knocks, swallowing her nerves as she hears heavy footsteps and muttered curses behind her.

No one answers the door. Beth knocks louder.

From behind her, the man charges, a vibrant plume of flame snaking toward Beth like some ungodly
serpent, catching in the manicured lawn and leaving waves of fire in the burning grass. Beth goes on
the offensive, charging the man before he can hit her with another jet of fire. She hits him in the
collarbone, listening to a satisfying crunch as the man’s breath hitches. She drives her shoulder into
his sundered collar, sending them both toppling to the ground. Beth’s about to rip out his throat when
she feels a razor-sharp pain in her chest. She screams, falling away from the man onto her back. The
world spins, the moon shining too bright as she slowly gets into a shaky sitting position. Lodged into
her chest, a hair’s breadth away from her heart, is a smooth wooden stake. Gingerly, she grabs it by
the base and pulls, feeling another burst of pain as she pries the stake from her chest, taking a good
chunk of flesh, blood and muscle with it. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the old man getting to
his feet. Beth staggers to her feet and limps to the door, pounding on it, screaming as much as her
punctured lung would allow.

“LET ME IN! LET ME IN FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!”

She’s about to scream again when the door flies open, sending her stumbling back in surprise.
Hannah, eyes wide and fearful, grabs her by the shoulders and hugs her, briefly.

“Come in,” she says, and pulls her through the threshold, slamming the door behind them just as
Beth’s would-be killer is making his way to the door. Beth turns to the door and bares her fangs,
waiting for him to just burn the damn door down and charge in like he’s in a movie.

“You try to come in here, and I’ll call the cops,” Hannah says. It’s an absurd threat, but still, none of
them want attention drawn to them right now.

“I’ll dust you all before they can cuff me,” the old man snarls.

“Hard to question a pile of dust,” comes an oddly familiar voice from behind them. Beth turns and
feels herself nearly die again from shock.

Josh.

Josh.

He’s wearing that same carefree smile he’d show her and Hannah back when they were human, right
before he’d tell them some awful joke to cheer them up. It’s like someone cut him out of a family
photo and brought him to life. He looks a little absurd in modern clothing, his tailored jackets and
fine-spun shirts replaced with a holey flannel shirt and faded jeans.

“Little bird told me you’re looking for your daughter,” Josh continues. “If you play nice, we can take
you to her."

There’s a short silence as Beth stares at the impossibly solid ghost of her brother and the man on the other side of the door pauses in his assault.

"...I can’t trust the word of devils," the old man says. "You’re all liars."

"Maybe. But we’re not stupid. You’ve got us in a bind here. Us helping you is the only way we get out of this intact. And I’m guessing you need a little help taking down a big old cabal of lady vamps by yourself."

"Why would you have any interest in helping me?"

"Because we want that cult gone too," Hannah says, and Beth shudders. Facing the clan means facing Cassandra. No one has ever been stupid enough to try that.

Until now, anyway.

"If I come in, you’ll overpower me," the old man says. "Three against one."

"Four, actually," Hannah corrects him. "But you’d burn down the house with you. Fighting means everyone loses."

"I don’t negotiate with devils."

"Then leave," Hannah says. "You don’t lose anything if you leave."

"But if you stay, we can help each other," Josh says.

Another long pause. Beth closes her eyes and taken in a breath, feeling the air burn down her protesting throat. Maybe this is all a dream, and she’ll wake up tomorrow in the mansion and everything will be normal.

"You got Matt in there?" the old man asks.

"...Yes," Hannah sighs.

"Give me some proof he’s alive. Then we’ll talk."

Suddenly, Hannah moves to the door.

"Come on in. If you try anything, we’ll paint the walls red."

The door opens and the old man enters, his eyes alight with cold fire. He considers his weapons, and sighs.

"Take me to him."

Hannah leads the man upstairs, leaving Beth alone with her dead big brother. Wordlessly, he wraps her in a bear hug, planting a cold kiss to her forehead.

Before she fully processes what’s happening, Beth is crying.

"Hey," Josh whispers into her hair. "It’s okay. I got you. It’s gonna be alright."

"Josh," Beth murmurs through her tears. "You...you can’t...I..."
“Shhh,” Josh whispers. Beth hiccups, salt in her eyes, a rock in her throat. She wants to say something, anything. What happened, I missed you, I thought you were dead. Nothing makes it to her tongue, nothing leaves her mouth but more sobs, each mone more taxing than the last.

Josh comforts her the way he did when they were kids, when she’d fallen and skinned her knee or when her parents had shunned them both for being the disappointments they were. His hand runs over her hair, slow and rhythmic as he whispers soothing nonsense. Upstairs, she hears Hannah and the old man talking in hushed voices. Distantly, she hears footsteps down the hall. She stiffens.

“Beth.” Sam’s voice is soft, hesitant. Beth buries her head in Josh’s shoulder. She can’t look at her. She nuzzles deeper into Josh’s chest, squeezing her eyes shut but the tears fall regardless.

“Jesus, Beth, you’re hurt,” Sam says. Now that they’re so close she can feel Sam’s presence again, feel her fledgling’s anxiety, raw and potent, right in her chest. Beth flinches, moving closer to Josh. Feelings the ghost of Sam’s emotions clattering around inside her hurts more than even the gaping chest wound.

“I’m just thankful flamethrower dude’s aim was off,” Josh says.

“She’ll need blood, Josh. Lots of blood.”

“No worries, I got us covered. I went out and got two weeks’ worth of blood. Or enough at least to feed two hungry sisters for a couple of days.”

“You used to eat more than me,” Beth mumbles, despite herself, wanting to keep Josh talking, hoping it will convince her addled brain he’s real.

Josh chuckles.

“I guess so. Things change though, sis. Come on.” He leads her over to a couch. She slumps down, relieved. She’s not sure how long her legs were going to hold out.

“Sam, can you go get us some food? It’s in the second fridge, down the hall. Where I told you Vincente kept all his weird European beer.”

Beth glances over. Sam’s standing awkwardly near the kitchen. They lock eyes for a second before Beth pulls away. The last few decades have taken its toll, but even so, she looks more gorgeous than Beth remembers.

The stairs creek. She looks up, sees the old man and her sister returning from upstairs.

“Satisfied?” Sam asks.

“The bar is low,” he growls. He shifts, glowering at them. “The boy is alive, that’s true.”

“We won’t let anything happen to him, I promise,” Hannah says.

“How about you put the arsenal down and we’ll talk,” Sam asserts.

“You want me to disarm? Are you mad, devil spawn?”

“Don’t call her that,” Hannah snaps.

“I’ll call her what I want, she-devil.”
“Alright, alright,” Josh sighs, standing up. “Guys, this is not what I want. Okay. Look. Angry old
dude, I get it. I wouldn’t trust us either. So, how about you go upstairs and scope the place out. We
won’t take your weapons. In a couple of hours we’ll talk. You want the cult dead, we want the cult
dead. But right now, I want to fix the hole in my sister’s chest. The hole you put there. And notice
how we are not killing you for that.”

“Is that a threat?”

“An observation.”

“Fine,” the man growls, finally. “You have twelve hours to convince me not to burn you all to a
crisp.”

He stalks away, grumbling under his breath. Her brother grins at his retreating figure.

“I like him.”

“Of course you do,” Sam scoffs.

“What? Sammy, he’s a total badass. When he’s not trying to murder my sister. Anyway, gimme the
good stuff” He takes a jug full of blood from Sam’s hand. Beth’s stomach twists and aches at the
sight of it. “Open up Beth.”

“Ugh,” Beth groans, almost gagging as the blood slides down her throat. It’s sharp and sour, nothing
like how succulent human blood normally tastes. “What the fuck? Did you get this from a sick
human?”

Hannah’s about to open her mouth, but Josh talks over her.

“Yeah, uh, we can only steal lousy blood. But it’ll do the job.”

“Ugh. Gross, Josh. This tastes like ass.”

“One, I really doubt that, and two, it doesn’t matter how it tastes, it’ll help you heal. ‘Cause you look
like shit.”

“Fuck you, Josh.”

“That’s the spirit,” Josh smirks, crouching down in front of her. His hazel eyes are alight with
mischief. ‘I knew my sister was in there.’

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They wait about an hour, Jess playing with her phone and wishing Cassandra allowed them to do
more with them than text the clan members and play Tetris, when a car pulls up into the garage of
this mystery person’s house. A middle-aged woman gets out, arms full of grocery bags, and makes
her way slowly to the door.


Jess would rather take a trip to the surface of the sun than sit around and take orders from Bev, but
she sighs and heads out of the van, wanting nothing more than to get this over with. Whoever this
lady is, she must be something special to warrant all this guerilla stealth bullshit.

“Ma’am? Excuse me?” Jess calls. The woman looks up. Her face is lined with wrinkles, crows’ feet
creasing as she narrows her eyes. Her face bears the wariness of someone used to rough
“Can I use your phone? Mine’s dead and I need to call a Lyft,” Jess tells her, offering a little nervous laugh. The woman gives her a hesitant look, then sighs and puts down her groceries, reaching into her pocket for her phone. Distantly, Jess hears Bev and Violet quietly flitting to either side of the driveway. Jess grins warmly as the woman unlocks her phone and hands it to her. It fades as soon as she sees the girl in the background image. A young woman with short black hair and a knowing smirk on her achingly familiar face.

“Emily,” Jess blurts out before she can stop herself. Emily’s mother backs up against her car.

“How do you know my daughter?”

Out of the corner of Jess’s eye, she sees Violet emerging from behind the car, eyes dark and hungry.

“No!” Jess shouts, running to stop her when she feels a pair of arms wrap around her stomach and tug her back, crushing down on her diaphragm. She coughs and sputters, struggling in Bev’s iron grip. Emily’s mother doesn’t make it five feet before Violet pounces, landing a quick blow to the back of her head and watching her drop. A dull crunch sounds as the woman’s nose meets the pavement. Violet chuckles, dragging her unconscious body toward the van. Bev’s harsh laughter fills Jess’s ears.

“What the fuck?!” Jess gasps. “Bev, what the fuck?!"

“This was a test, honey,” Bev purrs. “And guess what? You flunked.”

Jess elbows Bev in the gut, breaking away from her grip and using the momentum of her escape to land a punch to the brow. Bev staggers back, cursing and putting a hand to what will likely be a nice new shiner on her eye in the next few hours.

“You fucking cunt,” Bev snarls. “I can’t wait to see you burn.” She goes low, ramming Jess in the stomach with her head and shoulders and knocking her back. Jess elbows Bev in the back and kicks her away, then charges forward, jabbing her in the jaw and chest. Bev backhands her, hard, and spits a wad of her own blood onto Jess’s face.

“You’re such a bitch, you know that?” Jess mutters.

“Least she’s not a traitor,” comes Violet’s voice from behind. Jess barely has time to turn around before the full weight of Violet’s elbow slams into her temple. A ringing pain echoes through her skull. She can faintly hear the shrill laughter of her captors before she drops to the pavement and everything goes black.

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It’s quiet when Matt wakes up.

He’s been sleeping for god-knows-how long. He’s lost long stretches of time, waking up fitfully, staring up the unfamiliar ceiling before his tiredness overwhelmed him. Sometimes he wasn’t alone. At least once he remembers coming to and seeing a pretty blonde girl looking down at him, humming soothingly as she drags a cool cloth across his skin.

Matt groans, reaching up and fingering the bandage wrapped around his head. Nope, he didn’t dream about the headwound, but at least it feels like he’s stopped bleeding. His head still aches
something awful though, along with the rest of him. He feels a bit like he’s endured a dozen gruelling training sessions without a break in between.

He takes stock of his situation. He’s safe, for now, at least. His shirt and jacket are laid out on a chair near an ornate-looking vanity. His clothes aren’t caked in blood, which means someone bothered to wash them for him.

This is a weird way to treat a prisoner.

Matt throws his shirt on, a bit embarrassed at being shirtless in some strangers home. Whoever has kidnapped him has money. It’s the fanciest room he’s ever been in, with huge bed and refined-looking wallpaper. He hopes they aren’t going to ask his family for a ransom, because compared to this guy, his family don’t own shit.

The ache in his head has subsided a bit and now he’s just hungry. There’s a pizza box next to his bedside table, and while a small part of him is worried it’s poisoned, he’s too famished to care, opening the box and eating two slices in less than a minute. He’s slobbering, and probably dropping bits of processed meat on his clean shirt but he doesn’t give a damn. He needs to build up his strength so he can get the hell out of here.

Voices. Matt slows. He can’t make out the words, but someone is laughing, joyously. The voice is vaguely familiar.

Hannah? It sounds like Hannah. Maybe. He’s not sure. He’s not sure of anything anymore.

The windows are jammed shut. He senses he’s up at least on the second floor of a building. It’s probably a long way down, but if he wanted he thinks he could break the window and jump to safety. But leaving would mean he wouldn’t get any answers. He still doesn’t know what that thing that attacked him was, doesn’t know if Hannah is still in danger.

Hannah.

He can’t leave without her.

“Hey,” he yells at the top of his voice, slamming his fist against the door. “Hey! Let me out. Hey. Let me out, damn it!”

The voices below him stop.

“Hey,” he yells, banging on the door even harder. “I know you can hear me. Open the freaking door.”

No one responds, which just pisses Matt off more. He was one bad injury away from the NFL. No one is going to keep him locked away. Matt squares his shoulders, ready to bash the door down when it opens. Matt peers down and sees a familiar blonde girl looking up at him anxiously.

“Hey. Are you alright? Do you need anything?”

“Some freaking answers. Where the hell am I?”

“Somewhere safe,” the girl says softly, glancing down the hall.

“Where’s my phone? I couldn’t find it.”

“It’s downstairs.”
Matt tries to move past her, but the girl reaches over and puts a cool hand on his forearm. Her grip is like iron. He narrows his eyes. He’s double the girl’s size. He could shove her aside easily, but then again the past day or so has taught him that looks can be deceiving.

“I want my phone. I need to go. You can’t keep me here.”

“Matt, it’s not safe. You can’t leave here just yet. Why don’t you come back with me, and -”

“How do you know my name?” he bellows, balling his fists. “Are you one of them? Like that thing that attacked me?”

“Matt—”

“Where the hell am I? What happened? Where’s the rest of my stuff? And where is Ha-”

“Matt?”

Matt starts. Hannah’s a few feet away from them down the hall. He didn’t hear her approach them at all, no footsteps, no intake of breath, nothing.

“Hey,” he says, relieved. He didn’t realize how anxious he was about Hannah’s safety until now.

“I’ll take it from here,” Hannah says to the other girl.

The girl doesn’t look convinced.

“Han, are you sure…”

“Sam, I got this.”

“Okay,” Sam still looks skeptical, sending Matt a warning look, as if he’s the wronged party.

Hannah indicates back towards his room.

“Please.”

They go back inside, Hannah hanging around the door as if afraid he’s about to bolt. Matt shuffles, shoving his hands in his pockets. The air feels thick with unshared secrets. He hates it. Hates that they’re standing apart from one other, gawping at each other like strangers. As if they haven’t spent the last five months practically in each other’s laps.

“Han,” Matt says, breaking the uneasy silence. “What the hell is going on?”

“I,” Hannah throws up her hands. “I barely even know where to start.”

“Okay, how about the beginning. Or, wait. No. That thing. That thing that attacked me. It looked...she looked just like you.”

“Of course she does. She’s my sister. My...baby sister.”

“That’s...not like any baby I’ve ever seen,” he jokes weakly, before the full weight of what Hannah actually said hits him with a grim force. “Wait, she’s your sister? That thing is your sister. But she’s a monster.”

“Yes,” Hannah whispers. “We are.”
“No. No. No. No. You gotta be shitting me here,” He babbles. He can’t keep still, so he starts to pace around the room, Hannah’s words getting all jumbled in his mind. “But she was a thing, with fangs and was like, crazy strong and, you’re like, you can’t be like that, there’s no way…”

“I’m sorry,” she already sounds on the verge of tears. “I’m so, so, sorry.”

“What? Are you saying, you’re a…I can’t even say it…”

“Matt, maybe you should sit down…”

“Like hell I’m going to sit down,” he snarls, not even a little sorry when Hannah flinches. “You’re telling me this whole time you’ve been a monster? A…”

“Vampire?” Hannah laughs. It’s a hollow sound. “Yes. We are. I am. God. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry you had to find out like this.”

“How exactly was I going to find out?” He sounds a little hysterical. Probably because he is. His mind is racing so fast he can barely keep up with his own thoughts. This is absurd. A joke. Hannah’s going to start laughing, and he’s going to sulk, and then she’s going to wrap those long arms around him and kiss the pout right off his face.

“This can’t be right...this is some kind of joke?”

“Matt, you know it’s true. Why do you think we’ve never been out during the day? Why could I barely keep your mom’s food down? And…” Matt scoffs, turns his back on her, trying to block her out, but she just keeps talking, her voice high and desperate. “You know I’m strong. And fast. No… no human could have saved you from my sister.”

He shivers. He leans down and grabs his freshly washed jacket and pulls it on, wishing it could shield him from the truth. The truth, the crazy truth, that now seems undeniable.

“When were you going to tell me?” he says. His voice sounds colder than he means it to be.

“Last night. Remember? No, Matt I mean it,” she tries to reach for his hands but he flinches, stepping away from her. She looks hurt, but she keeps her distance. “I couldn’t tell you at Vino, okay, not in front of a whole room of humans. Not when I was worried that I was being followed. I needed to get you alone. And that was the plan. Until Beth crashed it.”

“Followed? Who… who was going to follow you?”

“The clan. Or cult. The cult. The cult I was a part of…”

“So… you...and your sister...are part of a cult. A vampire cult.”

“Yes,” Hannah whimpers.


“I know this is a lot, but—”

“I can’t...Jack warned me. He said vampires…kill and eat people.”

“Yes.”

“Do you?”
“...Yes.”
“What the fuck,” he gasps, backing away, his blood running cold when he’s realizes he’s alone with an undead creature. “Were you going to kill me?”

“I wanted to,” Hannah says, tears starting to slide down her face. “At the beginning.”

“Oh my god…”

“I thought you were just a meal, until I got to know you. Until I saw how good and decent and kind you are. Matt, please! Please listen. I didn’t know how wrong I was. My whole life I was taught that there was only one way to be a vampire. That humans were...like cattle. And I was so, so stupid, because I believed all of it. I believed every single word. Until I met you. Until I fell in lo–”

“Don’t. Don’t you say that word, goddamnit,” he snarls. Half his mind is saying that maybe he shouldn’t be talking like this to a self-confessed mass murderer, but the other is too enraged to care.

“How can you say stuff like that? How could you ever love? You’re a monster.”

“I know,” Hannah sobs. Matt wants to hit something, punch something, slam his fist against a wall until his knuckles bleed, but a small, fucked up part of him still wants to take Hannah into his arms.

“I know. I’m a monster. I have done so many bad, bad things, and I’m sorry, Matt. I’m sorry for all of it, but my feelings for you is the one thing I can’t be sorry for.”

“How long have you been like this?” Matt asks weakly, rubbing his forehead. He feels another headache coming on.

Hannah pauses. She looks reluctant to tell him, which is ridiculous considering what she’s already confessed to tonight.

“Well?”

“I was turned by my sire Cassandra in October 1935.”

“What the hell?” he gapes. He stares at her. She’s so tall, pretty, elegant and young, barely a line on her smooth pale face and he’d almost double over laughing at how ridiculous this whole situation is until he remembers how her fangs glinted in the dull light as he lay bleeding and terrified at her feet.

“...Yeah.”

“This...is some seriously uncool shit.”

“Hey,” she laughs a little, wiping the tears from her face. “You did say you like older women.”

“Not, like, my grandmother old...”

“Hey. At least I aged well...”

“Well, you got me there,” he says, smiling despite himself. He feels faint all of a sudden. He sags down onto the bed, his legs too weak to support his weight. “This is a lot to process...”

“I know,” Hannah says, wringing her hands, looking anxious again. “I’ll give you all the time you need. I’m so sorry.”

“Do you...are you going to keep killing people?”

“No. I...everything Cassandra taught me was a lie. All of it. And I know I can never atone for what
I did, but for as long as I am on this earth I will never, ever, hurt another human being again.”

“Okay,” he says weakly. “This...cult. Why were they after me?”

“There’s a rule that a vampire cannot have a male paramour. That men are good for food and…other things. Me being with you was expressly forbidden. And while I am still completely pissed at her, Beth was trying to protect me from our sire.”

“Oh,” he frowns, still reeling. This is still so completely and monumentally fucked up. “This cult...the vampire cult. They only target women?”

“Yes.”

“They only make women into vampires?”

“Usually women who are on the fringes of society. Ones people aren’t going to miss.”

“Okay,” Matt shudders again. He feels nauseous. “And why me?”

“Why you what?”

“Well, LA’s a big place. Why did I catch your attention? Since I’m sure there were plenty of other tasty snacks for you to choose from.”

Hannah looks guilty again. Matt feels a spark of anger run through him again, but he tries to swallow it down, to hear her out, at least.

“I thought you were cute,” Hannah says eventually. “And you were putting up posters everywhere.”

“The posters? Why would you care about the posters?”

“Oh Matt,” she sounds miserable again. “It’s because of Emily.”

“Emily?” He scoffs, standing up, readying himself for the blow. “What? What does this have to do with her?”

“She’s one of us, Matt. She’s like us.”

“Like us?”

“She’s been turned. She’s part of the clan. She’s... she’s a vampire.”

The words come to Matt slowly and strangely, like he’s hearing them underwater. The ridiculous, painful impossibility of it all is threatening to strangle him. He fumbles for words, any words, that will make this somehow okay.

“But...but...can she change back? Is there, like, you know...a cure?”

“No. She can’t change back. None of us can.” Hannah looks away. “I would if I could.”

“So...so Emily’s a monster. Forever. And you knew.” Each fact hits harder. “You knew the whole time and you never fucking told me.”

“I know...”

“The posters? You spent hours with me putting up posters. We practically walked all of the East Side
putting up fliers everywhere and all the while you knew she was dead. Were you laughing at me the whole time?"

“Matt, no—"

“Is this how vampires get kicks? When you’re not, you know, smashing people’s skulls in.”
“Matt, I wasn’t proud of how I acted in the beginning, okay. I can’t tell you how sorry I am for it—”

“I’m sick of your sorry’s.”

“I was working with Emily! That note she sent? I gave it to you, okay? She didn’t want you to look for her when it wasn’t safe! Please.” She’s crying in earnest again. “I was trying to help you both. I screwed it up, of course. Like I screw everything up.”

“Did you turn her?”

“What?”

“Did you?” he asks coldly. “Did you make her into some...undead thing?”

“No. I. No. It wasn’t me. She was turned by my friend Jess.”

“Jess?” the same sounds familiar, and he scours his memory for a clue until—

“Jess,” he repeats. It’s coming back to him. The night of the party. Emily’s face flushed with pleasure, practically giddy after spending the evening flirting with a girl. “This...Jess. She pretty and blonde and um...” he motions to his chest. “Kinda stacked?”

Despite herself, Hannah half hiccups, half laughs.

“Yeah, that about sums her up.”

“That party was a long time ago, and you knew. You knew. This whole time, you knew.”

“I was protecting her! And you. I swear. Look, Matt, she wasn’t in danger in the cult, okay? Not with me and Beth and Jess looking out for her. But she’s in danger now. So we’re going to get her out. I promise.”

“No, I’m going to get her out. You can help if you want. Whatever. I don’t care.”

“Matt?” she sounds wounded. He shrugs, batting away her anguish.

“Get out.”

“Matt, please!”

“We’re getting Emily out of your cult. And then I am never going to see you and your fucked up family again.”

“Matt,” she says, sobs wracking her whole body. “Matt, please, don’t do this. Please, please, I’ll do anything!”

“Start by leaving,” he snarls, striding to the door and wrenching it open. Hannah whimpers.
“Do I need to repeat myself? Get the fuck out.”

She does, turning on her heel moving with a speed that takes Matt’s breath away. Finally he’s alone. Trapped in a gilded prison and surrounded by undead monsters.

He slams the door shut before slumping down onto the bed, hoping the duvet muffles his choked cries.

Mother paces in her office, her eyes darting like a cat stalking a fly. Ashley keeps to the corner of the room, wary of the rising waves of rage churning under Mother’s surface. Mother’s desk is covered in papers strewn haphazardly across the surface. One of the drives (he would have loved those gadgets) from her box is missing. Only one person could have taken it.

“I should have known,” Mother mutters. “Damned disloyal corrupting…” She looks up suddenly, as if just realizing Ashley is in the room. “Ashley. You’re loyal to me. You always have been. Isn’t that right?”

Ashley remembers her treasure. Words are caught in her throat. She can only nod, keeping her eyes locked with Mother’s gaze.

“Yes. Yes. You’re loyal. You’ve always been so devoted,” Mother says, her eyes widening. “I was harsh. The iron hand. But it made you better. That was my mistake. Too soft on her, far too soft.” She brings a hand to her temple and massages it, exhaling. “It’s not her fault, poor dear. It was my responsibility as a sire to harden her, but I’ve coddled her. This is a lesson for us both. I won’t make the same mistake twice. When she’s with us again, I’ll discipline her the way I should have from the beginning.” She turns away from Ashley, her shoulders slumping slightly. She sighs. “It’ll be hard. For both of us. But Beth needs a firm hand to reform her. Your education. Your lessons. She’ll have your lessons. Yes. Like you. That’s the only way to make her loyal…”

Ashley curls up further into a ball, barely able to look at Mother. She’s never been like this before.

“Mother?”

“Did I give you permission to speak?!” Mother barks. Her eyes are alight with cobalt, feral fire. Her voice cracks down like a whip. Ashley cowers, hiding her head with a choked whimper. Mother is angry. Mother is angry. Mother is angry.

Eventually, she hears another weary sigh, and then Mother’s voice again, softer now.

“It’s alright, sweet girl. I forgive you.” A hand pats Ashley’s head, combing through her tangled hair. “I know you’d never betray me. Not you.”

In her mind, her treasure gleams, just out of her Mother’s gaze. If she knew…

“Never,” Ashley whimpers. “I love you, Mother.”

“And I love you,” Mother whispers. “The truest love is painful. You understand that.” She rises and looks out the window, her eyes glazing over slightly. “Beth will too. Soon.”

There’s another knock on the door. Mother turns to face the door, her expression hardening.

“Come in.”
Bev enters, a smug look on her bruised face.

“Assignment’s been taken care of.”

“Good. Come with me to the pit. I’d love to give our guest a formal welcome.”

Mother leaves, Bev hot on her heels. Ashley slumps into a sitting position, alone in Mother’s office. She trembles. Mother is changing, and soon nothing will be safe.

Her treasure. She needs to hide her treasure.

Quickly, quickly, she runs downstairs, her footsteps light, she shadows keeping her safe from Mother’s many, many eyes. Soon she’s slipping into her playroom, her dolls watching over her. Behind the pretty blonde head on the lowest shelf is her treasure. Ashley moves the head, frowning when the remains of the rotting face falls away in her hand, and picks up the cracked, dusty pair of glasses hidden behind it. She puts the head back in its place and considers the glasses, still holding together after all this time. Her one fragment of him. As long as she has these glasses, he will keep her safe. Carefully, she tucks the glasses into her coat pocket, feeling a little warmer with them so close to her.

It’s her one secret. The one thing Mother doesn’t know about her.

The very last vestige of the happy girl she used to be.

Chapter End Notes

Alright. Home stretch!
We’re coming into the endgame now, and the climactic resolution is just around the corner.
Coming up next chapter: reunions, reconciliation and a dangerous hunt. Stay tuned!
As always, I’d like to thank my co-writer holeybubushka for being so awesome and breaking my heart with that Matt/Hannah fight.
Leave a comment if you liked it. Thanks for reading!
Bad Blood

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from the 2015 song 'Bad Blood' by Ryan Adams (which in turn is a cover of the 2014 song by Taylor Swift).

Also.....

#Clears throat# See that rating? See the tags? Yeah. We (or really, me, since I'm basically debauched) really earned that explicit rating with this chapter. If graphic descriptions of sex is not your bag of chips, then I'd scroll through a certain section. You can't miss it if you're looking to avoid it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alex never liked being alone, ever since she was a little girl. Whenever Jack took her to the playground, she would whimper and cower, clutching at his leg instead of going off to play with the other kids. Even though she was always big for her age, she was timid and anxious. School was tough for her; she made few friends and came home stifling tears more often than not. Jack did his best to give her the comfort she needed without smothering her, but when he looks back, he knows he got it wrong. His recommending therapists, his subtle arrangements of “accidental” encounters between Alex and the nicer kids at school, the constant encouragements to try and be independent, she must have read them as frustration. Stop being such a baby, said the message she saw between the lines of his encouragements. You’re too old to be acting like this. You’re embarrassing me. He should have known a rift would form.

If he’d been a better father, he could have protected her.

If he’d been a better father, his baby wouldn’t be dead.

If he’d been a better father, a demon wouldn’t be stalking around wearing Alex’s skin.

The monsters loiter about their decadent safehouse and plot. Though they were not the ones to kill Alex, they come from the same pit of hell as the demon who ate her soul. He looks into their eyes and sees darkness. The same darkness he saw in the vampire his daughter has become when he first found her, blood on her lips and crocodile tears in her eyes, her pretty, girlish sire laughing at their dying human prey. He had fled before Not Alex could recognize him, ripping memories from whatever fragments of Alex’s soul remained like pages from a book, matching Jack’s face with that of a once proud father.

This pack of demons is smaller than Not Alex’s clan, less menacing. The mysterious blonde seems to be the de facto leader, talking to each of her compatriots in turn and calculating, forming plans that will almost certainly lead to his betrayal and death. The surly vampire sulks in the shadows, the wound from his damnable aim growing smaller and smaller by the hour. Her succubus sister talks in sorrowful whispers to her silver-tongued brother, who offers a devil’s best impression of human empathy and hugs her close. Matt, it seems, is free of the devil’s spell. Good. It’ll make things easier for him when everything is consigned to the flame.

Jack bides his time, sitting alone in the basement bedroom the demons surrendered to him. Compared
to the rest of the house, it’s largely austere. He prefers it, the bare walls and cheap carpeting. Vanity and pretension are the devils’ calling cards. He’ll be gladly free of both.

Alex’s room was filled with little trinkets from their travels together. Snow globes from Seattle, sea shells from Edisto, foggy bits of quartz from Aspen. Her decorations contained memories rather than symbols of status.

When she died, he burned them all.

The day rolls into night without fanfare. Jack listens to the almost silent footsteps of his infernal neighbors. They wake without a sound, slipping through the shadows like they were cut from the dark themselves. When the blonde gathers them all together to plan their assault, the boy is conspicuously absent. Jack nods absently as the demons discuss and debate, one hand resting on a stake hidden under layers of frayed clothing. Across the room his discarded flamethrower sings silently, longing for the burn.

When they storm the cabal of vampires, all of the demons will burn.

All of them.

It would be for the best if Matt were not present to witness it.

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It’s been a full day since Jess was sent on some mission of Cassandra’s. She hasn’t come back. Emily’s phone is devoid of calls or texts, and not even the faintest mention of Jess’s whereabouts has passed the lips of the other girls.

Something is very, very wrong.

She paces her room, muttering curses under her breath and running down the battery on her phone, checking it every ten seconds for a message from Jess.

“Goddamnit Jess, where the fuck are you?” she mutters.

“Your foul mouth does you no favors.”

Emily startles, wheeling around to see Cassandra standing in her now open doorway, smirking. Despite her enhanced hearing, Emily didn’t even hear the door open. She stands there, watching as Cassandra saunters inside, looking over Emily’s sterile bedroom.

“You haven’t done much to personalize this place.”

“What do you want?” Emily asks. Cassandra raises an eyebrow. There’s nothing behind her eyes.

“That’s no way to talk to someone about to give you a present.”

Emily takes an involuntary step back.

“I...what? Present?”

“Well, it’s only fair. You only just joined us, and you seem like you could use a little pick-me-up.” Cassandra puts a hand on Emily’s shoulder, and it takes everything in her not to flinch away.
“What is it?”

“What’s not spoil the surprise,” Cassandra says with a wink. “Come with me.”

They walk in silence down empty hallways, further and further into the bowels of the mansion. Slowly the cold feeling in Emily’s chest spreads, moving into her bones and up her spine. Finally, they stand in front of the heavy iron door to the pit, and Emily swallows down a whimper of fear.

The door opens with a loud, creaking wail. Emily shudders as she follows Cassandra into the pit, nearly gagging at the smell. Corpses of humans, flayed, dismembered, disemboweled or some hideous combination of the three, hang from hooks like some grotesque slaughterhouse. Rotting entrails accumulate in the corners of the room, and the buzz of flies threatens to deafen her. Down in the center, her face bruised and her tan skirt stained by stagnant pools of blood, is her mother.

“What’s surprise,” Cassandra says.

Emily screams. Her mother looks up at her, confusion, pain and fear fighting for dominance in her eyes.

“Emily…” she croaks.

“No,” Emily whimpers. “No no no no no no…”

“What a lovely reunion,” Cassandra says. “Sakura, is it? I’m sure you’ll be interested in hearing all about what your little angel has been up to.”

“What have you done to her?” Sakura asks. There’s the faintest note of defiance in her voice, and Emily’s sure it will get them all killed.

“Me? I didn’t do anything to her. I gave her a home, a purpose, a chance to prove herself.” She turns to look at Emily, her eyes glinting in the darkness. “Speaking of which. Emily, think of this as a final exam. Look at your mother and know what’s at stake if you fail.” She picks up Emily by the hair. “Ah, but it’s unfair to spring a pop quiz on you, isn’t it? Let’s give you a few days to think it over. After all, your meal hasn’t even arrived yet.” Effortlessly, she drags Emily, struggling and kicking and crying out as her mother fades from view. The door to the pit slams behind them and Cassandra strides into another, throwing Emily, struggling and kicking and crying out as her mother fades from view. The door to the pit slams behind them and Cassandra strides into another, throwing Emily into the far wall. The world spins for a few seconds as Emily’s head collides with the stone. Distantly she feels a cold weight on her wrists, and when her vision clears, she can see she’s been manacled to the wall. A draft hits her face, and she looks up to find a hole in the ceiling, the moon shining through.

“Few more hours until sunrise,” Cassandra says. “If I were you, I’d keep out of the light.” She turns around, heading back for the open door. “And don’t worry. I’ll take good care of your mommy.”

“FUCK YOU!” Emily screams after her. Cassandra just laughs and slams the door behind her.

Silence. A faint breeze touches her face. All alone in the empty cell, Emily curls into a ball and sobs.

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Matt supposes if he has to be trapped in a house filled with vampires, at least it’s one with a kick-ass gym.

He’s been stuck in this godforsaken place for almost two days, going out of his mind with anxiety
and rage. When he finally leaves his room and discovers a smallish gym near the basement he almost swoons with relief.

He slams his fist against the punching bag, the shock of the blow reverberating up his arm. He slams his other fist into it again, enjoying the satisfying slap as his glove smacks into the bag.

Thunk.

He’s been played for a fool.

Thunk.

His best friend is beyond saving.

Thunk.

He knew something was off about Hannah. He knew. He choose not to see it.

Thunk.

He chose to be blind.

Thunk.


Thunk.

He hates her.

Thunk.

He has to hate her.

Thunk thunk.

He wishes he hated her.

Thunk.

He wishes—

Thunk.

everything—

Thunk.

was—

Thunk.

different.

“Not that I’m not enjoying the show, but I think you’re about to blow a gasket, bro.”

“What the hell?” Matt yelps, whirling around, gloves raised.
Josh. He’s leaning against the doorframe, a nonchalant grin on his insufferable face.

“Jesus,” Matt grumbles, ripping off his gloves and tossing them to the ground. It’s unnerving how silent vampires are. He doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to it. “Someone should put a bell on you people.”

“Aw, where’s the fun in that? Besides, you look cute when you’re startled.”

Matt shivers, unnerved. He remembers Hannah making a similar taunt many months ago. That playful jibe doesn’t seem so innocent now. Did she enjoy seeing him startled? Did she fantasise about how startled he would have been as she slipped her fangs into his neck?

“What do you want?”

“I thought we could talk.”

“Yeah, right. No offence, I don’t think we have anything to talk about.”

“That’s not true. There’s loads of stuff. Our shared love of all the Transformers movies. Snow. Drake’s first, but not second, album.”

“What?” Matt blanches. He grits his teeth, feeling annoyance pulse through him. Has Hannah been talking behind his back?

“Relax. We used to be pals.”

“I doubt that.”

“You don’t remember?” Josh strolls into the room, a knowing smirk playing on his lips. Matt scowls. He’s not a big guy, but Josh could probably snap Matt’s arm in two without breaking a sweat. “You don’t remember all the time we spent on NextOfKin?”

“What? That was you?”

“Seriously? You had no idea Max Schrek was a fake name? Dude. It’s called Google.”

“Whatever. Excuse me for not realizing I was being stalked by vampires.”

“You’re forgiven,” Josh quips, moving closer towards him, striding forward with a languid grace. “I guess what I’m trying to say is; we’re not total strangers.”

“We may as well be.”

“I’m not sure about that. I know you’re a good guy. The sort who picks up their wasted best friend in the middle of the night because they’re worried about how she’s going to get home. The sort who spends hours putting up flyers in the middle of the night. The sort of dude who gives a girl his jacket, not expecting anything in return.” He grins. His teeth are disconcertingly white. “Man, if I had a friend like that back when I was alive I may not have been quite as much of a colossal fuck up.”

“Well, er...,” Matt mumbles, squirming. He takes a swig of water, striving to avoid Josh’s eyes. He can’t help but be a little flattered, even if Josh talks with the ease of a used car salesman. “Thanks. But uh, I don’t think you can know that. We didn’t talk all that much.”

“Who says that’s all I’m talking about? I’m observant, bro. And I observed you plenty.”

“What?” Matt whispers, hating the tiny quiver in his voice.
“Sammy didn’t just swoop in outta nowhere. We watched you and my sister when you were on some of your...’dates’. Well, Sam did. I was only allowed to be there a few times. I kinda have problems following the rules, so.” He shrugs, staring off into the corner of the room. There’s a heavy pause.

“I could barely stand it,” Josh says, finally. “Seeing Hannah with you. It hurt so much. Not like, in a bad way. Just...it reminded me of how she was, back when we were alive. That smile. It didn’t matter how shitty my life was, she could always make me feel better, with that smile, you know?”

Matt did know. When the enormity of Emily’s disappearance threatened to overwhelm him, Hannah’s smile tethered him down to Earth. She’s a shameless flirt, and charming in a way Matt will never be, but there was something so genuine about her when she smiles. She laughs like a young girl does, giddy, sweet and without a smidgen of guile.

Hannah can’t have been faking that. Not the whole time. She can’t have.

“And when I saw her with you, I just knew things were going to turn out okay. So, I gotta thank you for that, bro…”

“Thank me?” Matt grumbles. “For what? Being a putz? For falling for all her tricks?”


“Yes, tricks!” Matt hisses. “She didn’t tell me what she was. She let me think my friend was alive. She was playing me the whole damn time.”

“You really think that?”

“Y-yes,” he mumbles, scowling. “She made me look like a fool.”

“I’m sorry your ego took a hit.”

“What? That’s not it at all.”

“Uh, really? Cause it kinda sounds that way.” Josh sighs. It’s a rough, harsh sound. He runs his hand through his tousled dark hair. “Look man, if you want to stay down here and brood and work on getting even more ripped, that’s your prerogative. But you’re definitely not seeing the whole picture here.”

Matt huffs. Josh may be practically one hundred years old, but what would he know?

“She hasn’t told you much, has she, about the night we were all turned.”

It’s not a question. Matt stays quiet, curiosity getting the better of him.

“I didn’t see it. My...sire, I guess, if you could call her that, she found me outside. That’s where it all stopped for me. But Hannah told me what happened to her.” He’s staring off into space again, eyes glazed over. As if Matt isn’t even there. “Cassandra only wanted Beth. But I guess she needed leverage, and what better leverage is there, than to hold your protege’s freaking twin hostage?” He chuckles. His laughter is wild, unhinged. Matt swallows, tries not to step away. “But Cassandra has a way with violence. She ripped Hannah’s throat open. My sister died on our kitchen floor, choking on her own blood while Beth watched. This is the people we are dealing with. The type who murder girls in the middle of the night and laugh while doing it.”

It’s humid but Matt shudders anyway. He can see the whole gruesome scene in front of him. Hannah, soft, sweet, innocent Hannah, writhing on the floor, trying to hold back the tide of blood
that’s squeezing the life out of her.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because everyone else has been treating you with kid gloves, being all gentle, all, oh, Matt, how are you feeling? Let me be all sympathetic. Well, sympathy can suck my dick. It’s a miracle my sister wasn’t beyond saving by the time you met her. Because the cult we’re dealing with? They’re freaking Jonestown on steroids.”

“That’s doesn’t…” Matt splutters, frustrated. “That doesn’t excuse what she did.”

“It doesn’t. Not entirely. But you should know something. About us vamps. We may look like you, but we’re not you. Cause the thirst is strong, bro, and I’m not talking about the bump-and-grind-kinda thirst. I’m talking about the only thirst that matters.” Josh grins, taking a step towards him. They’re close now, so close that Matt can see an odd, almost wanting kind of gleam in his eyes. “I was down in those caves for so long. I was mad by the time Sam found me. Well, I was mad already but now I was a cocktail of crazy. And all I wanted was blood. Man, you have no idea. I just wanted to find somebody, anybody, and drink deep.”

Matt shivers. It’s hard not to feel nervous, stuck down here alone in the gloom with Josh.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Sam, of course,” Josh says. “She took care of me. Gave me blood. Took the edge off, you know? It took forever, but but she showed me there’s another way. But my sisters didn’t have that. They had the opposite of that. Cassandra took every dark urge and magnified it. Indulged their worst instincts. She let the monster inside them off the leash.”

“Josh…” Matt whispers, but the other man ignores him.

“Cassandra took two scared girls, kids, practically, and turned them into killers. She thought she had twisted them into her own image. Well,” he grins again, but it’s pained. “Lucky for us she was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong!”

“Josh,” Matt tries again, despite himself. “Have you heard yourself? You’re excusing murder.”

“No. I’m really not. Pay attention.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means vampires are weak.”

“Oh sure. Immortality must be such a drag.”

“Aw, kid,” Josh growls, shaking his head. “You think we got it made? Have been listening? I mean, come on. Do you know what’s like to need something so bad it drives you crazy? And even when you get it, you’re just counting down the days until you want it, all over again.” He pauses, his eyes too sharp for Matt’s liking. “I mean, even right now. I can hear it. In your veins. It’s pounding alllll through you. Mmmmm…” He whistles, low and sinister. “It must have been quite the workout, Matty.”

Matt takes a step back now, appearances be damned. He’s been told Josh has never killed before, but looking at him now, you wouldn’t know it. He shivers, swallowing down his fear as best he can.

“W-what...what does this have to do with Hannah?”
“Everything. She could have killed you. At any moment. But she didn’t. You... I’m not sure how you did it, but you unravelled a lifetime’s worth of bullshit. You brought out the best in her.”

“The best? It doesn’t feel that way.”

“I get it. You feel betrayed,” Josh says. Matt snorts. Betrayed is a polite word for it. “I would be mad too. But don’t you see? She protected you.”

“Protected?”

“From her own instincts. All that bullshit brainwashing that told her that you were a meal, nothing more.”

Matt pauses. Everything Josh is saying is ridiculous, excusing the indefensible, but then again…he remembers the fear in Hannah’s eyes when one her fangs pierced his skin when they making out in the back of his car. He remembers the gravel scraping against his wrist as he lay on the ground and looked up at his girlfriend staring down her own sister.

“But...Emily…”

“If she told you about Emily, would you have believed her? Or would you have thought she was crazy and dumped her on the spot?”

“I wouldn’t have!” He protests. But it sounds feeble even his own ears.

“Look,” Josh says, gritting his teeth. “There’s a way higher-than-zero chance we’ll all be dead in a few days. So, you can stay down here and sulk. Or.” He pulls out something from his pocket, handing to Matt. When Matt sees it, it feels like all the air has whoosked from his lungs.

Hannah. The picture is from an old and crumpled newspaper clipping, but even then, Matt can see the bright gleam in her eyes. She’s with her two siblings, but while the two of them are stony faced, she’s beaming back at the lense. Matt’s eyes slide down to the description below. It was taken at the opening of some film called Tale of the Twins. The caption is dated June 1934.

The three of them had barely a year left.

“Like I said. You can be butthurt about what happened. Or you can use what little time we all have left to really get to know each other.”

Matt stares down at the picture. Those eyes, bright and carefree. He’s seen that look before in Hannah’s unguarded moments. In all those good times they had together. Maybe he’s being selfish, or insane, but it’s awful to think that she’ll never smile like that at him again.

“Josh...” Matt starts, glancing up warily at his companion....

But he’s already gone.

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Hannah stares listlessly down at the magazines strewn on the bed. It took her forever to find something she liked. No one’s allowed to leave the safe house. While it’s unlikely any of them were followed, Hannah has no doubt the entire clan is scouring Los Angeles. And while Hannah would like nothing more than getting the hell-outta dodge, it’s not safe. Not yet. Not when it’s Cassandra
who is hunting them.

Hannah knows more than anyone that Cassandra always gets what she wants.

So. She’s stuck here. The safehouse, she’s learned, belongs to Josh’s ex-boyfriend who is away working on a film project in his hometown in Spain. Unfortunately, Josh’s ex isn’t interested in gossip mags. No, just her luck, the place is filled with sports magazines, and not just any sport, but soccer.

She’s pretty sure that’s not even a sport.

The guys are fairly cute, she supposes. She flicks to the back of the nearest magazine. It’s a profile of some player called Sergio Ramos and his wife. They’re a beautiful couple, staring at each other adoringly, sitting in various poses across a two page spread. Even though the picture is staged, Hannah doesn’t think you can feign that devotion she sees in their eyes.

No. You can’t fake that.

She chokes down a sob, flinging the magazine across the room. It’s not fair. She used to look at pictures like this all the time, happy couples beaming back at her from the pages of glossy magazines. It filled her with a percular, sharp kind-of-wanting. Cassandra always dismissed that feeling as lust and Hannah, like the pathetic lemming that she is, went along with it.

Now she knows better.

It was better when she didn’t know what it was to love and to be loved. It was better when could stroll into any room and have her pick of young men and not concern herself with messy things like feelings.

But now. Now it hurts all the more because she knows what she’s been missing. Knows how wonderful it is to see Matt for the first time after a long hard night. What it’s like to dance with him, snuggle into that broad chest and listen to steady thud of his heart. Knows that he’s the only thing besides blood that makes her feel passably alive.

And now that’s gone. Gone. Gone. Gone. Gone.

She flings another magazine across the room. Then another. It’s not fair. She’s been lied to all this time. It’s not fair. It’s not -

The door to her room opens and Matt somehow manages to evade the magazine that almost hits him square in the forehead.

“Hey! Whoah.”

“Oh my god,” Hannah gasps, sitting up and clutching at her chest.

“Yeah, uh,” Matt leans down and picks up the magazine lying at his feet. He cocks his eyebrow at her. “I don’t like soccer either.”

“Matt, I am so sorry. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, uh. I’m fine. You’ve got a good arm on you though. You could give the quarterback on my team a run for his money”

“I think I have an unfair advantage.”
“You do,” Matt says, smile fading. Even if she didn’t see his shoulders tense, she still knows she ruined the moment.

“So, uh,” she clears her throat. He’s probably here to admonish her again. It would be silly to expect anything more. “How are you?”

He sighs heavily. Matt hasn’t been sleeping, not if the bags under his eyes are any indication.

“I’ve been better. You?”

Hannah sniffs, wiping the tears from face. “I’ve been terrible.”

“Han...”

“Matt,” she says pitifully. Just hearing him say her name gently like that has her on the cusp of tears again. “I miss you so much I can barely stand it.”

“Hey,” he says. There’s no hostility in his eyes and for that she is deeply grateful. He comes and sits by her. The bed sags under his considerable weight. He leans over, his warm hand brushing over hers.

“Hey,” he yelps, frowning. “You’re freezing.”

“Oh. Uh. Yeah. Sorry... Sorry.”

“Why do you get like that?”

“Like what?”

“It’s just... sometimes when I would see you, you’d be cold, like you are now, but other times you feel normal.”

“Oh,” Hannah says. Matt doesn’t look disgusted, just curious, so Hannah carries on. “If I haven’t fed properly in a few days my skin gets like this. I think it just means I haven’t got enough blood inside of me.”

“How come you were almost always warm when we’d be together?”

“I always ate before I saw you. It was safer.”

“Okay. That’s, um, very considerate of you.”

“Blood wine, mostly. I lost more of my appetite to hunt the longer we were together.”

“Well I suppose... wait a second, you’re freezing. That means you haven’t eaten in days.”

Hannah shrugs. Eating is just about the last thing she feels like, even though she should be training herself to enjoy the animal blood Sam and Josh have provided her.

“That’s not okay, Hannah,” Matt frowns, jumping up. Hannah whimpers, already missing the warmth from having him so near. “Wait a second, I’ll be right back.”

He strides away. It wouldn’t take much to stop him, but she doesn’t exactly have the right to be barking out orders. She waits, anxious for him to return.

She hears him before she sees him, his heavy tread announcing his arrival minutes before she finally
sees him at the door carrying a jug full of blood.

“Here,” he says, handing it to her. “Sam said this is the good stuff. Deer blood, I think. You should drink it.”

“Oh, um…” she squirms. He already hates her. She doesn’t want him to be revolted by her as well.

“Seriously Hannah, you can’t starve yourself. You need to be healthy. And anyway, I’m starving too.” He shoves his hand into his pocket and brings something out. “Whoever lives here has an awesome stash of protein bars.”

“I think his name is Vincente. He’s Josh’s ex.”

“Josh has an ex-boyfriend? But he’s a vampire.”

“Yeah…”

A pause. The notion that a vampire and a human can be together hangs heavily over them.

She closes her eyes, shielding herself from him. The whole situation is too much and she needs a moment to collect herself. In any case it’s easier to drink when she can’t see him. She gags as the sour blood slides down her throat but it’s worth it when she feels a delicious warmth gradually seep through her body.

“Is Emily a monster?”

“What?” Hannah says, opening her eyes, wiping a stray bead of blood from her mouth.

“Is she?” Matt looks miserable. He scuffs his foot on the floor. “Is she beyond saving?”

“No! Matt, no. She’s… I’ve never seen a fledgling be less inclined to believe in Cassandra’s crap. I mean, her smart mouth almost got her killed during her initiation ceremony but Jess and Beth saved her. And while I haven’t seen her be openly defiant since, I know she’s biding her time until she can escape.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Trust me. Emily doesn’t like following Cassandra’s rules.”

“That sounds like her,” Matt says fondly.

“It’s not too late for her, Matt. I’m… I’m sorry for letting things drag on for so long. But she’s still your friend. You haven’t lost her.”

You haven’t lost me either she wants to say, but what’s the point in that.

“There’s so much I want to know,” he says, finally. “So much we haven’t said to one another.”

“I know. I was going to tell you everything, before. Well. Before. But I’m here now. Whatever you need. Because I am, so, so, sorry for dragging you into this.”

“I know,” he sighs heavily. He clenches his jaw, eyes all dark and intense. She’s seen that expression a few times before, and every time she’s had to restrain herself from throwing her arms around him and kissing him senseless. That’s not an option here, so she stays silent.

“When did it change for you? When did you stop seeing me as a meal?”
The question surprises her. “What?”

“You heard. When?”

“Oh,” she smiles. How can she pinpoint anything in particular? Falling for him was a series of tiny moments, a love built over time and not in a rush.

“I suppose,” she smiles again. “When we danced together, do you remember that? At your work. I’ve never been that happy before. That’s when I knew I would do anything to protect you.”

“Oh. Me too. I mean, I liked you before that. I kinda thought you were wicked hot right away. But that’s the moment for me, too.”

“I’m glad,” she says, loving and hating the beougeong hope building in her chest.

Matt sighs, rubbing his face, but when he looks back at her, his smile is gentle.

“Hey. Han. I think we should start everything over. Clean slate. Just you and me. And no secrets. Okay?”

If she had a beating heart it would have leaped into her throat. “Really?”

“Well hello Hannah-very-fashionable-creature-of-the-night,” he smiles. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

++++

Her dreams are twisted, gnarled wreaths of fire and light, someone screaming in her ears. Emily writhes and mumbles before finally jolting awake to find the pain hasn’t stopped. Her left hand is burning, her flesh melting under the soft light of the morning sun. The smell of charred meat fills her nostrils and she jerks back, her chafing wrists crying out in agony. Her spine is stiff and sore, her head throbbing, her stomach an aching hole in her belly.

Out of one nightmare and into another.

Now safely cocooned in darkness, her left hand heals, flesh and skin growing back and the pain slowly subsiding. Emily watches as the flesh on her wrist regenerates, rubbing snugly up against her manacles. It’s not perfect healing, not like the other cuts she’s gotten as a vampire; the scarring is noticeable, and she’s almost certain her hand has lost more than it has grown back.

If her hands were just a little bit smaller she could slip them out of the cuffs.

She looks up at the sun, bright and merciless in the cheerful blue sky.

She gets an idea. An awful horrible, bad-torture-porn-movie idea.

Experimentally, she holds her hand out into the sun again. The pain is immediate: it’s the shock of touching a hot stove times ten. Her hand twitches and spasms and her brain screams at her to do the sensible thing and pull back, but she persists, watching flesh melt into ash and tar as the pain slowly
turns to numbness. She catches the faint hint of bone before pulling back, crying out as another wave of agony hits her. This time, the healing is slower, and her hand feels stiff and arthritic. Still, when she tries to pull her hand out of the cuff, she gets a little further than before. She flexes her fingers and they slowly follow her brain’s orders. It makes her feel like an old woman.

She looks back at the patch of sunlight. If she’s not careful, she’s going to lose her hands trying this shit.

It’ll have to be slow. Cautious. Far more cautious than she feels she has time for.

Still, it’s the only choice she has, and she won’t be a very effective fugitive without her hands.

She thinks about her mother, all alone in that shithole, with no one but psychotic vampires to keep her company. Emily should have seen this coming. Shouldn’t have been a piece of shit coward hiding in her plush bedroom while her mother was stalked. She could have saved her, could have saved Matt, could have saved everyone, if she wasn’t so focused on saving herself.

Sighing, she massages her damaged hand and retreats, as far away from the sun as she can get. She needs a plan. It won’t do her any good to sit here and feel sorry for herself. Her mom doesn’t need some sniveling, broken girl. Her mom needs a fighter, and a thinker.

She’s been doing both all her life. And no one’s better at either of them than her.

+++ 

Beth can’t shake the feeling they’re all being watched.

She had slept a full twelve hours, before waking again early tonight, skin all slick and sweaty and the ache in her chest just as pronounced as before.

She had checked it before going downstairs. There it is, a small circle, flecked with her own black blood, right in the centre of her chest. A few centimetres to the left and that madman would have killed her. It’s worth remembering that, Beth thinks. He may be disarmed for now, but he’s still dangerous.

Her wound is smaller than it was before, small mercies, so at least she knows she’s healing, albeit torturously slowly. It still aches, a dull throbbing sensation that’s hard to ignore and makes her almost as weak as a mortal. It sucks, to think she’s the reason why they can’t launch an attack on Cassandra’s fortress.

‘Attack.’ Beth snorts to herself. Not that they could if they wanted to. Even with Jack’s arsenal, there’s no way they can go up against eight or so fully fed vampires. And even if they snuck in, Cassandra’s battalion of cameras would spot them.

She shuffles towards the front door, cautiously pulling back the blinds in the living room. The street outside is fairly empty. It’s a placid little piece of suburbia, and therefore not usually a place where vampires bother to go. If people go disappearing around here, they’re bound to be missed.

But while everything looks fine, there’s an eerie stillness right outside their house that’s seriously off-putting. No pedestrians, no dogs, nothing is walking past their door, and when Beth’s eyes slide past a cluster of trees she can’t help but feel the vegetation is looking back.

Stupid. She wasn’t followed. No one knows they’re here.
Beth glances down at the candles and insignia that Jack insists will keep them invisible to other vampires. Beth still thinks this is a bunch of voodoo-wannabe-mumbo-jumbo, but if there’s even a slim chance that it is keeping them hidden, then it’s worth it.

The harder thing than staying hidden is keeping her bond to Cassandra severed. It’s a primal, intimate connection, and she’s not sure how to break it. She definitely wants to. She’s not sure how this final battle is going to go down, but Beth does know they can’t live together as they were. It’s clear Cassandra’s behaviour is unacceptable. Repugnant, inexcusable and absolutely eye-poppingly rage-inducing but... Cassandra’s unwell. Although she hasn’t wanted to admit it, Beth’s known it for years. Cassandra’s paranoia and resentment has twisted her into a gnarled parody of herself. But she’s not all bad. The others don’t know Cassandra like she does. Cassandra loves Beth, maybe even admires and respects her. And Beth knows she hasn’t laid a hand on Jess. She would have felt it, if she had, so maybe her sire isn’t completely beyond saving.

Maybe.

“Evening grouchy-grouch, fancy seeing you down here.”

Beth starts. She must have been really deep in thought to have missed her brother’s entrance. He’s not human-level loud, but he’s not far off. Josh shoots her a grin, the same teasing, playful smile he used to wear when they were kids. Beth’s still not used to seeing him and everytime she does she has to remind herself that he’s not an apparition borne from her grief-stricken mind.

“Hey,” she rasps, flopping down on the nearest couch.

“You sleep well, sis? How is the wound?”

“It’s fine,” she mumbles, wincing.

“Do you need me to check the bandages? I bet it’s only a flesh wound,” he says.

She smiles. Trust her brother to be a Monty Python fan. “No, I’m fine. Promise.”

“Are you sure? I know my way around bandages. I can help.”

“Really? No offense Josh, but you could barely bandage your own knee when we were kids.”

“That’s only because I wasn’t into the ole rough and tumble like you were, much to dad’s disappointment. And anyway, things change. I worked as a volunteer nurse in West Hollywood during the 80s.”

“You did?” she asks, shocked. She wants to make a smart ass comment about only doing it for the hot patients, until she realizes what a grim time it would have been, working in the gay community as a nurse.

“Yeah,” the mirth is gone from her brother’s eyes. “I’ve seen things. Things that’ll put even your wound in the shade. But anyway, enough about me. Let’s get you healed up. Come on. Follow me, old girl.” He wraps his arm around her shoulders, pulling Beth to her feet. She’s about to snap at him to lay off, it's not like she's some feeble human, but truthfully it’s a relief to rely on somehow else for a while. Gingerly, her brother helps her into the dining room, plopping her down on a plush chair before heading to the kitchen and pulling out another jug of blood from the fridge.

Beth’s stomach twists at the sight of it.

“How about I warm this up? It’s much better warm. Do you want to watch a movie while you
drink? Or, wait. Beth, you have got to try out the hot tub.”

“This place has a hot tub?”

“Yeah, Vincente got one installed about five years ago. It’s enormous, and the jets are a thing from heaven. Trust me, I’ve been in it plenty of times.”

“Oh…” she says, a little thrown. There’s no hint of the repression or shame that plagued him... them ...back when they were human. Josh speaks with the ease of someone completely comfortable in his skin.

Lucky him.

“If he starts talking about dick sizes, just spray him with some water. He usually stops then.”

Beth flinches again. She knows that voice, but still comes as a faint shock anyway when Sam strolls into the kitchen. Beth didn’t feel Sam before she heard her. She swallows, tries not to take it to heart that Sam is still blocking out her presence.

“Oh yeah? I think you’re full of baloney. You never turn down a gossip session.”

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“HA! Don’t believe her, Beth.” Josh waggles his eyebrows. “She loves hearing about my conquests.”

“Ew!” they both exclaim. Sam shoots her a small smile.

“I cannot believe my own sister and my own best friend are turning against me,” Josh says, clasping his chest melodramatically. “You’re both tearing this family apart.”

“How about you do something useful and go heat up this blood and stop being a putz,” Sam teases.

“Fine. If you admit you only appeared because you overheard someone say something about a bath .”

Sam’s mouth open and shuts a few times, a fetching pink blush coloring her cheeks.

Beth frowns. She shouldn’t be thinking like that.

“I think,” Beth says slowly, feeling worn down to the nub all of a sudden. “Maybe I will have something to eat. And a movie sounds good.”

“Awesome,” Josh says, putting the blood in the microwave. “What do you want to see? Something action packed I bet. Remember how we both begged dad to take us to action flicks when we were kids?”

“I do,” she smiles. She made a habit of blocking out her past, trying to consign her mortal life to the shadows, but it doesn’t hurt to think back on it now, not when it’s Josh taking her down memory lane.

“I should go,” Sam says. She fidgets awkwardly.

“Off to take a bath, I bet.”

“Shut up.”
“We’ll see you in five hours.”


“Mmmhmm. Don’t blame me if I drink all the blood while you’re gone!”

Sam scoffs as she leaves, throwing Beth a final, furtive smile as she does so. Beth tries to return it. She should be pleased that they’re so close, but there’s something so intimate about their banter. So teasing, so sweet. Beth tries to ignore the twisted, dark feeling that’s twisting through her gut.

She’s not jealous. She can’t be jealous. She’s just hungry, that’s all.

“Beth…” Josh says slowly. Dammit, he must have caught her expression. “A-are you jealous?”

“No.”

“Yeah right! I saw that look. Hate to break it to you, considering I thought you had first hand knowledge of this, but our Sammy is just, maybe, a little bit gay.”

“I know that! Ugh. Shut up.”

“Hey,” her brother’s expression softens. “You should talk to her, you know.”

“Josh…” Beth warns.

“She’s missed you, Be-”

“Josh.”

“She still -”

“Josh.”

“Okay,” her brother holds up his hands, defeated. He comes to sit by her, handing her the jug full of warm blood. “I get it. Message received.”

The blood tastes just as sour as the first time. Beth scowls, resists the urge to hurl the whole jug to the floor. “Why am I still drinking this? Don’t you have any decent human blood around here? This tastes so gross. It must be defective. Where’s the good stuff?”

“Um,” Josh starts. He looks strangely unsure.

“What?” Beth asks. Her wound is making her soft and woozy. “Huh?”

“It’s nothing…”

“No,” Beth snaps. She’s so thoroughly sick of the others treating her like an injured kitten. “There is something you’re not telling me, Josh. You need to spill already.”

Her brother looks at her for a long moment, his dark eyes darkening further. Beth holds his gaze, defiant, wanting him to know he can’t wriggle out of this one.

“It’s not human blood,” he says finally.

“What?” Beth asks. Her wound is making her soft and woozy. “Huh?”

“It’s…not human blood. It’s animal blood. Deer, I think. Or maybe from a cow. I forgot to label it.”
The words hit like a blow. She flinches under the weight of them, glowering at her brother.

“You mean… All this time… you’ve been giving me animal blood? What the hell? Don’t you know this stuff is practically poisonous? No wonder I’m not healing, Josh, you’ve been giving me toxic blood.”

Her brother blinks at her, seemingly for once in his life lost for words. Beth fumes. Hasn’t Sam taught him anything?

“Beth,” her brother says, his voice ominously calm. “Animal blood isn’t toxic. That’s what Sam and I have been living off for decades.”

“What?” He’s not making sense.

“Think about it. You’ve been drinking animal blood since you got here. If it was toxic, then wouldn’t you have gotten sick? And it’s not like you’ve been hungry, either. It doesn’t taste great, but it’s food all the same.”

“I don’t…” Beth says, bewildered. While his words echo in her mind, they’re still not making sense.

“Beth, I was in a cave for decades. There weren’t any humans down there, and almost no way of getting out. How do you think I survived?”

“I…”

“Cassandra lied. We don’t need to feed off humans. Vampires can live off animal blood. I’m sorry.”

Beth hears her own voice, so small and girlish she can’t believe it’s hers.

“What? No. No, that’s…”

“Beth…” Josh says. His voice is soft.

“But, that…I couldn’t…I didn’t…” Beth hears herself say. “But…but humans are…they’re…they’re bad…they deserve…”

“Beth, you know that’s not true.”

“But…but…” Beth’s voice is high-pitched now. She can barely hear it. Without a word, Josh opens his arms and Beth buries herself in his embrace. The eyes of a thousand dead woman peer at her when she closes her eyes. Innocent girls, lost and oppressed and misunderstood, like her. She’d seduced them and used them up and left their husks in the mansion and stray alleyways.

All for necessity, she told herself.

All for necessity.

Beth screams into Josh’s shirt. Josh rubs the back of her neck and she screams and screams until her throat is raw. Her eyes burn with white-hot tears.

“Beth, it’s not your fault. You didn’t know.”

Beth can’t answer him. Another dry sob threatens to sunder her wounded chest. Josh pulls her closer, moving his hand steadily up and down her back.

“I’ve got you,” Josh murmurs into her hair. “It’s okay. I’ve got you…”
“Why…”

“Shh…”

“Why would she lie? Why would she tell us we had to hurt people? Why? Why?!”

“Beth…”

“Why would she do that?!?”

“She...she wanted you to hate humans.” Josh’s voice is gentle. “So you’d push humans away and only spend time with the cult. With her. If you thought killing people was necessary, then it wouldn’t be as hard for her to convince you to follow her and not ditch her like Sam did.”

Beth has no answer. She bends over, dry heaving and sobbing while Josh rubs her back. Choked by tears, Beth feels her mind pulled somewhere down, deep and dark and full of hushed, angry accusations.

_Murderer. Murderer. Murderer._

She doesn’t resurface for a long, long time.

++++

“So... wait a second, people actually wore fedoras back then? Like….in a non ironic kinda-way?”

“Yep,” Hannah laughs.

They share a grin. They’ve been holed up in his room for hours, sharing stories and secrets. Hannah had kept her promise and answered every question he asked, no matter how uncomfortable it made them both. But he finds the more time he spends with her, the less appetite he has to hear about her unsavoury past.

Not when there’s so much other fun stuff to discuss.

“Wow,” he mutters. They’re both huddled over her phone, looking over some old Google images of Hannah back when she was alive. They can only find five pictures from old newspaper clippings someone had bothered to scan and post online. It turns out her family’s notorious, and the source of much debate on some of the dodgier parts of the internet.

“You look beautiful,” he says, pleased when Hannah smiles bashfully in return. She does, though. Even though the images are blurry, she looks so vivid and full of joy. There isn’t a single picture he can find where she isn’t beaming right back into the lense.

“You look beautiful,” he says, pleased when Hannah smiles bashfully in return. She does, though. Even though the images are blurry, she looks so vivid and full of joy. There isn’t a single picture he can find where she isn’t beaming right back into the lense.

“People used to dress classier back then. Even Josh wouldn’t leave the house without a three-piece suit. My dresses were more conservative, though. Daddy didn’t want me to get a reputation.”

Conservative? His eyes map the dip and curve of her waist, the way her dress clung to snugly to her skin.

“You don’t agree?” she asks coyly, cocking an eyebrow at him.
“No, I do. I do. Your dresses were...classy. Leaves a lot to the imagination.”

“Oh? And what are you imagining?”

“Plleeeeeenty of things,” he teases back, feeling the tips of his ears go red hot. Hannah smirks, threading her fingers through his and squeezing tight.

“I can’t believe it. I mean, you lived through the Depression. The roaring twenties. Oh man, prohibition. And gangsters!”

“I don’t remember any gangsters, although we probably did know a few, considering dad was in Hollywood. But we barely felt prohibition. Daddy made sure the cellar was always stocked, which is why his parties were the best in town.”

“Oh yeah? Wouldn’t that have been past your bedtime? During prohibition?”

Hannah shrugs.

“I was seventeen when prohibition officially ended. Old enough to attend all my parents’ parties. They liked me being there. I did well at their soirees.”

She doesn’t say anything about her siblings, but Matt thinks it’s perhaps wise not to ask about that. Instead, he looks down at the grainy picture in front of them, taken five months before Hannah disappeared...died. Before Hannah died.

She looks gorgeous, hair swept up, revealing her long neck. He doesn’t know much about clothes, but the outfit she has on is immaculately put together, an elegant dark dress (red, Hannah said), with a smart fur coat wrapped around her shoulders. She’s standing in front of an old cinema with her siblings and parents, the family’s bentley just barely in shot.

“This is so awesome! Look at all those signs. Old-school cinemas were really cool. And didn’t you say you guys even had a butler at one point?”

“We had to lay him off in 1934. But yeah. We did.”

“Wow,” Matt marvels. “Must have been an interesting time to be alive.”

Hannah laughs bitterly.

“You could say that.”

Matt’s startled by the harshness in her tone.

“Don’t remember it fondly?”

“Sort of,” she says. “It was okay for me, but my brother and sister...they couldn’t be themselves. And so many people were suffering, even though I had it alright.” She sighs, glancing down. He follows her gaze, sees her long pale fingers clasped together with his own darker ones. “But mostly I don’t wanna live in an era where being with you would be a crime.”

“Me neither,” he murmurs, pulling her forward and kissing her, soft and slow. “Me neither.”

++++
It must be midnight before Sam is done with the her bath.

The warm water had soothed her nerves and relaxed her muscles and left her with the feeling like she could take on the world. She checks her phone, hoping to see a message from Josh and a bit disappointed when she finds none. They’re supposed to be planning their assault on Cassandra’s fortress tonight, but Sam supposes she can’t blame Josh for wanting to spend as much time as he can with his sisters before they’re all plunged into mortal danger again. The three of them have been through so much, after all.

Still. She can’t help but feel this is the calm before one hell of a storm.

Sighing, she thinks maybe she can check in on Hannah when she gets dressed, watch an old movie like they used to, when -

“Sam?”

“Beth?”

Her sire steps out from her room at the end of the hall. She looks tired, worn down, like butter scraped too thinly over bread. Her skin is white, so white Sam worries she hasn’t been eating. But just like that, Beth’s pale face cracks into a grin, and she’s is hit with a memory of the two of them trekking through the mountains, Beth’s teasing voice demanding Sam hurry up, back when they were stupid and fearless and alive.

“Sam,” Beth repeats slowly, cocking her head. Her voice sounds a little hoarse. “Josh and I just finished watching the third Lord of the Rings movie and you…you just got out of the bath?”

“So?” Sam croaks, pulling her towel closer towards her. The material chafes against her skin. “You know I like baths.”

“I do,” Beth smirks, eyes lingering in places they shouldn’t. Sam swallows, looks away, remembering the feeling of Beth’s slick body against hers. The dampness of Beth’s hair as Sam threads her fingers through it, the way her sire gasped when Sam kissed that spot just below her ear.

“How’s Josh?”

“He’s good,” Beth’s smile is soft, almost wistful. “Just like I remember him. Mostly.”

“Good,” Sam says, clutching at her towel, struck with a ridiculous fear that it’s about to fall off. A part of her wants to shake Beth, beg her to stop putting on this stupid facade and just talk to her, but after what she’s done she doesn’t have the right. She may have saved Josh, but she left the twins in the hands of a madwoman.

If she’s lucky, Beth will forgive her in a decade or two.

“My uh, room’s over there,” Sam says, pointing awkwardly to the door just to their right. Beth pauses, her eyes glinting and it’s enough for all the fresh blood in Sam’s veins to race up to her face. “I’m not, that wasn’t an invitation or anything, I just, need to get changed. Because it’s cold. I’m cold. Yeah.”

“Sorry. I’ll get out of your way.”

And that’s not really what Sam wants to hear. She’s quite happy for Beth to be in her way. This is the first time they’ve said more than two words to each other in decades, and this playful teasing is something but not nearly enough.
“You can join me, if you want. In my room. Just to talk,” Sam stumbles when she sees Beth’s eyebrows shoot up. “Just to talk, I swear. It would be nice to. You know. Talk.”

_I’ve missed you_, Sam wants to say, but doesn’t.

“That’s, ah,” Beth says, her face closing in. “Thanks. But I think I need to be alone.”

“Of course,” Sam says, wanting to kick herself.

“No, Sam… you’re right. We should talk. I want to, I swear, but not tonight. I’m sorry I’m just… a space cadet right now.”

Beth’s smile is hollow, lips trembling like she’s trying to choke back a sob. Sam looks into her eyes, wonders when her sire became so sad.

“Of course,” Sam says, gripping her towel towel to her chest and stepping past Beth. Their fingers brush, Sam tries not to whimper at the strange familiarity of it.

“Sam?”

Sam stops. She’s less than a step away from her door, but she turns and looks back at Beth.

“Yeah?”

“Just,” Beth swallows thickly. “Thanks. For saving my brother. I can never repay you for that.”

“It was nothing, I mean, we saved each other, really, I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him.”

“Jeez Sam, I really doubt that,” Beth smiles. “Still selling yourself short, I see.”

_That’s not true. I’m only strong because of you_, Sam thinks.

“Don’t put yourself down. Because you’re strong Sam,” Beth chokes out, as if reading Sam’s mind. “You’ve always been the strongest one. The bravest one. The best one. I’m sorry I didn’t see it sooner.”

“Beth,” Sam says, reaching out to her.

“I’m fine. I’m fine, really,” Beth says, batting her away and coughing, taking a moment to regain her composure. When she does her mouth, that lovely, lovely mouth, curves into a smirk.

“It’s good to see that some things never change, though. Fifty years on, and you still look great in a towel.”

“Beth!” Sam squeaks, flushing.

“Goodnight Sammy,” Beth drawls. “Lemme know if you need any help in your room.”

“Hardy har,” Sam teases back, opening her door and scrambling inside, trying to clamp down on the hoarde of butterflies surging through her chest.

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“So, this is the part where you take your boxers off.”
“Okay,” Matt splutters, trying his hardest to sound cool even though there is nothing cool about this situation. They had been making out for what felt hours, mouths scorching hot trails across skin, when Hannah finally pushed him off her. He’d thought maybe that was the end of it, until she had taken off her bra and made it clear in no uncertain terms that clothing is unnecessary.

“Okay,” he says again, fingers hooked in the waistband of his boxers. He’s standing by the bed, feeling a little exposed, all sweaty and short of breath, especially when Hannah looks so serene, laying back the pillows, naked except for her underwear.

She bites her lip, eyes slipping down his body before lingering on his crotch, and the tension’s so palpable he’s wondering how the hell he managed to restrain himself around her until now.

“This is happening. Be cool. This is actually, actually happening.

“Do I need a….”

“A…?”

“You know,” he swallows. “Protection?”

“What?” she gasps, a shocked giggle escaping her lips. He’s not sure why she’s so surprised. Isn’t it good he’s asking these things?

“Sorry,” she smiles. She must have seen his expression. “C’mere..”

She leans up and tugs him forward until he’s lying next to her on the bed. She pulls him close, their legs intertwined together, skin against skin. He’s hard, his dick straining against the flimsy material of his boxers and he tries not to rut against her when her thigh rubs up against him.

“Well, you can’t get me pregnant, obviously. And STIs aren’t a thing, either. My body kills off infections.”

“Okayyyyyyyy,” he mumbles. The otherworldly weirdness of the situation is beginning to freak him out, but Hannah must get that. She wraps her arms around his shoulders and kisses him sweetly, once. Twice.

“You can wear a condom if you like. Whatever you’re comfortable with. I just want you.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “Please, Matt.”

He’s not going to deny her, not when she asks like that. The kiss starts off slow and languid until Hannah reaches down and palms him through his boxers. He groans, jutting up against her knowing hand, his thin resolve slipping away. He kisses a messy path down her neck, stopping to palm her breast, lips wrapping around a nipple.

She whimpers, straining upwards as he slides his tongue against her. She’s so responsive and loud and he loves it, doesn’t care if it means Josh will probably rip him to shreds. Matt swirls his tongue around the nipple, gasping a bit when her long nails sink into his back.

“Harder,” she gasps out. “Harder.”

Teeth. She means teeth. He’s never done that before. He’s always much bigger and stronger than the girls he’s taken to bed, so he’s holding back, just a little. But this is so different, and yeah, he can do it, he’s a-rise-to-the-challenge-kinda guy.

He scrapes his teeth against her nipple, before sucking on it as hard as he can. His other hand shoots
up to twist and tug at her other breast, flicking the tip of the hard nub as she bucks up against him.

“God, yes,” Hannah hisses, head thrown back against the pillows. He looks up, taking in the pale expanse of her neck, her mouth hanging open, fangs out.

Fangs out?

He slows. She must catch his expression. She looks horrified, a hand shooting to cover her mouth. “Oh my god.”

“Han, it’s okay.”

“Oh my god, don’t look at me.” She says, squirming away from his gaze.

“Hey, no. No!” He’s shimmies up, wrapping his hand around her wrist, trying to pull her hand away. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for -”

“Hannah, it’s fine,” he soothes. “I don’t mind. Let me look at you.”

It takes eternity but finally Hannah lets her hand slip away, eyes flitting shut, as if ashamed. It’s an incredible sight. Her fangs are not that long, maybe half an inch longer than the rest of her teeth but even in the dim light he can see they’re razor sharp. But somehow, despite looking like they could tear into flesh, he doesn’t find them intimidating. Not when it’s Hannah who looks afraid.

“You’re so beautiful.”

“Matt, I thought I could control myself, but what if I can’t? What if I hurt you?”

“You won’t. You could have hurt me before, remember? And you never have.” He runs his hand down her face. Her skin is so soft and warm. He lifts her chin up, so her dark, sad eyes meet his. “I trust you.”

“You do?”

“I do,” he says, leaning down and kissing her again.

He wants her to know, to really realize that it’s not just lip service, that he trusts her completely. Matt takes a deep breath, steadying himself, wondering if she can feel the way his heart is clattering around his chest.

Hannah’s gasp is a bit feral when Matt’s tongue flits across her fangs, lapping at it. He drags the tip of his tongue down one side, then the other. Hannah’s eyes are dark, darker than she can remember as she stays stock still as his tongue brushing up against her. He almost thinks she didn’t like it, until he pulls away and she gasps, a soft, almost yearning-kind-of-sound.

And fuck. *Fuck.* More than anything else in the world he wants her to feel good. There’s still guilt lingering in her eyes and he needs her to know that there’s no room for shame in their bed.

He slides his boxers down, groaning a bit when his cock is exposed to the cool air. Hannah catches his eye, eyebrows shooting up, looking impressed, and yeah, there’s never a time where that doesn’t feel good. But this isn’t about him, not right now anyway, so he puts his mouth back on her, kissing down her neck, lingering over her breasts again, dragging his teeth across her nipples, once then
twice before dropping further downwards, kissing a path right down to her panties.

She’s wetter than any other girl has ever been for him and he can smell her and god it takes every inch of his willpower not to tear the damn things off. He kisses her over the soaked material, his lips mouthing over where he thinks her clit might be. Whatever he’s doing, it’s working, if Hannah’s choked gasps are any indication.

“Matt…baby. Please.”

He grins, letting her push him away as she lifts her legs up, shimming out of her underwear, throwing the garment aside. She rests back on the bed, opening her legs up for him. He takes a moment, almost overcome with anticipation, his mouth watering, already desperate.

He hooks her legs over his shoulders as he shuffles down, dipping his head, until finally, finally, he can feel her against his lips, the soft pulse of smooth, slick skin.

He licks a bit clumsily at first, sliding his tongue all over her velvety folds. He just wants to feel her everywhere, dipping his tongue gently inside of her, loving how she groans in response.

“Matt…”

He takes the hint, propping forward, tongue finding her clit. He licks cautiously, unsure how sensitive she is, touching her lightly. Her frustrated groan tells him he can go harder so he does, finding the hard nub and lapping at it firmly.

“Oh god,” Hannah moans, hips jerking up. She’s gripping the sheets, holding it like she’s afraid of letting go. “That’s so good baby, keep going.”

He does, rubbing the tip of her clit with the flat of his tongue, swirling around it, bringing her closer and closer. She likes a firm pressure, the harder he licks the more she presses herself up into his mouth.

“Oh fuck,” she whimpers. “More….”

And Matt thinks he knows what she wants, pushing his finger near her entrance, glancing up and getting an enthusiastic nod to his unspoken question. Matt smiles around her clit, before easing a finger into her, slick and slow.

And jesus, she’s so tight and wet around him, and a hot pulse of arousal shoots through him when he thinks of how good she’s going to feel around his dick. His hips jerk forward, his cock rubbing against the sheets until he remembers this isn’t about him right now. He pulls out, before easing back in, letting her take his finger inside before lowering his head and lapping his tongue against her.

He’s rewarded with a sharp cry and he’s reminded why he loves doing this. He knows she wants it hard, so he starts fucking her in short, sharp bursts, pulling his finger until he’s almost out before sliding it firmly back in, making Hannah groan and squirm. Her hips are bucking up, trying to take him deeper.

“Put another finger inside me baby, please…”

He moans against her. His dick gives an interested twitch and while he wants to touch himself, to take the edge off, he ignores it. Instead he pulls out, shifting forward, glancing up and rewarded when he sees Hannah’s head thrown back, eyes squeezed shut, fangs glinting. Another finger slides inside her, and it’s way easier than with most girls. It’s liberating, not having to second guess a woman’s desires, as he starts to fuck Hannah with purpose, mouth focusing on the spot that makes
her twist and groan.

Her hips are bucking up, pushing her clit harder against his mouth as he fucks her just a little bit harder. She’s moaning, loudly, openly, both of them getting turned out by the wet sounds his mouth is making. And yeah, he feels like an absolute superstar, loving the noises she makes, knowing that she’s so close-----

“Matt. Stop. Stop, baby.”

He does, pulling away and looking up at her, confused. Did he do something wrong?

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. Jesus. Wow.”

“Uh...then why are we stopping? You’re like, close. Right?”

“I am. I’m really close.”

“Oh,” he says, pulling his fingers out of her, confused when it makes her shiver in response.

“Then why….”

“It’s just,” she smiles, coyly, eyes glinting. She looks even sweeter than normal without her glasses. “I just really want to come with your cock inside of me.”

And Jesus, he did not expect her to say that. He groans, ready to give her what she needs, moving up, poised to spread her legs and slide straight into that wet heat.

“No, wait. It’s better for me when you’re….sitting down.”

And she may as well have socked him in the gut, that’s how hard it is to breathe all of a sudden. She lies back, a mischievous spark in her eyes, as if she knows just how hot she’s being right now. And fuck, he’s never been with a woman who has just asserted herself like this, and it’s quite possibly the sexiest thing ever.

He scrambles forward, his back pushing up against the headboard. When he glances up he sees Hannah, her eyes closed, looking like she’s concentrating hard.

“Hannah?”

“I’m fine,” she says, smiling sweetly. He notices, as if magic, her fangs are gone. She squeezes his hand off his confused look. “I just needed to concentrate. I didn’t want them around when I do this.”

“What?”

He realizes a split second what she’s going to do right before she does it, her breath hot on the tip of his dick before her mouth envelopes him.

He gasps as Hannah’s cheeks hollow out, taking him deep inside her. His hips jerk up accidentally, and he feels his dick hit the back of her throat and he’s about to apologise except Hannah doesn’t seem phased at all. In fact, she’s pulling him deeper inside of her, her throat like a vice, tight and wet and everytime he expects her to come up for air she just sucks harder, her head bobbing between his legs.

Matt’s groaning, hips jerking up erratically, relaxing when he realizes Hannah is okay with him fucking her mouth. It’s amazing, and the back of his mind he knows this is superhuman stuff as
Hannah doesn’t let up for a second, her hand wrapped around the base of his dick and her mouth working on the rest of him. He thinks she’s only been down there for a couple of minutes but it feels like an hour, and he’s about to ask her to stop because he’s not sure how long he can last before Hannah finally lets him go, smirking at the wet popping sound as she moves her mouth away.

She throws her leg over, positioning herself above him. Matt moves to grab her hand, threading his fingers through hers.

“Okay,” she says, sounding a bit unsure for the first time. He’s squeezes her hand, staying still, letting Hannah dictate how she’s going to do this.

“Fuck,” she whimpers, rubbing her clit against the tip of his dick, before slowly sinking down on him, inch by inch.

They groan in unison when she’s finally full sheathed. Hannah’s smile is a bit wild as she runs her hands across his chest, long nails just barely scraping his skin.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she whispers, rocking forward. “Yes.”

The hot heat is incredible, and Hannah must feel the same way, as she’s taking her time, rocking forward gently, an almost glazed look in her eye. He’s passive, letting her take the reins completely, entranced by the slow roll of her hips.

“I’ve wanted to do this for so long,” she rasps, starting to picking up the pace. “I can’t believe this. I can’t believe this is happening.”

He nods, mouth too dry to speak. She lifts her hips up slightly, before sinking back down again, smirking when he whimpers, before doing it again, then again, the hot slide feeling incredible as she starts to pick up the pace. Fucking Matt hard, riding him like she means it.

He grabs her waist, wanting to be more than a passive participant, jerking his hips up to meet her thrusts.


She’s so beautiful. He can’t help staring at the way her hair slides across her shoulders, her breasts shaking with every movement. Her mouth drops open when she moans, and he can see her fangs are out again. He groans, pushing himself deeper inside her, wrapping his arms around Hannah’s back so she’s pushed up against his chest. She claws at his shoulders, and it hurts a bit, but he finds he doesn’t mind it.

“Oh god,” she groans against his ear. She’s grinding against him now, quaking and shivering so much he thinks she must be close. And while he loves the feeling of her voice in his ear, he wants to see her.

He drops his hands from her back and Hannah gets it, leaning away from him but never letting up on the pace. One of Matt’s hands goes to her breasts, flicking the hard nipple, the other goes to her ass, squeezes. She moans, deep and rich, her eyes hot and dark and sliding down to focus on his neck.

“Matt, I’m so…”

Matt nods. He’s close too. He wonders whether he should finger her clit but he doesn’t need to, not if the frenzied way she’s riding him is any indication.
“Matt…”

And he’s nodding, saying yes, yes, yes to whatever it is she’s asking. He’s on the cusp of coming, his thrusts starting to get lazy and unfocused, whimpering as Hannah groans and brings her teeth to his neck.

For a split second he thinks he must be insane, but it feels so good, the wet heat, Hannah’s strangled groans, and when her fangs pierce his skin he almost comes on the spot.

He goes slack underneath her, the world spinning a bit, everything narrowing down to the fangs slipping inside his neck. He feels the roar of his own heartbeat in his ears as his head lolls back, dimly feeling Hannah clenching around his cock. She’s coming, she must be, by the way she cries out, riding him through the last throes of her orgasm, her fangs sinking in deep. It should be awful, but it’s not, the pain and pleasure so sharp it makes his head spin. His hips push up, feebly thrusting into her.

*Hannah’s inside me*, he thinks. *She’s actually inside of me.*

He comes. Harder than he ever has, the orgasm crashing down over him. Hannah’s rolling her hips, as if she’s trying to milk every last drop, groaning up against his neck.

They’re still for a long moment, Matt’s mouth all dry and his heart still ringing in his ears. Dimly, he feels Hannah’s fangs pulling out, and it hurts, but only a little.

“Matt?” her voice is muffled, like she’s underwater. “Matt? Oh my god, *Matt*?”

She’s shaking him, furiously. He frowns, looking up at her blearily.

“Hey.”

“Sorry, are you…are you okay? Oh my god, for a second I thought…oh my god, Matt, are you sure you’re okay?”

“Oh, hello?” He grins, starting to come to again. “You were right there, weren’t you? That. Was. Awesome.”

She stares down at him, aghast, before breaking out into a wide grin.

“You jerk,” she squeals, hitting him softly. “You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“But your heart doesn’t work?”

“Shut up! You know what I mean.”

“I do,” he says, gasping when Hannah finally gets off him. Hannah pauses, the two of them sharing a long look before she moves, snuggling into his side. She fits perfectly in his arms, and when she smiles up at him, she sees her teeth are faintly tinged with red. Red from his own blood, and he should be *disgusted*, but instead he pulls her closer.

“Hannah. Right now I feel like the luckiest man alive.”

She rolls her eyes, resting her head on his chest, right over his heart. She closes her eyes, listening to the steady thrum of its beat.

“You’re a doofus,” she says contentedly, smiling. “But you’re my doofus.”
“Yeah,” he says, squeezing tight. “I am.”

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“Okay,” Josh says. He’s standing in the middle of the living room, seemingly at ease. “Thank you all for coming to this Let’s-Take-Down-A-Cult planning extravaganza. First off all, Jack, thanks for not murdering us in our sleep. Really appreciate it.”

“Don’t make me regret it.”

“Love you too,” Josh says with a wink. Everyone else sighs. Hannah stays close to Matt’s side, her fingers brushing his but never quite holding them. Every few seconds Josh’s eyes flit over to them, a glint of something made of equal parts amusement and malice.

Matt feels his face get hot. There isn’t much privacy in a place like this. If Hannah’s embarrassed, though, she certainly isn’t showing it. She smiles serenely at her brother as Sam takes up the reins of plotting.

“Most obvious question is how we’re gonna get into the damn place. Jack can blow a hole in the wall, but we can’t follow him in unless we get an invitation.”

“I mean, technically, Hannah and I are still welcome there,” Beth says. “As...inhabitants of the mansion, we can invite you in when we get there. And even if we get separated, all you have to do is convince Jess to let you in.”

“Don’t remember Jess being particularly fond of me,” Sam mutters, “but it’s worth a go.”

“Woah, wait. Hold on. Jess is the one who turned my friend. She took Em,” Matt interjects. The others look up at him.

“I mean, yeah, she did,” Beth says. “What about it?”

“Well...I can’t just let that go. She ruined my best friend’s life.”

“You and Emily can give her an earful when we’re all safe, Matt,” Sam says calmly. “Enemy of our enemy, remember?”

“What if she rats us out to Cassandra?” Matt asks.

“She won’t,” Beth says immediately. There’s a quiet challenge in her calm expression. The corner of her lip twitches downward.

“Speaking of rats, I’ll need to know where the demons most often congregate,” Jack says. “It’ll be easier to kill them if they’re clustered in one place.”

Matt pictures a jet of flames, the sound of screams and broiling flesh. He shudders.

“We won’t have time to cause much chaos,” Beth says. “There’s too few of us to make this a war. The way I see it, we get in, get Jess and Em, and get out.”

“What about Tam? And Sophie?” Hannah pipes up.
Beth worries her bottom lip before she answers her.

“...Tamika can handle herself. She...she’ll be alright. Jess...she might be in danger. Especially if Emily’s up to her usual bullshit.”

Matt smiles at that. Good to know that Emily’s left an impression. Beth glares at him.

“Something funny?”

“Calm down, general,” Josh cuts in. “Matt’s just glad his friend’s fire is still burning. Kind of like his was last night.”

“Josh!” Hannah gasps. “I can’t believe you!”

Sam pinches the bridge of her nose and says nothing. Jack looks positively murderous.

“Beth, is there any way you can contact Jess without Cassandra knowing? She might be less inclined to snitch if you let her know you’re coming.”

“I’m not sure,” Beth says, her voice taking on a bitter edge. “Cass has probably bugged our phones and put tracking devices in our goddamn heads for all I know.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Josh says. "Jack. Why don’t we get you up to the house at dusk. Beth gives you an opening, you go in and torch the place. Or find your daughter and live happily ever after. Whatever. Then we,” He motions towards his sisters and Sam. “Go steal a car and get the hell outta dodge.”

“Josh!” Hannah cries out.

“That’s not what we agreed to, demon,” Jack growls.

“We said we’d get you to that place. We can do that. We can even show the best way to sneak in. But come on! The rest of us don’t need to stay in California. Let’s steal a car and head north. Canada, maybe. Nothing bad ever happens there.”

“No way,” Matt snaps, glowering at Josh, who just scowls in return. “I’m not leaving without Emily.”

“And I’m not leaving without Jess,” Beth says firmly.

“And I’m not leaving without Ashley,” Sam says quietly.

There’s a pause. Matt glances around the room. Everyone bar him and Jack look utterly shocked.

“Sam,” Hannah says. Matt can feel her hand trembling as it brushes up against his. “Sam, I’m so sorry, but she’s not who you remember.”

“I spent a lot of time with her, Sam,” Beth says. “A lot. And after what Cass put her through… there’s no coming back from that.”

“I know she’s been hurt,” Sam says.

“Sam-” Hannah starts.

“It’s more than hurt, Sam,” Beth says grimly. “Cass has warped her mind, and whatever she did, it’s made Ashley the most loyal of all. She’ll stay with Cass until the bitter end. She’s been broken, Sam.
I’m sorry. She can’t come back.”

“Almost 47 years ago I left Ashley in the hands of that…creature. I abandoned her when she needed me most,” Sam sounds like she’s swallowing back tears. Next to him, Matt sees Hannah glance away, a guilty look on her face. “I left her to rot. That’s on me. But I will be damned if I do that again.”

“Sam…” Josh says gently.

“No, Josh. It’s decided.”

There’s an uneasy pause. Matt looks around, sees that everyone seems to be preoccupied with looking at their shoes.

“Uh, guys?” He asks. “Who’s Ashley?”

No one answers him at first. Then, with an awkward cough, Beth finally speaks.

“Ashley is...was...a girl from the Castro that Cass wanted Sam to turn. To prove her loyalty. And she did, but then Ashley’s initiation went pear-shaped and…”

“And I left the cult,” Sam says flatly. “Without Ashley.” Her voice cracks a bit as she says the name.

“Wait, hold on. What initiation? Like a gang initiation?”

He feels Hannah’s hand get cold.

“Pretty much, yeah,” Sam says. “New vampires are supposed to kill a human brought to them and drink their blood.” She grimaces. “Someone they knew, typically. It’s supposed to symbolize cutting ties with your old life, but honestly it’s just to break new vamps down and make them easier to manipulate.”

“So what happened?”

“Ashley wouldn’t kill her boyfriend,” Sam says. “Not killing your initiation victim means getting cooked alive in the sun, so I tried to step in. Didn’t end up mattering. Cassandra had the boy killed and Ashley tortured until she was broken.”

“Why not just kill her?” Matt hates the question but it passes his lips anyway.

“Because Ashley serves as a constant reminder of what happens when you defy Cassandra,” Hannah says quietly. “You look at that poor girl and you think, ‘that could have been me’.”

“She’s utterly loyal, too,” Beth says. “Unquestioning. The perfect attack dog.”

“Which is exactly why we should cut our losses and bolt,” Josh says. “I’m all for valiant rescues but we’re talking borderline unkillable monsters here. The best we can do for Jess and Emily is throw the heat off them. I imagine deserters are a more pressing concern than back-talking little shits.”

“Don’t talk crap about Em, alright?” Matt says. Josh ignores him.

“Look at us,” Josh says. “A bunch of misfits subsisting on low-quality blood, flanked by a lovestruck puppy and a firebug with delusions of grandeur. This. Won’t. Go. Well.”

“If you’re getting cold feet, boy, you can turn tail and run,” Jack growls. “We don’t need you anyway.”
“Don’t talk to him like that, asshole,” Beth snaps.

“Guys, please,” Sam tries, but they ignore her.

“You and your ilk love to make false promises and spin your little plots. You won’t even try to save your own!”

“That’s real rich coming from a guy who’s itching to ram a stake through his daughter’s heart.”

“How dare you!”

“I see this argument going to really constructive places,” Sam interrupts. “Both of you, drop it. We can’t do this unless everyone is one hundred percent behind it. If we’re divided when we go there, Cassandra and her goons will rip us apart.”

Jack grumbles in reluctant agreement. Beth looks away.

“This...finding Ashley is that important to you, huh?” she asks Sam.

“Yes.”

Beth nods.

“Then count me in.”

“Me too,” Hannah says.

Josh bites his lip. His face is pale, his eyes darting around the room. Finally, he nods too.

“Alright. Let’s go make a horrible mistake.”

“I’m coming too,” Matt says. Everyone looks up at him, surprised.

“Matt…” Hannah starts.

“What?” Matt says. “I can handle it. Besides, you guys need the muscle.”

Josh doesn’t even try not to laugh.

“Matt. Darling. Honey. I get that you’re a tough dude among humans, but these are vampires we’re talking about. They’d toss you around like a ragdoll.”

“I’m loath to agree with demons,” Jack says, “but he’s right. You should stay here, for your own protection.”

“And stay here while Hannah and Emily are in danger? Hell no.”

“Matt, please,” Hannah urges him. “I know you wanna help, but…”

“I’m not gonna just stand around being useless,” Matt says. Sam looks at him evenly.

“You’re not useless, Matt. But you’re a human without Jack’s training or gear. I think Emily will be much happier if she gets to see you alive. She’ll understand that it was too dangerous for you to come with us.”

Something about her tone riles up his temper, and before anyone can say anything else he’s left the table in a huff.
“Matt, wait!” Hannah calls after him. Matt turns to find her standing, staring at him with wide, pleading eyes.

“...I’ll be right back,” Matt tells her at last. “I just need some air.”

His limbs feel heavy and worn, they way they did when he was in the hospital doped up with pain meds, as he walks out into the front yard. Dawn is at least an hour away, leaving the sky a dark, dusty panorama of black-blue-red-orange. Matt stretches his neck, rubbing at the sore muscles with his left hand. Somewhere in the city, Emily is alone, surrounded by monsters trying to coax the humanity out of her.

Every day when Matt was injured Emily would visit him. She never stopped looking out for him, even when everyone else did.

She never turned her back on him. He’s not about to turn his back on her.

For a few minutes he stays put, listening to the growing cacophony of crickets. The suburban streets are dark, deserted. He’s about to turn around and go back inside when he hears a scream.

“Hello?” Matt calls out.

“HELP!” cries the voice. “OH GOD, SOMEBODY HELP ME, PLEASE!”

Matt’s feet move before his mind does. He dashes into the street, following the screams until he rounds a corner and sees a bloodied girl lying in the middle of the street, barely moving. Matt swallows as he grows closer, his stomach turning at the smell of fresh blood. The girl stirs feebly as he kneels beside her.

“Ma’am? Are you alright?”

The girl’s eyes flutter and she looks up at him. Her eyes are dark, dark green.

“So pretty.”

“What?”

Her lips curl into a small smile. In a flash of movement too fast for Matt to track, he sees a blur of teeth and blood and wide eyes and suddenly he’s on his back, his head ringing and a familiar metallic taste filling his mouth. The girl kneels on top of him, knees crushing down on his chest. He tries to scream, tries to suck air into his lungs, but she just pushes down harder, making Matt wheeze and hiss.

She licks her lips and grins, her long, needle-sharp fangs bared.

“Come on, pretty doll,” she hisses, “let’s play.”

Chapter End Notes

Matt, you did wonder who Ashley is....

Sorry about the delay, both my co author and I were busy but I hope the length of the chapter made up for it? I’ve looked at our notes and it seems like the other chapter won't
be as long as this one.

As you can tell, now that Matt, Jess and Emily are in the hands of the clan, shit is about to get real. Strap in folks.

Thanks again for all the support for this story. We started this almost ONE YEAR ago. And now, look, it's this giant behemoth. Thank you to everyone who has read this, but in particular, those of you who have left a review or kudos. It means the world to us, and spurs to finish this bad boy as soon as possible.

And finally, thanks to my co author, who is a great source of ideas and encouragement. Thanks my bro. Almost to the promised land!
Hold Back the River

Chapter Notes

Title comes from the 2015 song of the same name by James Bay. Please note that there’s explicit sex in this chapter, as well as more-intense-than-usual violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s been three days.

The sun has slowly whittled her hands down to a melted parody of flesh, the skeletal fingers stiff and painful to move. The smell of burned meat fills Emily’s nostrils and she struggles against the urge to dry heave. A small bowl of blood lies untouched in front of her. Bev brought it in yesterday, a shit-eating grin on her face.

It didn’t take a genius to riddle out what human the blood came from.

Emily flexes her left hand. A dull wave of pain courses through her. She grits her teeth and tries to make her hands as small as possible, testing them against the heavy iron braces on her wrists. She pins the chains with her feet to brace herself, then tugs. The pain is immediate, but not anything she can’t tough out. Her eyes sting as she contorts her fingers, watching her burned, bony hands squeeze through the manacles, the rough metal scraping against the raw, half-melted flesh. Finally, after what feels like hours, she yanks one hand free, then the other, kicking the blood bowl over in a spasm of agony and relief. She fights the urge to sob as she collapses into an exhausted heap, a stray tear escaping between her eyelids and splashing onto the dirty floor.

The easiest part of her escape is over.

A quick glance to the sky gives her enough clues to guess it’s late morning. She has about half a day to pull this off. Emily stretches, listening to the satisfying crack-crack-crack of her joints, and slowly, shakily gets to her feet. A blue tunnel of darkness fills her vision as her head spins, and she leans into the wall, gripping the stones for balance. She’s felt Jess’s presence in small, faint bursts these past few days. Wherever she is, she’s not staying conscious for very long.

Anger closes around her heart like a vice, and she does her best to swallow down the poisonous hate inside of her. The rage is easier to manage than it used to be, but goddamn if it wasn’t seductive in times like this.

She bides her time until she hears footsteps outside her cell. They’re brisk and light, the steps of someone who wants to be in and out as quickly as possible. Emily presses her back against the wall adjacent to the door and waits for it to swing open. When it does, Emily pounces, catching a squealing Wren off her guard, her delivery of blood tumbling from her flailing hands.

“Ah!” Wren shrieks. “Oh, Emily! You’re not supposed to be out of your chains. I mean, not that I want you to be in those chains, but it’s not my call, you know? Though I have to say, not sure if I’d have made a game of pissing off Cassandra so much if I were you. I mean, technically you had a unique situation compared to the rest of us, but still. You don’t have a good time around here if you don’t know how to keep a low profiEEEW what’s wrong with your hands?!”
Before she can keep on yammering, Emily presses a hand to Wren’s mouth.

“You keep quiet and stay down here, or I’ll chain you up and watch you burn.”

“Yrsh mrm,” is Wren’s muffled reply.

Emily stands, satisfied when she sees Wren holding her position on the ground, refusing to move, and heads toward the exit. The halls are dark and quiet, the kind of quiet that fills the air with electricity and has you waiting for the first sounds of thunder. She follows the echoes of Jess’s struggles for consciousness, walking through the cold, labyrinthine halls until she finds Alex standing vigil next to a big black door. Alex looks tired, dark circles under her dull brown eyes as she watches Emily come closer. For the first time since Emily first met Alex, she doesn’t look afraid.

“Emily.”

“I need to borrow your key, Alex,” Emily says, looking directly into the larger woman’s eyes. Alex looks back, weary expression unchanging.

“She wants you to do this, Emily. It gives her precedent to hurt you more.”

“Yeah, because lying around and waiting to die is totally a better option,” Emily snaps. “Give me the fucking key, Alex.”

Alex closes her eyes. Saying nothing as she pulls the key from her pocket and presents it to her. Emily snatches it from her hand and brushes her aside, beginning to work the lock.

“Em, please. Just take Jess and run. Hide out somewhere until sundown and grab a car and go.”

“I’m not leaving without my mom,” Emily says without looking at her.

“That’s exactly what she wants you to think,” Alex begs. “Em, why do you think these rooms were so lightly guarded?”

“I...Yeah, probably this is some trap, okay? I know that. But my mom will die without me.”

“Better you live and remember her than die with her here.”

“Look, Alex, I’m not here to talk about morality or choice or whatever. Get the fuck out of my way, and if you tell anyone about this, I’ll rip out your tongue and feed it to you.”

“You’re brave, Emily,” Alex says as she walks away, her footsteps almost silent. “I’ll remember you at the end of this. Someone has to.”

Emily turns the key and slowly drags the heavy door back, looking out at the blackness of the room beyond. She hears someone faintly stirring in the cell’s depths. Quickly, Emily slips inside and shuts the door behind her, scanning for any hidden comers. Finding none, she breathes a sigh of relief and closes the door behind her.

“Ngh...Em...?”

Jess’s voice is rough, raspy. She sounds a little out of it, and as Emily follows her voice, she can see why. After her eyes adjust to the dark, she can see Jess on her knees, a trickle of blood running down her bruised, discolored forehead. Her eyes are unfocused and foggy. Someone, Violet, Emily guesses, apparently made a game out of seeing how many blows to the head Jess could withstand. Still, Jess manages to meet her eyes after a moment, and Emily can see some of Jess’s bruises
shrinking, if very slowly.

“Jess. Can you stand? We need to figure out how to get the hell out of here.”

“Smartest thing you’ve ever said,” Jess says hoarsely. “I feel like shit, but I should be okay. I...I’ve had worse.”

Memories of Jess’s brief, bitter descriptions of her husband come to Emily’s mind. Involuntarily, she balls her hands up into fists. Slowly, Jess gets to her feet, swaying where she stands.

“Em,” she says. “They sent me to take your mom. I...I couldn’t do it. I tried to stop them…”

“Jess, it’s okay. I know. You wouldn’t be in this shithole if you’d passed one of Cassandra’s little ‘tests’. Speaking of, we need to get to my mom before Cassandra starts mine. I don’t know who she’s gonna try to have me hurt, but I can guess.”

Jess nods.

“What time is it?”

“Not sure. Little before noon, I’m guessing,” Emily tells her. “If we hurry, we can get my mom out before most of the others wake up. We can find a car, mom can drive while you and I are in the trunk, we can pick up Matt on the way, and we’re golden.”

“But where will we go?” Jess asks. “Escaping is one thing, but Cassandra is one hell of a predator to shake.”

Emily shrugs.

“I’m improvising. Any suggestions?”

Jess thinks for a moment, wiping the blood from her forehead as she does. She seems a little more cogent, now.

“North. Out of California. Somewhere with snow.”

“Agreed,” Emily says. “Fuck this state. Let’s go somewhere without a million fault lines.”

“I’ve heard Idaho’s pretty.”

Emily wrinkles her nose in disgust.

“Ick, no. Anywhere but Idaho.”

Jess chuckles.

“Alright then, no Idaho.” Jess rubs the back of her head, wincing a little as she does, then returns her gaze to her fledgling. “What now?”

“We keep to the shadows. Sneak up on whoever is guarding the place, and take her down together. Then we pop in, get my mom, pop out, steal a car, and hit the road.”

Jess manages a grim smile.

“Sounds so easy when you say it.”
“Waiting around to die is easiest,” Emily tells her. “I’ve never been one to take the easy way out.”

A few minutes later, they’ve slipped into the shadows of the mansion’s long, dark hallways, moving as quickly as they dare, hands clasped tight as if they’re the only things tethering each other to the earth.

Neither one makes a sound.

The halls are utterly silent. Even a human could hear a mote of dust hitting the floor. The pit sits, silent as a tomb, at the end of the hall. There are no guards.

Emily stiffens.

“This is a trap,” she hisses. “I know it.”

“What do we do?” Jess asks?

“Where’s Beth? Maybe, ugh, maybe we could get her to help us. She can’t be okay with you getting hurt like this, can she?”

Jess looks at her feet.

“Beth’s gone.”

“What?”

“...I heard Bev and Violet talking while I was locked up. Hannah deserted, and Beth went to find her. She hasn’t come back yet.”

“I’m sure she’s alright. She’s probably just hiding out somewhere until the sun sets. She’s not dumb enough to get caught in the sunlight.”

“Yeah...” Jess mumbles. “Anyway, how should we handle this?”

“Just...keep an eye out. Any sudden moves, and we bolt.”

Jess nods, offering her fledgling a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Okay,” she says. “Ready when you are.”

By some miracle, the door opens soundlessly. It’s not locked. Emily swallows. Never in all of the world has there been a more obvious trap. Jess grips Emily’s hand as they descend the stairs, and Emily fights the urge to hiss in pain; the nerves on her hands are raw and exposed, and while it’s nice that Jess doesn’t seem to notice or care about the hideous gnarled things her hands have turned into, the pressure still hurts.

It’s dead silent in the pit. The only thing Emily can hear besides her own footsteps is the slow, ragged breathing coming from the center of the pit.

Well, at least her mom is still alive.

The pit is as dark, empty and bleak as ever, with flayed corpses hanging from hooks and the floor coated with dried blood, piss, and mold. At least the sun pit was clean.

Emily can feel old blood seeping into her shoes as she creeps over to her mother, her eyes darting about and seeing nothing. Her mother lifts her head slowly to look at her. Her face is pale and wan,
with massive bags under her eyes and yellowing, congealed cuts across her face and body. Her eyes widen as Emily gets closer.

“Emily…”

“Mom, it’s okay, I’ve got you…”

“Emily!” her mom hisses. “Run!”

Emily stares at her, stunned, before she hears Jess cry out. She wheels around to see Jess falling back into the shadows, a pale arm around her neck. Behind her, Emily can see deep blue eyes glinting in the darkness.

“Now, Emily,” Cassandra says as she puts Jess into a strangle hold. “I know you’re anxious to meet your meal, but patience is a virtue. One of many that you lack, I’ve found.”

“Let her go!” Emily yells, her aching hands balling once again into fists. Cassandra laughs.

“Which one? Oh, that would be another fun game! Whom do you save? Mother, or lover? Oh, but you didn’t know about that, did you, Sakura? Your daughter has been up to so much since you saw her last.” She grins. “Ah, but no. I have a different game in mind. One I’m sure all three of you will enjoy.”

Emily spits at her. The old bitch watches with disinterest as the phlegm hits the disgusting floor, then tightens her grip on Jess’s neck.

“You impertinent little wretch. I’ll enjoy breaking you.” Her head turns sharply to the left. “Ashley. No need to hide your toy any longer. Bring him out.”

Ashley moves out of the shadows, a soft smile on her face, a bloody, semiconscious body cradled in her arms. The body is almost comically larger than her, but she holds it as easily as a ragdoll. Weakly, he mumbles something, and Ashley presses a finger to his lips. When his head turns, Emily locks eyes with her best friend.

“Emily…” Matt croaks.

“Fuck,” Emily mutters, biting her lip so hard it bleeds. “Fuck!”

“Language, Emily. You’re taking years off your mother’s life,” Cassandra laughs. Emily lunges at her, screaming with bloodlust. Before she’s within a foot of her, she feels a tug on her arm as Ashley yanks her backward. Emily hears her shoulder dislocate before she feels it.

“I must confess, it’s a little unwieldy holding this one in place,” Cassandra says, nodding down at Jess. “Beverly? Be a dear and hold onto this tramp for me.”

Beverly steps out of wherever in the pit she was apparently skulking—how many of Cassandra’s minions had been waiting down here?—and takes Jess from Cassandra, subduing her with a cold laugh.

“I can’t wait to rearrange your pretty face, you traitorous whore,” Bev says with a grin. Jess rolls her eyes and continues to struggle in her grip, but Emily can see that the days without food have taken their toll. Cassandra watches the struggle with detached interest, then returns her gaze to Emily.

“If you two will hold still for five minutes, I’ll explain your task. If you pass, your mother is free to go, and you will be considered a full fledged member of our clan. If you fail, you, and everyone you
love, will suffer, and die. I’ll make sure your death is the very last, so you can spend your last moments knowing that you caused everyone and everything you cherish to be destroyed. Understood?”

Emily grits her teeth. Ashley’s hand is wrapped tight around her wrist. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see where Matt was unceremoniously dropped onto the floor.

“The test is very simple,” Cassandra continues. “You will make a meal out of your dear friend Matthew. You will end his life, slowly, tearing skin from his limbs, scarring his face, ripping out teeth, and whatever other delightful alterations we can make to his handsome body. Only when he is clinging to life by the thinnest of threads will you be allowed to open his throat and grant him the mercy of exsanguination. If you fail to cause him adequate pain, I will demonstrate how to properly torture a human on your mother.”

A wave of nausea threatens to bring Emily to the floor in a fit of retching. She can feel the bile gathering in the back of her throat. Her wrenched shoulder throbs. Her hands tremble, becoming even number than before.

“You sick fuck…” Emily whispers. “You...you…”

“Let’s start simple,” Cassandra says with a smile. “Break the fingers on Matt’s left hand. Or his right, if you’re feeling adventurous. Makes no difference to me.”

“No,” Emily says. “No, no, no, no. I’m not doing this.”

Cassandra rolls her eyes, and in one swift motion, breaks one of Sakura’s fingers. Emily and her mother scream at the same time. Distantly, she can hear Matt start to sob to himself.

“You make everything difficult, don’t you, child?” Cassandra asks. “You must have been difficult to raise. The again, Sakura here must have messed up somewhere along the line for her little baby to murder two innocent children in cold blood.”

“Don’t you dare lie like that to me,” Sakura spits. “Emily would never, ever hurt someone like that.”

“Wouldn’t she? Oh, the things I have seen, Mrs. Davis. Did the police neglect to tell you they found your baby’s DNA on Jason Green’s corpse? Her teeth-marks on his ruptured throat? Her fingerprints on his clothing? The evidence is overwhelming, Sakura.”

“How...how do you know about...?”

“Oh, I’ve been following your daughter’s case with some interest, Sakura. Emily’s little vengeful streak ruined a lot of lives. Just ask poor Katie’s parents how they feel about Emily’s oh-so-justified rampage of revenge.”

“You’re lying…” Sakura says. She looks desperately at her daughter. “Emily...she’s lying, isn’t she?”

Emily opens her mouth, but no words leave her, all of them stuck somewhere between her larynx and her tongue. Sakura’s eyes widen with horror.

“Emily…?”

Emily can’t find her voice. Distantly, she can feel the sting of tears in her eyes. Sakura lowers her head and trembles. Cassandra takes another one of Sakura’s fingers and snaps it.
“Your choice, Emily. Take action, or I will.”

The world spins as Emily looks over to Matt. He’s looking up at her, pain and confusion in his eyes. He’s covered in deep, rose-red scars, several of them already festering. The scent of his blood overwhelms her senses, threatening to drown her. Involuntarily, she begins to salivate. Distantly, she hears another snap and another choked cry.

“Now, Emily,” Cassandra says.

Shakily, Emily picks up one of Matt’s hands. His skin is calloused from years of football practice, but she can still see the softness hidden underneath. She swallows a sob as she closes her hand around Matt’s right index finger.

“Em,” Matt rasps. “Help me.”

Emily can’t meet his eyes.

“I’m so sorry.”

She bends his finger back at an unnatural angle, her hands jerking back as if burned as soon as she hears the snap. Matt whimpers and curls into a ball. Cassandra and Bev laugh with jubilation.

“That’s it, Emily. Listen to the monster inside of you. Embrace it like you embrace your whore sire. Only when you realize your worthlessness can we build you into something greater.”

Emily falls to her knees, that old devil rage curling and coiling in her gut, screaming for vengeance, for blood. Her left hand finds a loose stone on the pit floor, her fingers wrapping around it, its rough dusty edges pressing into the skin of her palm. She grits her teeth and stands, looking Cassandra in her cold, empty eyes.

“Something the matter, Emily?” Cassandra asks.

Emily says nothing as she snaps her hand forward, hurling the rock at her head. It catches Cassandra in the temple, sending her staggering back in surprise. Ashley cries out with anger as Bev stares in shock, Jess taking advantage of the chaos to elbow Bev in the gut. Emily charges forward, diving into Cassandra and knocking her to the ground. Hateful blue eyes stare up at her as Emily slams her fist into her nose.

“I’ll kill you,” Emily snarls. “I’ll kill you I’ll kill you I’ll kill you…”

For the briefest moment, Emily thinks she might see the tiniest flicker of fear in Cassandra’s eyes. Then she hears Matt cry out, and turns to see Ashley holding him by his hair, her free hand gripping his throat.

“Let her go,” Ashley says. Her voice is low and rough. “Or I rip out his throat and feed it to you.”

Emily’s split-second hesitation is all Cassandra needs to throw her off and pin her down. In the background she can hear Bev slamming Jess’s head into the wall.

“I was hoping you’d give me trouble,” Cassandra whispers into Emily’s ears. “Now, now, now I can finally drop this useless pretense. All traitors will die. All of you. All of you. You and your whore will die together. Isn’t that romantic?” She grins, her sharpened canines white as death. “But first we’ll give your little human friend a proper sendoff.”

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Beth paces outside her sister’s door, totally at a loss. The house has a shellshocked air about it. Matt’s kidnapping should have spurred them into action. But only Hannah seemed to react, falling to pieces and not being able to move from her room the second they all saw Matt’s blood smeared across the pavement. The rest of them are mired in a strange lethargy, hovering around each other, unsure how to act. Sam is hiding in her room. Josh is cracking jokes, smiling though his eyes are hollow. Jack is fingering his flamethrower, mutterly darkly to himself in between swigs of whiskey.

They look broken. Beaten already.

Beth sighs, wincing and bring her hand up to touch her chest. Her wound has healed meaning theoretically they could attack Cassandra’s fortress tonight. But what’s the point in that? Cassandra knows where they are. They’ve been under surveillance for days. Probably from the minute Beth arrived. How else could Matt have been taken, mere moments after going outside? Cassandra tracked her to this place. Beth thought their connection was severed. It should be. Anyone with even one iota of self respect would have cast her sire out for good, but no. It turns out Beth’s sickness runs deep.

This is all her fault.

She’s about to open the door to her sister’s room when she hears the hallway creek just behind her. It’s a tiny sound but Beth spins around anyway, holding up her fists, itching for a fight.

“Hey!” Josh says, holding his hands up. “Don’t shoot!”

“Josh.”

“You checking up on her? How she been?”

“You know,” Beth says bitterly. “Like she’s lost her whole world.”

“Yeah,” Josh says, wincing. “I should go in there.”

“It’s okay,” Beth says, blocking his path. “I got this. She doesn’t like being crowded when she’s upset.”

“I know. So I’m going in.”

“Excuse me. I got here first.”

“So?” Josh scoffs. “She’s my sister.”

“So?” Beth snarls, trying to pull herself up to her full height. Josh is taller than her, but only just, and she’s ten times the monster he is. “She’s my twin, Josh.”

“I know, I know, but it should be me going in there right now,” Beth opens her mouth, feeling rage and self loathing churning in her gut, only stopping herself from ripping into Josh when he brother holds up his hands pleadingly. “Beth, please. She needs me to comfort her because you have got to find out a way to make this rescue mission work.”

“What?”

“Go find Sam,” Josh says. “Look, the two of you combined have spent over one hundred years with Cassandra. You’re the only two that can find a weakness. So, you want to be useful? You want to help Hannah? Start by finding a way to make Cassandra crawl back into the black hole she came from.”
Beth gapes at her brother, grappling for words. Eventually, she has to concede he has a point. Comforting Hannah feels more like a way to salve Beth’s pain than an actual constructive use of her time. And she can’t afford to be selfish. Not when Matt’s life is hanging precariously in the balance.

“Beth?”

She turns. Her brother is still waiting by Hannah’s door, an apprehensive look on his face.

“Yeah?”

“When I was down in the caves, after I had changed, before Sam found me, I had…so much time to think, you know? So many things to reflect on. And for so long I practiced saying sorry to you. I kept saying it and saying it. Sometimes you were down there with me. In the caves. Sam said that was just my mind playing tricks, but it felt so real, so…” Josh shudders. “I was so sure you died thinking I hated you.”

“Josh?” Beth says, taking a step towards her brother, confused.

“I didn’t think I’d ever have a chance to make it right between us, you know? That I’d blown it. It seems like we’re probably all going to die now anyway. But still. I’m grateful that I have the chance to say sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry for what?”

“You don’t remember?” Josh says, smiling although he looks pained. “We fought the night we were turned. I called you a queer. That was practically my last word to you.”

“I.” Beth stutters. The day they were all turned is hazy, as if her mind is shrouding the horror from her. When she reaches for a memory of that night it seems to slip from her fingers.

But…

“Shut up! Like you’re one to talk anyway. I see the way you look at Sam. You’re as much of a queer as me.”

“Josh,” she says slowly. “Josh, it’s okay. You don’t have to apologise for that. We were kids.”

“I do. That was an awful thing to say. And for so long I thought that was going to be the last thing I ever said to you.”

“Well, I mean, you weren’t, wrong, so…”

Josh laughs, smiling through his tears. Beth goes to him, holds her brother’s cool hands in hers. “I know I wasn’t wrong. But still. I shouldn’t have said that. Some brother I was. I should have had your back. Instead, I wanted you to suffer too.”

“I was suffering. I just didn’t know it.”

“Yeah? Well, I didn’t have a right to out you like that.”

“You saw it? How I felt?” Beth asks, suddenly curious.

“Yeah. I saw both of you. The little looks, the barely-there touches. And Sam never smiled at John the way she smiled at you. I could see it a mile off.” He shakes his head. “I should have helped you guys. We should have stuck together. Instead of me being bitter that you found someone to love.”
“Josh,” her brother is crying in earnest now. Wet, heaving sobs, a lifetime’s worth of guilt tumbling out. Beth pulls him into a tight hug, running a hand through his loose curls. “Josh, it’s okay. I’m sorry too. I was so hard on you back then. But it was just ‘cause I hated myself so much. I didn’t have your courage. But I swear, we’re going to get out of this. Then you and me are going to Pride.”

“Yeah?” Josh chuckles against her neck, but she can feel his tears trickling down her clavicle. “Like you can handle my fabulousness.”

“Oh I intend to, big brother.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Josh says, pulling away, wiping the tears away. A determined, almost grave expression settles on his face. “Now go figure out how we’re going to fix this.”

She leaves him, wincing when she hears Hannah’s choked sobs as Josh opens the door.

He’s right. She needs to fix this.

When she gets to Sam’s room she sees her fledgling leaning over her desk, scrutinising a pile of newspapers closely. It’s the middle of the day, so the blinds are fastened shut, the only light coming from a tabletop lamp. Sam’s eyes work just as well in the dark, but the tiny human touch makes Beth smile.

“Hey,” Sam says, glancing up. Her voice is hoarse. She sounds like she used to, back in the mansion when she just woke up, her voice still husky with sleep as she rolled over and whispered *hi* into Beth’s hair.

“Hey. Whatcha doing?”

“Looking over some stuff,” Sam gestures to a nearby chair. Beth takes the hint, pulling up close to Sam, trying to resist the urge to press up against her. “Anyway, I’ll tell you about this in a second. I remembered something you said before Matt was taken. Something about cameras.”

“Yeah,” Beth says bitterly. “They’re everywhere.”

“Everywhere? Hannah’s room is still on the ground floor, right? Could we sneak in through there?”

“No. The cameras…” Beth swallows down a wave of nausea, the horror of this betrayal reborn anew. “The cameras are in the rooms, too.”

“What?” Sam baulks, dropping her pen to the desk. “She filmed you...In your rooms?”

“Yeah. Turns out technology made Cass more paranoid, not less.”

“When did this happen? How long has this been going on?”

“Well, I have a USB here, so from at least 1992. But a little before then, I think.” She doesn’t add the obvious, that at least Cass didn’t violate her and Sam’s privacy. But Beth knows Cassandra would have, in a second, if only she had the means.

“God, that’s awful. And none of you knew?”

“Cass is smart enough to keep it hidden. More’s the fucking pity. Anyway, what are you looking at?”

“Oh,” and Sam looks apprehensive all of a sudden. “Well, after Josh and I got settled and found a place to live, I started looking around for anything I could do to get at Cassandra. I knew I couldn’t
risk going anywhere near you guys again, but at least I could do something to try and stop her. I mean, she’s never left California, right? There has to be a reason. Something that’s keeping her here.”

Beth nods, silently urging her to continue.

“So I went to the public library and looked for any clues. Newspaper clippings mostly. I looked, on and off, for decades for anything at all about who Cassandra really is.”

“Did you find anything?”

“Not a lot. Except for this…” Sam slides a few newspaper clippings over to her. Beth blinks, confused, trying to understand what Sam is getting at.

**Banker’s son sues for divorce**

**Martial shock: Prominent banker accuses wife of adultery**

**Tawdry tale: banker and wife divorce**

“I don’t understand…”

“Look at this,” Sam says, pushing another paper forward. Beth looks hard at the blurry picture of a distraught woman, clutching a small infant to her chest. A woman who looks a lot like…

“No way,” Beth whispers. “This can’t be her.”

“It looks just like her, Beth. She was married to a wealthy socialite, some guy called Nathaniel Harrison. But he said she cheated so he divorced her. It went through the courts pretty quickly but still, it was all over the papers.”

“Sam,” Beth mutters, head spinning. She can’t take her eyes off the picture, shocked at the look of pain in the woman’s eyes. “You can’t be sure it’s her.”

“Maybe it’s not. But she had a baby. The newspapers went into all the sordid details. She had a little girl with red hair.” Sam’s face hardens. “Didn’t you say she made Ashley call her mother?”

“That…doesn’t prove anything.”

“Here’s the thing, though. The jerk who threw her out? He died. Less than four years after the divorce.” Sam pushes another clipping towards her. “He was killed in the arms of his mistress. Massive trauma and blood loss. To the neck.”

“That’s…”

“A lot of coincidences.”

“But then…” Beth looks back at the grainy picture. It does look a lot like Cass, although it’s hard to reconcile the sophisticated woman she knew to the petrified girl in front of her. “She said she was 500 years old…”

“So she lied. There’s a shocker. But it makes sense, though, right? Her hatred of men. Her weird preoccupation with fighting ‘injustice.’ Her need for control. Her obsession with Ashley.”

“Yeah…” Beth says, looking at the small caption underneath the photo.
“Sally Meeks,” Beth growls. “Sally Meeks. Christ. All this time. All this time we spent together and I didn’t even know her fucking name.”

“Beth,” Sam says softly, going to take her hand. She stops, and Beth’s grateful that Sam remembers that she doesn’t like to be touched too much when she’s upset. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. God, none of this is your fault. I just, ugh, I wanna scream. I wanna punch something. How can she do this? How can she lie about everything?”

“I dunno…”

“It’s disgusting. It’s fucking awful.”

“It’s a betrayal.”

“You’re right. It’s a betrayal.”

Sam sighs, rubbing her temples. “I’m not sure what we do with this information. But it’s better knowing than not, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Beth mumbles, feeling the stirrings of a nascent idea beginning to form in her mind.

A betrayal. A violation. A house built on lies…

A house built on lies.

“Beth,” Sam says slowly. “Are you okay?”

“Sammy,” Beth says, her voice beginning to shake. She takes her fledgling’s hand and squeezes tight. “Sammy!”

“What, what?”

Beth grins. “I think I just figured out how to defeat Cassandra.”

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“Well. What do we have here?” Cassandra purrs.

Emily struggles, but Bev’s grip around her is merciless. Ashley keeps Jess restrained in the other corner. Between them, Matt and Sakura take turns receiving Cassandra’s wrath. Sakura sobs quietly, her head bowed, as Cassandra leans into Matt, her eyes widening as she sees something on his neck. She squints, and sees what Cassandra is leering at: a pair or tiny circular scars in Matt’s neck, a few centimeters apart. Cassandra laughs again, short and venomous.

“I see. Hannah took quite a liking to you.” She kisses the mark, grinning as Matt flinches away. “I like you too, Matt.”

“…Just...just leave her alone…!” Matt rasps. “Don’t…”

“Don’t what? Don’t harm her? Don’t use and seduce her and leave her to rot? Don’t do what she was planning to do to you?”

A bitter wave of nausea courses through Emily’s stomach. Bev chuckles in her ear.
“I...I know...what she did...” Matt says miserably. “She told me.”

“Really?” Cassandra asks. “What else did she tell you? Did she blame me? Claim I made her kill the men she’s killed? Oh, Matthew, if only you knew. She’s slaughtered and devoured enough men to fill a concert hall. I’m sure she claimed it wasn’t her fault, but it was her teeth in the end, not mine. What makes you think you’re so different, hm? What makes you so sure she isn’t using you, even now? And even if she isn’t, one day you’d get old and decrepit and useless to her. What then? She’ll never age, Matthew. She’d cast you aside like garbage and find some new suitor to tell her sob story. You aren’t special to her. She won’t come back for you. No one’s coming to help you.” She leans in and bites down hard on the scars on his neck. Matt cries out, struggling in her grip. The smell of his blood is disgusting and intoxicating in equal measure.

Jess lets out a tiny whining noise. Cassandra looks up, blood dripping from her mouth. She smiles.

“Hungry?”

Jess grits her teeth and glares at Cassandra, hate in her red-rimmed eyes.

“Burn in hell, you sadistic bitch.”

Cassandra, unmoved, strides over to Jess and grabs her chin, tilting her head upward until their eyes lock again. Emily feels her own terror magnify as Jess’s fear joins the growing discordant symphony in her mind.

“So impertinent. And here I thought your darling husband had beaten the defiance out of you. Oh, but this time, your little lover Beth isn’t here to save you.” She sinks her sharpened nails into Jess’s gut, digging and twisting as the chamber fills with Jess’s screams. Emily can’t look away from the growing red stain on Jess’s shirt, spreading out from where Cassandra’s hand still digs and pierces flesh. Distantly, she can feel the stabbing pain in her own abdomen, so white-hot it feels unreal. Finally, she pulls her hand out again, watching with satisfaction as Jess whimpers.

“That will make her come running. Running to save her fledgling,” she says mockingly, and despite everything, Emily feels a faint pang of jealousy. Cassandra looks up at the ceiling and laughs. “I should have started doing these tests years ago. I feel so much younger!” Cassandra crows. She turns around, her eyes gleaming with murderous intent, only to tut when she sees Matt slumping to the ground, unconscious. “Oh. Now that’s too bad.” She stretches, the cracks of her neck like snapping branches on a silent night. “Well, at least I can make him last a little longer. I need to rest anyway, it’s almost dawn.” She clicks her fingers. Bev and Ashley drop their captives and scuttle up to join her. “Jessica. Emily. Make sure our guests don’t die, alright?” They saunter up the stairs. “Sleep well,” Cassandra calls to them before she slams the door, leaving the four of them alone in the dark. After the shock wears off, Emily moves over to Matt, covering her nose and looking over his wounds. They’re numerous but not deep, although the long gashes on Matt’s face look incredibly painful. Still, his injuries don’t look immediately fatal. She guesses Cassandra and Ashley wanted to keep Matt around for their amusement as long as possible. Carefully, she lifts Matt’s head, keeping the bite on his neck as elevated as possible without hurting him even more. Matt stirs in her arms.

“Emily...”

“Matt, fuck,” Emily says. “I told you not to come looking for me! Did you even read the note I gave your tramp?”

“She’s not a tramp...”
“Sorry. Your lady of the night.”

“Emily.”

“Sorry,” Emily grumbles, but there’s the faintest hint of a smile on Matt’s face.

“Em…Of course…I went looking for you. You’re…you’re my best friend. You would’ve…done the same for me. Lord knows you’re…just as stubborn as I am.”

Emily manages a short chuckle.

“Thank you for looking for me,” she says quietly.

Matt smiles, but his eyes are fluttering closed.

“I’m sorry…” He mumbles before his breathing deepens and his eyes close. Emily holds his head in her hands, keeping it elevated until the bleeding in his neck slows, then stops. Finally, she lays him down, hands shaking. She hears Jess murmuring to herself in the dark, cursing under her breath. Before she can go over to her, she hears a soft sob and feels a hand brush her shoulder. She looks up to find her mother, eyes red rimmed and watery, her mouth in a thin white line.

“Mom…”

“Your hands!” her mother gasps. Emily pulls her hands back instinctively, folding them in her lap. She winces from the pain, and her mother puts her hand on Emily’s shoulder.

“Em, honey…I…thought you were dead.”

_I am_, she thinks, but she holds her tongue.

“What happened to you?” Her mother asks. She opens her mouth and closes it soundlessly, as if fumbling for words. Emily’s throat suddenly feels sore.

“I was on my way back home after the night of that shitty prank, and I got jumped,” Emily says slowly. “When I woke up, I was here. That woman, Cassandra, she’s been taking girls for years. She has some fucked up blood cult shit going on here. I just wanted to get out, and, and I tried, but she has eyes everywhere, and even if I’d been able to get past them, I…” She closes her eyes. “Mom, I’m not…they changed me.”

“What do you mean?” her mother asks quietly. Emily holds out her arm.

“Check for a pulse.”

“What?”

“Please. Just…you’ll see,” Emily sighs. Her mother’s blood-stained fingers brush against her wrist. They fumble up and down her arm as her eyes widen.

“Where…?”

“I’m one of them, mom. It sounds so stupid, but…I’m not human anymore.”

Her mother’s expression is unreadable. When she speaks, Emily can barely hear her.

“Is…is it true, what Cassandra said? Have you killed people?”
Emily feels tears welling up in her eyes. Her lip trembles.

“...Yes.”

“Why?”

“I...I don’t know. I just...I killed Katie and Jason. When I woke up here, they brought Katie to me, and I was just so...so angry, and hungry. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, I swear, but it was just...primal.”

“...And Jason?” her mother asks.

“I made her,” Jess’s voice sounds from the darkness. “I manipulated Emily into killing him. I knew that when she got there, the anger and the hunger would be too much. All I had to do was get her there.”

“Emily,” her mother whispers, “You don’t...I can’t...you’re not a killer. You can’t be.”

“I did, mom. I...I’m sorry. I don’t have an excuse, I just...” She swallows around a growing lump in her throat, her shoulders beginning to shake with sobs. Cold tears stream down her cheeks, and she looks down at her knees, unable to face her mother.

“We knew she’d be aggressive and starving when we turned her,” Jess says. “That’s why we brought Katie and Jason to her. As meat.”

“But...”

“We have to eat people to live. Cassandra thinks that people have to be broken down and desensitized in order to survive. Em never would have hurt anyone without us forcing her hand.”

“That’s...that’s not...” Emily mumbles. “No excuses.”

“Emily, you’ve done harm,” her mother says gently. “There’s no dancing around that. But we can make it right. As soon as we get out of here, we’ll figure out how to make it right.”

“But...”

“You’re not a monster. This place, these people who did this to you, they’re the monsters, alright? Not you.” She pulls Emily into a hug, the warm, gentle kind she remembers from when she was six and the nightmares were twisting the shadows of her bedroom into monsters lying in wait. The kind that always made her feel that no matter what happened, her mom would keep her safe. “Oh, my baby. My poor baby. I’m so sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

It feels like hours before they let go, her mother looking down at Matt and exhaling.

“I’ll do what I can for him. If you have any ideas on how to get out of here...”

“I’ll think of something,” Emily tells her. “I won’t let you die, mom.”

“My brave girl,” her mother says. “...If we die here, I want you to know that I’ve always loved you. You’re the greatest gift life has ever given me.”

“I love you, mom,” Emily says, feeling the tears coming back. Christ, she’s been a blubbering wreck all day. She feels like she’s a kid again, tiny and weak and scared of a wide and strange world, of the maw of death that had swallowed up her father and threatened to gobble everything else. She turns away, walking up the stairs, her hands running over the heavy metal door for a weak point, a
Nothing. Goddamn fucking nothing.

Emily slams her fist against the unmoving metal and swears. Nothing happens. She slumps down onto the stairway, her head hanging low.

This is all her fault. If she’d just played along and kept her head down, none of this would have happened.

If she hadn’t made an enemy out of Cassandra…
If she hadn’t refused to stay the night at Matt’s…
If she hadn’t gone to that party…
If she hadn’t crushed on the wrong girl…

“Em.”

Emily looks up to find Jess standing a few steps below her, looking up at her with her lovely green eyes, glinting, even now, with a faint specter of hope.

“Jess. Are you okay?”

Jess shrugs.

“I’m about as okay as I can be,” she says. “Any ideas?”

“No,” Emily sighs. “I’ll think of something, I will, I just don’t know what to try.”

“Uh, well, don’t get your hopes up, but help might be coming,” Jess tells her.

“What?”

“When Cassandra was hurting me, I think Beth felt it too.”

“But isn’t that what Cassandra wants? For her to come back?”

“Probably,” Jess says. “But she won’t come alone. She’s too smart for that. So, so we just have to hold on until she gets here.”

Emily doesn’t want to bring up the possibility that Beth might not come back at all, not when it was such an obvious trap, but in their little private hell, the more hope they have, the better.

“Yeah,” Emily says. “Maybe.”

“And, and Hannah will wanna come back too. To find Matt. We’ll be okay. I know it. We just need to hold on.” Emily isn’t sure how Jess can be optimistic, even in times like this. It’s strange seeing it in someone so jaded, like a rose in a desert, both startling and beautiful. Jess walks up a few steps until she can take Emily’s hands in her own. “We’ll have to be strong. And if there’s anyone on this miserable ugly planet who knows how to be strong, it’s you.” She smiles, tears starting to bloom in her eyes. “S-so, you better not die, bitch.”

Emily smirks.
“Not planning on it.”

Jess squeezes her hands and looks into her eyes. They’re probably going to die, all of them, in painful and degrading ways. There’s little left for any of them. If they’re going to die, Emily wants to die with as many pleasant memories as she can gather.

And she thinks she knows how to make a new one.

Leaning in, she smiles a bit at Jess’s squeak of surprise as she presses their lips together. After a moment or two, Jess relaxes into the kiss, moving a hand tentatively into Emily’s hair. It’s not a terribly sensual kiss, or even all that pleasant, given that they both reek of blood, sweat and dirt, but it still leaves Emily feeling warm. They pull apart, Jess looking stunned in the best way.

“Okay, now you really have to survive,” Jess says.

“Don’t you worry,” Emily tells her. “We’re way too pretty to die.”

Sam glances at the alarm clock next to her bed. It’s almost 3pm. Right about now she’d usually be asleep, dead to the world. But she’s tossed and turned for hours, yearning for sleep, even though she knew it would never come. Her sire’s emotions come to her in brief gusts and surges, and Sam is unsure if that means Beth is dreaming or awake. Their connection is returning, slowly, and even amidst every horrible thing that has happened, at least that precious link is one she no longer has to suppress.

Hannah’s probably resting by now, or at the least safe under Josh’s watchful eye. She’s certain though that Beth has no one looking out for her. Sam sighs. As usual, the youngest Washington is trying to shoulder her burden alone.

She stops outside Beth’s room, presses her ear against the door. She can’t hear anything, not even the rustle of sheets. It could well be that Beth is asleep. If so, then she wouldn’t want to be disturbed.

Well, it wouldn’t hurt just to check.

When she opens the door she sees her sire on her back, silent and unmoving. Sam thinks she’s asleep, until her eyes adjust to the gloom and sees that Beth is lying on top of the blankets, staring blankly up at the ceiling. Sam can see what looks like dark circles under her eyes, white teeth worrying the chapped skin of her lips.

“Hey,” Beth says, still staring up ahead.

“Hey,” Sam says, closing the door behind her. She hovers near the door, looking for somewhere to sit. There really isn’t anywhere except the bed, and Sam already feels awkward for standing around for so long. She takes the plunge, broaching the space between them and sitting down as far away from her sire as possible. Beth doesn’t turn to look at her. “Can’t sleep either?”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead.”

Sam frowns. She doesn’t like the tone.

“Okay. That’s not at all depressing.” For a split second, Beth’s lips quirk into a smile. It’s gone before Sam can blink, though. “Seriously, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Sam.”
“Beth—”

“I said I’m fine.”

“Okay, cool. So you won’t be mind me sitting here and telling you all the ways I’m not fine.” Beth rolls her eyes, but there’s no malice in it. Sam smiles, curls her legs underneath her. “I’m freaking out. I mean, we’re going straight into the lion’s den. I know we have a plan, but so much could go wrong. And…” she swallows. “It’s scary, because I could lose you and Hannah, right when I finally found you.”

Beth winces, dragging her eyes away from the ceiling and looking at Sam for the first time.

“That won’t happen. I won’t let it.”

There’s a pause. Sam swallows. Her mouth feels intolerably dry.


“Sam,” Beth says, reaching out and squeezing her hand. “I...missed you too. More than I can ever—fuck it. Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? What for?”

Beth’s quiet for a while. Sam waits, knows she’ll unburden herself when she’s ready.

“This is all my fault. I mean, everything, everything, leads back to me. If I hadn’t—Everybody is in this fucked up position because of me. I’m the one Cass—Sally—whatever...I’m the one she wanted, right from the beginning. The rest of you are my collateral damage.”

“Beth, that’s not true! And anyway, even if Cassandra only wanted you, that doesn’t make it your fault.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No. It doesn’t.”

Beth’s smiles is shorn of humor.

“Cass isn’t going to let me go, Sam. She’s never going to let me go. Even if we rescue Jess and the others, it won’t be the end of it. It’ll never end. Not until she has me where she wants me.”

Sam scowls. Her hatred is hot, and pulses through her veins like blood. “Then we’ll end it. Because I’m not losing you again, Beth. That’s not an option.”

“Sammy—”

“It’s not, Beth.”

Beth sighs, turns her head away, as if ashamed. Sam squeezes her hand, vows never to let it go again.

“She hurt Jess.”

Sam blinks, startled.

“What?”
“Maybe an hour ago. Cass must have done something really bad to her for me to have felt it.” Beth looks up at her again, but this time, her eyes are thick with tears. “I’m sorry for dragging you into this, Sam. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Shh, it’s okay,” Sam says, running her hand through Beth’s hair. It’s a little coarse, like it hasn’t been washed in a while. Beth looks as though every little ritual of health is falling away, like she wants to make her body slowly fall apart and rot.

Sam thinks she would do anything to hold Beth together.

“Do you know, for so long I hated you. I thought I did, anyway. Did you know, fuck, how pathetic is this? I wouldn’t even say your name. Cassandra didn’t have to influence me at all. I hated you all by myself. And it hurts because now...now I see it. I see why you had to do it. And I’m sorry I didn’t have your courage. I’m sorry I couldn’t have helped you. I’m sorry you had to shoulder the burden of being in that awful place alone.”

Beth’s face is wet with tears already. Sam takes in a shuddering breath, trying to clear the overwhelming sadness, whether her own or Beth’s, she doesn’t know. All she knows is Beth can’t endure this pain alone. She lies down next to her sire and cups her slick cheek in her palm.

“There are so many things I regret. So many things I wish I could have done differently. So many things I have to atone for. But I could never regret knowing you. Never.”

“Fuck,” Beth cries, burying her face in Sam’s shoulder, body heaving. “Fuck. How am I ever going to make it up? All those people I killed? Sam, there’s no coming back from that.”

“There is. Okay? Because you’re not who Cassandra tried to make you to be. You’ve got a good heart, Beth. She never beat that out of you. And I know you’ve done awful things. So I have I. In fact, we even did some awful things together. But that’s why we have to live. That’s why we have to carry on. How else are we going to atone? How else can we make it right?”

“I’m not sure I can, Sam.”

“Then let me help you. Let Josh help you. You’re not alone anymore.”

Sam looks into Beth’s eyes. Those lovely, deep dark eyes. They used to be so full of joy. Of mischief. Sam wonders when Cassandra leched that happiness away.

“Sam. I can’t...I couldn’t stand it if something happened to you. Or my sister, my brother. I have to make this right.”

Sam pulls away. There’s something lurking in Beth’s tone, a finality she doesn’t like. “What do you mean?”

“Cassandra wants me? Then let her have me. Straight swap. Jess, Matt, Emily and Ashley. For me. I think she’d be willing to pay a high price to have me back.”

“Beth! What the fuck. No.”

“It makes sense. You know I’m the only one she wants. I can stop this. There doesn’t have to be any bloodshed!”

“Beth, no. No. I am not leaving you in the hands of that maniac, okay? No one is getting left behind. No one.”
“Why not? It’s what I deserve.”

“No,” Sam cries, more forcefully than she intends. She sits up, propping herself up by her arm. Beth drags in a wet breath, curling up into herself.

“This is not your fault. This is Cassandra’s fault. You are not to blame. Do you hear me, Bethany Anne Washington? And let me tell you something, I am not leaving you with that abusive monster again. I already did it once.” Her voice trembles. “I’m not doing it again.”

“Sam…”

“We are not leaving you. Because we love you, Beth. Josh loves you. Hannah loves you. Jess loves you. I...I love you.”

Below her Beth shudders. Sam sees the first flicker of hope in her eyes.

“You love me?”

“I do. I think I loved you from the day I fell down that ravine when we were kids. Remember? I slipped on some gravel and tumbled to the bottom of that hill near your house. You charged down after me. I’ve never seen you run so fast. Then you bandaged me up and told me to stop whining ‘cause we have a hike to finish.”

Beth smiles. Sam wonders if she’s basking in the memory too.

“I love you,” Sam repeats. She cradles Beth cheek. Her hand feels coarse when pressed up against Beth’s smooth, wet skin. “I never stopped loving you.”

“Oh,” Beth says. “Oh.”

The space between them is dangerously small. Beth shifts, her body inching closer.

“Beth…” Sam whispers.

“I know,” Beth says, moving closer, breath hot on Sam’s cheek. “I know.”

She doesn’t move, can’t, when Beth finally broaches the gap between them, presses her soft lips to hers.

“Is this okay?”

“Yeah,” Sam says, pushing Beth down into the bed, kissing her feverently. “Yeah, it is.”

They spend long moments kissing languidly before Sam eventually tears her mouth away, nuzzling the crook of Beth’s neck. She breathes Beth in, the scent of her familiar and alien all at once. Beth turns her head, kissing along her jaw, her touch light but it makes Sam shiver all the same.

Sam wants to be close to her, as close as their bodies allow so she surges back up and kisses Beth fiercely. Her sire whimpers into the kiss, her hips canting up, making Sam warm in all the right places.

And it’s so surreal, to be kissing Beth, Beth, again. It’s almost startling how easily they fall into a pattern, hands and mouths tracing paths across skin.

“That feels so good,” Beth says, her voice low and hoarse. Sam nips at her ear, shuddering at how needy Beth sounds, and while a tiny voice is telling her to stop, she doesn’t think she could even if
she truly wanted to.

Sam throws her leg over Beth, straddling her, suppressing a smile when Beth’s eyes widen almost comically. She almost thinks this is a dream, the kind where Sam wakes up suddenly, all flushed and wanting, the only relief coming when she slides a hand down her pants. But if this is a dream, then it’s the best kind of one, she thinks, as she palms Beth’s breasts, smiling down at her when her sire arches up into her touch.

Beth reaches out and grips Sam’s hips, as if trying to steady herself, and Sam thinks perhaps she’s struggling to believe this could be real, too.

“I love you,” Sam murmurs, dragging her mouth down her jaw, her ear, her neck. Beth whimpers, her legs spreading further, letting Sam settle in between them.

Clothes come off. There might not be a tomorrow for them, so Sam wants to take her time but she’s overwhelmed with an urge to touch, to taste. Before long she’s flung Beth’s shirt, along with her own top and bra, across the room.

“You’re eager,” Beth teases.

“Shut up,” Sam laughs, before gasping when Beth’s hands shoot up to cover her breasts, massaging softly.

“Okay,” Beth says with a smirk. “I’ll shut up now.”

“You’re impossible.”

They’re kissing again, a bit frantic and messy this time. Beth leans up and pulls Sam down until they’re pushed flush up against each other, nothing but skin-against-skin. Sam groans a bit, grinding down against Beth’s thigh unconsciously, amazed, still, by how good this feels.

“Please Sam,” Beth says, the humor gone from her voice, looking up at her, all vulnerable, and it takes every inch of Sam’s willpower not to rip Beth’s underwear off and dive straight in.

“Oh okay,” Sam says, kissing down Beth’s body, lingering on the swell of her breasts, the dip and curve of her waist. Every kiss is a reminder, memories of their lovemaking coming back with full force. Beth still likes a firm stroke of her tongue across her nipple, she still squirms and gasps when Sam bites at her neck. She still likes to grind up against the thigh between her legs.

Eventually, Sam can’t take it anymore, kissing down Beth’s body, pulling her pajama bottoms off her.

Jesus, she’s wet already, and when Sam leans down and places a kiss on top of her panties they both moan in response.

“Fuck,” Sam sighs, kissing her through the damp material, lingering over where she knows her clit is, delighted when Beth grinds up against Sam’s mouth.

She’s barely touched a woman since she left the mansion all those years ago. It’s not like she hasn’t wanted to, but being a fugitive and taking care of a half-starved vampire is a full-time job. But besides the odd kiss she’s only been in this situation once before, where she’d fucked a vivacious girl she met at a bar Josh dragged her to about five years ago. Sam had fingered her in backseat of her car. When they had finished the girl practically begged Sam to take her back to her place. But Sam couldn’t, not when she was still too entranced by the warm, heaving veins in her neck.
No such concerns here, but when Sam glances up, Beth is staring down at her, looking so overwhelmed, sad almost, that Sam just about calls the whole thing off, there and then.

“Beth?”

“It’s just…all these years. All these fucking years…”

“Do you want to stop?”

“Stop?” And there’s that cheesy, carefree smile. “Jesus, Sam, you trying to kill me? Don’t you dare fucking stop.”

Sam beams back up at her, before pulling Beth’s panties down, placing messy kisses on the inside of her thighs before surging forward, too eager to wait.

And god, Beth is so, so, wet, wetter than Sam remembers. The sharp slickness on her tongue, the heavy scent of Beth’s arousal is almost overpowering. But when she drags her tongue up the length of her sire’s slit, she remembers the joy of this, how she loves being in charge of Beth’s pleasure.

She works her tongue over her, licking up and down with long firm strokes, familiarising herself. It takes only a few minutes before Beth is pushing herself into Sam’s mouth, warm and insistent, and while she was planning to draw this out, she doesn’t think either of them have the patience for it.

Sam finds moves tongue, tongue flitting over Beth’s clit. Beth whines in response, quivering and squirming up against Sam’s mouth. Sam licks a little firmer, circling her tongue around her clit, loving how Beth cries out, arching up into her touch.

“Fuck, Sam. Oh fuck.”

Sam smiles around her clit, flicking her tongue, grazing the tip, which makes Beth cry out again. Her sire’s head is thrown back onto the pillows, the long pale expanse of her neck bared. Sam leans forward, starts to licks in small, concise circles, concentrating on the part that drives her sire crazy.

“Sam, please…”

“What?” Sam smirks, lifting her head away, replacing her mouth with her hand, stroking Beth lightly. Beth groans, twisting against Sam’s fingers.

“Sam, just…more.”

“More…”

“Sam, Jesus, fuck, you know, more, inside, please—”

She trails off, moaning when Sam leans back down, lapping at her clit while rubbing two fingers against her entrance. Beth’s eager, trying to bear down on Sam’s fingers as they push gently inside.

The memories are still a little hazy, but usually Sam needs to take a little care when pushing two fingers inside of Beth, but this time they slide in with ease. Sam whimpers, feeling a stab of hot arousal run through her when she feels how warm and wet Beth is, her inner walls tightening around Sam, drawing her in deeper.

Sam pulls back, fucking her gently at first, but Beth doesn’t want that, not if the desperate way she’s bucking up against her is any indication. So she picks up the pace, dropping her mouth back down, licking and sliding her tongue around her clit, while starting to fuck Beth with purpose.
“Oh, fuck, fuck. Sam. Fuck.”

Sam almost wants to tell her to keep it down, that they don’t want to be as loud as Hannah and Matt, but there’s something so sexy about Beth letting go like this.

“Sam—please...I need…another finger.”

Three? Over the years they’ve made love hundreds of times, but Beth has never asked for that. But then, perhaps it was foolish to think Beth’s desires would remain static, encased in amber. And Sam has never had the heart to deny her anything.

Even though Beth’s so wet her slickness has spilt over to the top of her thighs, it still takes a little effort to ease the third finger in. Sam can feel Beth stretching around her fingers and for a second Sam worries it’s going to hurt until her sire moans, low and guttural, when Sam’s third finger finally works itself inside.

Sam grins, thrusting gently at first. Her fingers are stretching Beth wide open, but she can’t slide in as deeply as she’d like. But that’s okay, especially when she curves her fingers upwards, and when she brushes against a bundle of nerves Beth cries out desperately.

Beth’s close, Sam can tell, as she groans and grips the bedsheets desperately. Sam lowers her mouth, licking her clit roughly, sliding inside of Beth in quick, full thrusts. When she finally manages to fuck her, hard and fast, all three fingers slamming into her, Beth comes, her orgasm wracking her whole body. Sam slows down a bit, enjoying the feel of Beth clenching around her, letting her sire ride out her orgasm.

Beth finally slumps to the bed, looking sweaty and spent. It’s only then that Sam’s own arousal becomes almost impossible to ignore and she squeezes her thighs together, yearning for release.

“Hey,” Beth says. “C’mere.”

Sam crawls up Beth’s body, nestling in her sire’s arms. Beth sends her a dopey smile, her desire sated. Sam thinks it would be okay if Beth doesn’t reciprocate if it means she gets to fall asleep, just like this. Beth seems to have other ideas though as she pulls Sam’s hand up to her mouth, licking her own slickness away, grinning wickedly.

“Fuck…”

“What?” Beth asks innocently, her other hand snaking down Sam’s body, dancing near the apex of Sam’s thighs. “I’m just trying to help you out. One vampire to another.”

“You’re very—” Sam chokes out, words withering on her tongue when Beth’s fingers part her thighs, sliding up against her.

And god it feels so amazing to have someone else touching her. Sam bucks up, searching for purchase, gasping when Beth pushes down a little harder.

“You like that?” Beth asks, voice low.

“Yeah,” Sam whimpers, burying her head in the crook of Beth’s neck, their bodies pressed together. There isn’t a lot of space between them since they’re both on their sides, but there’s enough for Beth’s hand to press up against her clit, rubbing in circles.

She doesn’t try and go inside, and truthfully Sam doesn’t need her to, content to be pushed up against Beth, groaning and crying out, the pleasure building with every knowing stroke of her sire’s
hand. She feels open and exposed, especially since Beth is watching her closely, their faces only inches apart. But it’s okay, because it’s Beth, and Sam feels the awkwardness seep away from her body as she strains to meet Beth’s fingers.

“That’s good, Sam. You’re doing so good.”

Sam whimpers, burying her face even further into Beth’s neck. It’s only been a couple minutes, but already she’s on the cusp of coming, pushing against Beth’s hand. The pleasure is heady and hot and when her sire drags her index finger over the hood of her clit Sam cries out, instinctively sinking her fangs into Beth’s neck.

Sam drinks her in. Her sire’s blood is cold and congealed but not unpleasant. It’s a musky taste, intoxicating in its own way, this blood that ushered Sam from the living to the dead. Sam groans, wanting to get as close as possible to Beth, sinking her fangs in as deeply as they can go.

She feels Beth pulling away, pushing at her shoulder, murmuring something in Sam’s ear that she doesn’t quite catch. Sam pulls out, confused.

“Beth?” Sam asks, suddenly mortified. “Sorry. I thought you liked me doing this?”

“I do. I still really do. But…” Beth trails off, a small smile on her face. “I just…really want to see your face when you come.”

And fuck, fuck. Sam cries out, flushing at words. It doesn’t take much more than that before Sam obeys, moaning as her pleasure crashes over her in waves. Beth rides her through it, eyes dark, drinking her in.

“Fuck,” Sam groans, slumping against Beth. Her sire chuckles, placing oddly innocent kisses along her jaw.

“I love you,” Sam whimpers. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

“I love you too,” Beth says, voice trembling. When Sam pulls away she sees that there are tears in her eyes. “I didn’t know how much I still loved you until now.”

“Hey it’s okay,” Sam soothes, pulling Beth into an embrace. “It’s okay. We found each other. That’s all that matters.”

“Yeah,” Beth murmurs, breath hot on Sam’s neck.

Sam holds Beth close, running a soothing hand up her back, waiting until Beth goes still and silent in her arms.

*And now that I’ve found you,* Sam thinks, looking down at Beth as she sleeps. *I’m not letting go.*

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Sam’s disorientated when she wakes up. She knows instinctively she’s not in her bed, and it takes her sleep-addled mind a few seconds to remember just what happened in the afternoon.

Sam flushes, rolling over, reaching for Beth, letting out a disappointed sigh when she realises she’s alone.

The bed is still warm, and when Sam buries her face in the blankets she can still smell Beth’s scent on the sheets. She groans, wishing she could stay like this forever, in bed with Beth, the pair of them
alone in their own world for eternity.

But she can’t. She can’t. Not when Ashley needs her. Not when that monster Cassandra is going to get what’s coming to her.

She hurriedly grabs her clothes from the floor, blushing a bit at how they’re strewn everywhere. If there is a God, Josh won’t be waiting outside for her, a mocking smile on his face. Thankfully when she opens the door she’s alone, and she takes advantage, tiptoeing down the hall until she’s outside her room.

It’s almost dusk. Even though her blinds are drawn she can sense the sun beginning to set. She hurriedly gets changed, annoyed that she didn’t set an alarm. She hopes the plan isn’t ruined before it’s begun.

Sam’s races downstairs and is greeted to the others waiting for her in the living room. Jack scowls and turns away, his flame throwing glinting in the dim light. Hannah’s sitting on the couch, looking wan. Josh is crouched next to her, a determined look on his face. She feels a rush of affection for him, that sweet, protective, headstrong boy, her only friend for so long. When Josh meets her eye they share a brief grin.

“Hey,” Beth says, coming up behind Sam. She looks grim, focussed. They share a look, and Sam yearns to touch her again, to pull her into a fierce hug and not let go, but they can’t. They can’t. Not yet, at least.

“Is everyone ready?” Beth asks, eyes darting around the room. Her mouth sets into a thin line.

“Good. Let’s go storm a mansion.”

Chapter End Notes

Not much longer until the end, now.
I hope you’ve enjoyed this story thus far. It has definitely grown into something larger than I ever envisioned it. In any case, thank you for wading through the blood and gore with us. It really does mean a lot.
I’d like to thank my co-writer as always for being ever talented and ever steadfast.
Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

Well here it is! This is a long one, fitting, I hope, for a finale. Get strapped in for some, blood, guts, and maybe a little bit of glory. It's a roller-coaster, folks.

Title comes from the 2015 song 'To Die in LA' by Lower Dens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The last of the day’s light fades, leaving the sky a dusky blue as they drive in tense, almost painful silence. Sam’s hand holds tightly to Beth’s as Hannah grips the wheel with white knuckles and a look of quiet determination on her face. Beth looks at her and tries to see the trembling, innocent girl that had been there once. Even after all these years, there had always been a childishness to Hannah, an undisguised naivete.

It’s gone now. Whoever Hannah is now, whoever she decides to be, she won’t be that scared, sheltered girl ever again. Beth feels a surge of grim pride, and wishes they’d gotten these moments of growth and discovery somewhere less shadowed by impending doom.

Josh has his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped together, his lips moving slightly. It’s strange; Josh has never been a praying man, even back when faith in god was more or less mandatory, but now here he is, begging the help of gods he probably doesn’t believe in. Jack, seated next to him, stares out the window impassively.

They’re all going to die. Beth lets that thought swirl around in her head, holds it, delves deep into it. They are all going to die.

She’s not sure where they’ll go after. Plunged into some thoughtless oblivion or cast into the fires of hell; either way, nothing good. Not for her at least. Being an abhorrent blood-drinking abomination doesn’t exactly endear you to any god she’s ever heard about. She’s not sure if she truly died during her transformation all those years ago, but even back before she knew what a vampire was, she knew that sensation was evil. The shifting shapes and colors of the world, baying beasts and cold blue eyes staring down at her, the feeling of falling without end; all of it swallowing her whole. It’s an experience reserved for monsters like her, and if dying once is agony, dying twice must be unbearable.

Beth looks over at Sam, all warm smiles and teary green eyes; at Hannah, quietly determined and so grown up; at Josh, praying for his sisters, his friends, himself, knowing full well his prayers will fall on deaf ears. Dying alone would be one thing, but taking the people she loves with her is another thing entirely.

The mansion looms overhead, stately and cold as ever, as the last of the day’s light dies.

The world is quiet. The night holds its breath.

“You guys ready to make the stupidest fucking decision of our lives?” Josh asks, but there’s no humor in his voice.
They get out of the car in silence. The grounds are deserted, and it’s early enough in the evening that Beth is willing to take a gamble and assume most of the girls are still asleep. The coming of spring, the shortening of night, is always hard for them to adjust, and the sudden lack of spare time to sleep in makes everyone groggy and inattentive. Beth moves everyone behind the car. Her knees press against the rough asphalt as she stares into Sam’s eyes, hoping the grounding pain and the reassurance in her fledgling’s eyes will fill her with some sort of deluded hope that this might work.

“I’ll go in first,” Beth says. “I technically still live here, so I can invite you all in. Just hold tight out here and wait about thirty minutes. Should be enough time for me to get a crowd together and get Cass away from the cameras. Got it?”

“You sure you’ll be okay by yourself?” Hannah asks.

“I’m not sure of anything at this point,” Beth confesses. “But it’s the best shot we have at getting you guys in undetected. I’m also about ninety percent sure that I’m the only one here who Cass wouldn’t slaughter upon sight.”

“What a charming lady,” Josh says.

“You have no idea,” Sam replies.

“If you two are done with your little side panel…” Jack grumbles.

“Hannah,” Beth says. “You know your way to the pit well enough to guide these guys?”

Hannah nods wordlessly.

“Good. Go straight there. Shortest way. If you see anything weird, cut and run. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Okay.” The rest of them lurk in the darkness, waiting for their cue to enter.

Beth grits her teeth, staring up at the mansion and swallowing down the sticky pit of dread in her stomach.

“Okay. Showtime.”

+++ 

With a shaking hand, Beth unlocks the door, trying her best to resists the urge to surreptitiously look around. The hallway is empty, but she knows her presence will be noted any second, if it hasn’t already.

The house is still, ominously so, but Beth swallows thickly and moves ahead into the living room, ignoring how the hairs on her neck prickle with every step.

The floorboards creak behind her. Beth stops. Sighs.

“What do you want, Bev?”

“Well, well, well, the prodigal daughter returns. I didn’t think you’d be stupid enough to come back,
but here you are.”

Beth scowls. “I need to see Cassandra.”

“Still giving orders? I don’t think so, babe. But don’t worry, you’ll get to see her,” she bares her fangs at Beth. “While you’re rotting away in the pit.”

“I came here of my own volition. I have information for her. Where is she?”

“If you really are surrendering you’ll come straight down to the pit with me.”

Beth swallows down her anger pulses hot in her chest.

“I don’t take orders from you. Now get out of my way.”

“You cunt,” Bev snarls, with such fury Beth almost takes a step back. “I’ve told her for decades you were trash. I knew it, even from the first time I saw you. You’re just an insipid, spoilt little rich girl who can’t control her own fledglings let alone run this clan. I told Cassandra you weren’t good enough. I told her. And I had to wait and watch while you degraded everything she and I worked for. While she gave you chance after chance. You should be dead. She should have killed you after your first slut ran away. But I kept telling myself to wait. Because I knew. I knew eventually you’d fuck up. And god. It’s taken forever, but finally, finally, even you’re not coming back from this.”

“Hey Bev, has anyone ever told you that you should really shut up?”

Bev lets out a feral, almost beastly raw, barrelling towards Beth at full pace. Beth tenses, before rearing back at just the right split second so Bev flies past her. Bev lets out a primal scream as her shoulder joints stretch and scrape as Beth grabs her arm and twists.

“Enough.”

Like a statue, Beth freezes. Bev drops to the floor, whimpering as she clutches her dislocated shoulder.

“Beth,” Cassandra says. She’s standing by the door of the living room, flanked by Violet and Ashley. Beth’s stomach clenches. “You came back,” her sire says, her voice tremulous. “I knew you’d come back to me.”

“Cassandra,” Beth says, opening her hands out, penitent. “Cassandra, I’m sorry. I tried to get Hannah. I tried. But she wouldn’t come back. Please forgive me.”

“Couldn’t come back?” Bev growls, getting up from the floor. “How could you let -”

“Silence,” Cassandra commands. She stares at Beth, her eyes thick with tumult. Beth’s not sure what emotion will win out.

“I’m sorry,” Beth repeats. “I failed you. I’m sorry. I know I don’t deserve it, but please. Forgive me.”

“Oh, my darling,” Cassandra says. Within a second she’s broached the space between them. She cups Beth’s cheek with her palm. Her hand is cold, like ice, like death, and it takes every inch of Beth’s willpower not to flinch away.

“This is my fault, as much as yours. I’ve been too soft on you. I haven’t prepared you for the rigours of this world. A firm hand is what was needed, right from the beginning, but I couldn’t…”

Cassandra’s voice drops, her lips moving so quickly Beth almost doesn’t catch what comes
next. “Never mind. I’ll fix you.”

“Cass… We need to get Hannah. She needs to come back and learn the errors of her ways.”

“Oh?” Her sire shakes her head, snapping out of whatever fog her brain was in.

Beth nods, trying not to sneak a glance at the ornate grandfather clock on the other side of the room. **Buy them more time, Beth, buy them more time.** “I couldn’t coax her back. Perhaps more… force is needed. A small group will be enough to take her. She’s hiding out in an upmarket hotel on other side of town.”

“Why hasn’t she fled?”

“She does not want to leave me,” Beth swallows. “Or the boy. Although she is convinced he is dead.”

“Not quite. He’s lingering on.”

“Well, then I can use that to get her to come back.”

“Is that right?” Cassandra says coldly, weighing up Beth’s proposition as it unspools in front of her. Beth fidgets, feeling dismayed at the crudeness of her argument. She should have thought this through better. She should have been better prepared. How much more time does she need to buy? Has she done enough?

“You failed, Beth,” Cass says, eventually. “What makes you think you could succeed again?”

“She was frightened and scared before. I’ll tell her the boy is alive, and if she wants to keep him this way, then she’ll have to come back with me. If she refuses, then, I’ll have calvary. Together, we’ll make her come. I’ll make her see sense,” Beth forces herself to look Cassandra in the eye. The hatred in her veins is poison. If Cassandra sees it, the game will be up. “Let me show you.”

“You’ve always been so determined.” Cassandra sighs with a dismissively shake of the head. “But this needs to be done a different way. Come to my room, and we will speak on it.”

Beth nods, playing the part of loyal lieutenant, trying to ignore the almost skeptical look Ashley throws her.

It feels like a victory when they all move towards the stairs. The more people she can coax away the more likely the others can slip in unnoticed. The mission hinges on Cassandra and her goons being distracted, and while they all have their part to play, Beth knows she needs to keep the other vamps occupied until they all realize their precious quarry has been whisked away, right from under their noses.

And what happens to her once her sire and the others find that out?

Well. It’ll be nothing less than she deserves.

+++  

Sam motions to the others to follow her lead. Carefully they fall into line behind her. Sam opens the door, instinctively stiffening, but Beth’s invitation has worked, as they all file inside, single file.

It’s jarring to be back here, especially since it looks exactly like how Sam remembers it. Back when
Sam lived here, she admired the Victorian architecture, the high ceilings, the stained glass, but now the mansion’s age is working against them, with the floorboards creaking with every tentative step.

Sam motions towards Hannah. Her friend nods, looking more resolute than Sam has ever seen her. She and Hannah tiptoe to the end of the hall, with Jack and Josh bringing up the rear.

They keep their backs pushed up to the walls, careful to avoid Cassandra’s many hidden cameras.

The living room is empty, thank god. Sam can barely muster the courage to take another step, but staying still is worse, so she frantically motions to Hannah, the pair of them moving from the relative safety to the hallway into the living room.

“Down,” Hannah mouths. “We have to go down.”

Sam nods. She squares her shoulders, the others falling in line behind Sam as she descends the stairs. The pit is right at the bottom of the stairs. It looks unguarded, which feels wrong to Sam somehow, but she doesn’t question it, not when time itself is against them.

She reaches the door. Sam hears the others behind, can hear the frantic way Jack’s heart is beating against his chest.

Almost there. Almost….

A floorboard whine. Sam whirls around. Less than two metres away from her is Tamika, holding a cup of steaming blood, staring at them, mouth agape.

Please, Sam begs, trying to convey everything she can with her eyes. Please Tam. Walk away

She was never close to Tamika, not really. Sam was an outcast, protected only because of Beth. But even then, she sensed a reluctance in Tamika, a lingering defiance. Sam hopes she isn’t wrong.

Tamika takes a sip of her drink, before slowly turning and walking away.

She hears the others gasp behind her. Sam almost wants to cry in relief, but they don’t have time. The others, they have to get to the others.

Her hand grazes the door of the pit when she feels a flash of hatred, sharp and vindictive, right in her gut. Sam gasps, slumping against the door.

Oh, no. God, no.

“Guys,” Sam croaks. “Guys, run.”

Too late. She’s too late, as always. She hears Josh cry out before she sees her friend tossed through the air, hitting the nearest wall with a sickening thunk. Jack growls, whirling around, but his frail human reflexes fail him. He gasps as a pale fist socks him in the jaw, crumpling to the ground like a marionette with broken strings. Behind her, Hannah whimpers.

Ashley.

There hasn’t been a day gone by when Sam hasn’t thought of Ashley, but seeing her again, like this, is a sickening blow. The bond, that tenuous thread that bounds a sire with her fledgling, remains. She feels it all. The hate, anger and pain that’s roiling in Ashley’s heart. The emotions hit Sam in the chest, like a blow.

“Ashley,” she gasps. Her fledgling glides down the stairs, all elegant in her menace. “Ashley,
“Mother!” Ashley yells gleefully, baring her fangs at Sam. “Mother, they’re here! The intruders, they’re here!”

“She feels the blow before she sees it.

There’s only darkness, after.

+++ The intruders are rounded up like cows for slaughter, herded into the pit with a delightful mix of hate and terror on their faces as Ashley and some of the other girls bind them with the manacles. Mother will be ecstatic. This is the largest bundle of dolls in one place Ashley has ever seen. The smell of blood, human and vampire, mixes into something enticingly toxic as she breathes in. She’s never drunk the blood of a vampire before, but maybe if she’s good, Mother will let her try. As the final doll is shoved into the pit, Ashley feels her stomach drop.

That fetid stench of betrayal is unmistakable.

There she is. Sam. That bitch. That bitch, that bitch, that bitch. All dressed up in innocence and good intentions like fox furs, gazing at Ashley with feigned sympathy.

Ashley can’t wait to rip out her eyeballs and feed them to her.

“‘Well! The gang’s all here,’” comes a familiar voice. Mother struts down the stairs, Beth dragged in tow. “‘My goodness, so many traitors, thieves and whores all in one room. I barely know where to start! Which one of your worthless lives do I end first?’ She glances at Sam and Ashley bristles.

“Don’t worry my sweet girl,” Mother says. “I’ll save her for you.” She grins, all bleak white needle teeth. “Beth, you have truly outdone yourself. All of my enemies, gathered in one room, and all because of you. There must be a part of you, deep down, that is still loyal. I will bring it out into the light.”

Beth sobs, curling into a ball on the floor, avoiding her sire’s eyes. Ashley sneers.

“But first…” Mother says, looking over her bounty with evident satisfaction. “I’ll need to cleanse my mansion of this filth. I think I’ll start with that...abomination,” she says as her eyes fall on the face of an unfamiliar boy. “Mr. Washington. How remarkable to see you. Forgive my bluntness, but I have to admit, I’m surprised you’re not presently rotting in a shallow grave.”

“I may be dead, but I’m still pretty. What’s your excuse?”

“How amusing,” Mother deadpans. “Now. You’re not supposed to exist. Mind telling me where you come from?” As she speaks, her head turns and her eyes bore into Beverly, who shifts her feet, uncomfortable.

“Well,” Josh begins, “when a man and a woman love each other very much—”

Mother slaps him, her nails leaving deep red tracks in the side of his pale face. Josh winces, and Ashley swallows a laugh.

“Hannah always said you were a clownish one. You’re about as funny as she is intelligent. Now.
Give me one reason why I shouldn’t leave you and your sisters out in the sun to roast.”

“My charming good looks?”

Mother actually does smile at that, though there’s no humor in her cold blue eyes.

“Well, you are attractive, but I’ve seen better,” she says. “You’re more appealing than this one, at least,” she says, looking down at the wizened old man. His wrists are bound, just like the others, but he’s so bruised and battered it hardly seems necessary. He groans softly when Mother pokes him with her shoe, clearly coming in and out of consciousness. “Is it true that you try and hunt my kind, old man?”

“Kill me. Wench.”

“I’ll get around to it, don’t worry. Perhaps Alex can help me,” she says, smirking at Alex, who sends Mother a pinched smile in return. “But now we have all the niceties out of the way, I say we get down business? Hmm. We haven’t got all night.”

“Cassandra,” Beth begs, sniffling as gets up off the filthy floor, blinking back tears. “Cassandra, let them go. I’ll stay. I’ll do whatever you want. Just let them go. You don’t want them. Please.”

“I do want them. They’re going to show the other girls what disloyalty really means.” Mother casts her eyes around, over the heads of the cowering captives to the vampires who are guarding them. “You,” she says to Tamika. “What is the punishment for disloyalty?”

“A sunbath,” Tamika says dully. She cannot look the captives in the eye. Ashley growls.

“And you,” Mother says sharply, turning to stare at Violet, who wilts under her gaze. “What is the punishment for desertion?”

“Asunbathma’am.”

“Stop mumbling, girl.”

“A sunbath, ma’am.”

“That’s right. A sunbath. So you see, Beth. I can’t let them go. Unlike you, I don’t believe in flouting the rules. So,” Mother claps her hands. “Who is first to burn? Huh? What about you,” she motions to the boy vampire, who quivers, quips forgotten. “You shouldn’t even be alive. Perhaps it’s only right that you feel the sun’s wrath first, you miserable freak of nature.”

“Wait!” Hannah cries. She squirms against the chains bounding her wrists. “Please, god, no. Cassandra, I’m the one who caused this. All of this was my doing. I’m the one you wanna hurt, right? Kill me. Just me.”

“Now, that’s funny,” Mother tells her. “If memory serves, the night I turned you and your sister, you were begging to survive. Now you beg for death.” Her face twists with disgust. “All you do is beg. You plead and whine and cry and debase yourself like the pathetic child you are. I spared you all those years ago for Beth’s sake, and this is how you repay me?” Her eyes narrow. “No. I want you to live and suffer as long as possible. You will see what your actions have caused.” She strides over to the boy, Matt, and her expression softens into an understanding smile. “Think on it, Hannah. If you had died that day, your paramour here would be living a normal, happy life. And now he’ll die in agony.”
As soon as she finishes her sentence she lunges to the floor, quick as light, her manicured nails ripping into Matt’s gut. His screams are matched by Hannah’s, Emily’s, rebounding together in a desperate, keening chorus. A rich red stain grows as Matt collapses, whimpering.

“You bitch!” Emily yells, straining against her bonds and spitting empty threats. Mother watches her, amusement plain on her face. Matt sobs, and Mother answers his plea for relief with a kick to the wound in his abdomen. The scent of blood fills the room. Ashley’s mouth waters.

“Don’t worry, Matt. You won’t die now,” Mother tells him. “You will live, suffering, for hours still, until the last of your blood runs out.” She licks her fingers clean, relishing every last drop. Ashley’s stomach rumbles. She hopes she’ll get to taste the mortal before he bleeds out.

“None of you deserve a quick death. But your actions warrant a public one. Yes. Yes. Your ends will be a show for all of us to witness. All of my pure followers will see how traitors, deserters, deviants and corrupted, lovestruck fools will fall to us, to me.” Mother turns to Violet, who stands nervously at attention. “Violet, rally the others. I want to put on a show.”

+++ 

The monster inside of Ashley roars with giddy delight as the sound of Jess’ screams fill the pit. Mother laughs and laughs, clapping her hands as she watches Wren break each of Jess’ fingers. Wren’s mouth is set in a thin line, enduring the task she’s been set. Idiot girl. She’s always pretended to be cruel, but Ashley knows better. She’s too weak for this kind of savagery. True barbarism takes a flair these soft children are too afraid to embrace.

Mother must feel Wren’s reluctance, too. The frustration is building inside of her, coiled and ready to strike. It makes a part of Ashley, that frightened, weak, girlish shadow, shudder. But Mother’s anger is not directed at her this time. It’s at Wren. Who, it turns out, isn’t quite as stupid as she looks, because suddenly she gulps and in one foul swoop snaps both of Jess’ wrists before dumping the squalling creature to the floor.

“Oh, stop blubbering. She barely did anything to you,” Mother chides, sneering as Jess weeps. “I seem to remember your husband did much worse.”

“Shut the fuck up and get away from her, you bitch.”

“Emily!”

“Now, now, Emily. I’d listen to your Mother over there. You better be quiet. Unless you want me to shut you up.”

Emily glowers, staring up at Cassandra mutinously. She tries to inch towards Jess, who has stopped crying but is now shivering in a tiny ball on the floor.

“Oh no, no, no,” Mother mocks, pushing Jess’ prone body away from Emily with her foot. “For once, Emily, no touching. Now. I think Jess has had enough attention for now. Who is next?”

“Me.”

“You?” Cassandra laughs at Beth. It’s an unkind sound. “Oh no, my dear. You get to watch.”
“Cass…”

“Don’t ‘Cass’ me. How dare you. This is all because of you, you realize that, hmmm?” Mother’s voice thickens with emotion. “I gave you everything. I pulled you from the miserable, loveless life you had and gave you something better. I’ve sacrificed everything for you, and you turn around and repay me with contempt. You were like a daughter to me, once. And then you left me to rot. Don’t you understand, wretched girl? You ruined my life. So now I have to ruin yours.”

Jess shudders and sobs softly, curled into a bloody heap on the ground. Cassandra spits on her and delivers a swift kick to her side. “We’ll have to trim the fat. Cut out everything useless. But I can still make you better. I can make you what you were always meant to be. Not some stupid pining girl chasing phantom lovers and holding up dead weights.”

Mother opens her mouth to say more, but she’s interrupted by Sam trying to lunge at her, straining against her restraints, fury in her eyes. The kind of protective fury she never showed for Ashley. All this bravery, too late, too late.

Ashley wonders how brave she’ll be when she’s pulling her skin away, strip by strip.

“To stop this, alright?” Sam pleads. “You’ve won. You’ve made your point. Just be done with this. Anabel wouldn’t want—”

The sound of a slap cracks like thunder through the room, and Sam staggers back, massaging her newly bleeding cheek.

“Don’t you dare say her name, you traitorous whore,” Mother snarls. “You aren’t worthy. You’re nothing. Wretched, insignificant thing, do you think you’ve managed to change anything, do anything? The only thing you’ve ever managed to accomplish is breaking your beloved Ashley’s mind into splinters. Do you want to know how I did it?”

Sam glares up at her silently, and Ashley knows that hateful look. She saw it once before, when her boyfriend’s head was ripped away in a scarlet shower of flesh and blood.

“You refused to care for your fledgling,” Mother says. “So I did it for you. It’s amazing what a stern lecture and two years of isolation in the pit can do for reformation. Ah, I remember her first night down there. All stained with blood and sweat and tears, crying out for the boy you killed, struggling as I sliced the neck of her human friend and brought his wound to her mouth. Oh, she shut up then, too hungry to resist, drinking and drinking as that worthless boy bled out like a pig for slaughter. After that, it was only a matter of a little starvation, a few beatings, and this lovely trick with a focused beam of sunlight. Do you want to know how it works?”

To Ashley’s surprise, Sam does not attack. Instead her face settles into an expression of subdued, chilly rage.

“You’re nothing, you know that? There’s nothing left in you. Not a scrap of goodness anymore. You could have helped these people. You could have made them happy, but you manipulated and dominated instead. Even now you’re too much of a piece of shit coward to tell your ‘daughter’ the whole truth. If Annabel could see you now, she’d die all over again.”

Something stirs in Ashley’s mind. The name, Annabel, rattles in dark and forgotten places in her soul, and something in Sam’s expression leaves her hesitant. Unsure.

There’s a pause. No one moves, wide eyes trained on Sam and Mother, locked in a moment of blood-freezing silence.
“Thank you for making your point,” Mother says flatly. “Here’s my rebuttal.” She turns to face Ashley, looking deep into her eyes and searching for any hesitation. “Ashley, flay her alive please.”

Ashley doesn’t move. Her legs won’t take her forward. Her chest tightens and the walls close in, and for the first time in years the monster inside of her is quiet.

“Ashley,” Mother snaps.

A reply blooms and dies in Ashley’s chest. She’s a block of ice before her mother and her enemy.

“Do I need to punish you again?” Mother’s voice is soft, almost sweet. Ashley feels her throat tighten.

“No, Mother,” she whispers. “I’ll finish it.”

“Why are you hesitating? Why are you showing mercy to this creature who has caused you so much harm.” Mother’s voice drops. “She took everything away from you. She took him away from you.”

“Ashley,” her sire gasps, getting on her knees, hands out in supplication. “Ashley, that’s not true. Why would I hurt him? Why would I do that? He was my friend. Think back to that night. Cassandra, she’s the one who ordered Beverley to rip Chris’ head off—”

Ashley snarls, adrenalin surging through the stagnant blood in her veins. That lying, treacherous bitch. The crack as Ashley’s fist sinks into her face is satisfying, as is the next, and the next. A cacophony of noise swirls around her but all she hears is the thunk of cartilage crunching into bone.

“My girl…”

_Crunch._

“My girl.”

_Crunch_

“That’s enough!”

Mother. Her cool hand touches Ashley’s shoulder. She tries not to flinch, staring down at the bloody mess on the floor.

“You shouldn’t spoil your doll too early. There’s weeks to play with her yet.”

“But, you said…”

“I said stop. You know she doesn’t deserve a quick end.”

Ashley shivers, her hands falling loosely to her sides. Nothing good ever comes from making Mother mad.

“Ash,” A small choked, plea. She glances down. Her sire is there, huddled on the floor, her nose a twisted smear across her face.

“Ash,” she repeats. Her sire’s eyes shine with a soft look Ashley can't quite place. Ashley shivers, unnerved.

“I’ve had enough. Dawn is barely a few hours away. We need to prepare our first participant. Beth. Since you’re usually so good at making decisions, make one now: Josh. Jess. Hannah. One of them
will burn at dawn. Which one is up to you.”

Beth goes even paler than usual, cowering up against the wall. “N-none of them. None.”

“None?”
Ashley seethes. If she ever spoke to Mother that way, she’d be whipped.

“That’s not an option, Beth. Can’t choose between your siblings and your former whore? Well, if you don’t choose, then perhaps one of the others will.”

There’s a familiar agony in Beth’s eyes, the same that’s always there when Mother presents her followers with an impossible choice. She looks like a fire is threatening to consume her from within. Her hands ball up into bloody white fists.

“I’ll give you ‘till the count of three,” Mother tells her.

Beth says nothing.

“One…”

Ashley licks her lips in anticipation of slaughter.

“Two…”

Sam clutches her head in her hands and groans in pain and despair.

“Three.” Mother turns suddenly to face Hannah. “Spare. Pick between Jess, Josh or yourself to be our example or…” She pushes the tip of her shoe deep into Matt’s gaping wound, the squelching sound drowned out by Matt’s cries.

“Cassandra…”

“Choose.”

“Please…”

The boy cries out again. The scent of blood is almost overwhelming


“See? Was that so hard?” Mother beams, smiling as Beth, Sam and Emily cry out. Hannah sobs, trying her best to get to the boy, who lays whimpering and bleeding out on the floor. “Wren, Tamika. Please escort Jessica out of the pit. We need to get her prepared for her big stage debut!” Mother cracks her neck, smiling down at all the broken, crying dolls as Jess is gently lead away.

“Jess! Jess, I'm sorry.”

Mother only has to glance at Beverly before the other vamp swings a boot to Hannah’s face.

“The rest of you,” Mother smirks, talking over Hannah’s wails. “Make yourself comfortable. It's not too long until dawn.”

++++
The initiation pit is packed. It’s been freshly cleaned in preparation for a new bloodbath, and Tamika, Aishah, Bev and Wren all stand guard, holding onto the chains that keep Beth and the others bound. Beth looks up into the audience and she can see rows of pale faces, wide smiles and terrified eyes as Cassandra presents her latest show, already launching into another monologue before Beth can even fully get her bearings.

“My girls, you have known me long enough to know that I only want what’s best for you. Isn’t that right? I give you everything you could ever desire, and I ask only one thing in return: your loyalty. Tonight, I’d like to make it clear what happens when this tiny, insignificant trifle of a request is disregarded.” She strides into the centre of the put, gesturing over to Beth and the others. “Look upon them. People we saved from the gutters of humanity, by design or by accident, and they squander their gifts, defying authority and consorting with human filth.” She spits in Jack’s general direction, then turns her attention to Jess. “I imagine some of you are surprised to see her here. After all, for years she was the perfect vampire, a model citizen, if you will. But she changed. And you could too. You see, no one is incorruptible, not you, not her, not even Beth. And I will root out corruption and bring it to the light. Speaking of.” She turns to Jess. “Any last words before your day in the limelight?”

“Stop monologuing, no one gives a shit,” Jess grumbles. Weakly, she moves her mangled fingers and flips Cassandra the bird.

Beth looks at Jess, still defiant despite hanging onto life by a silk-thin thread, and feels a surge of devotion. Cassandra must feel it, because she looks up and Beth and grins.

“Oh, my darling,” she says. “This is going to hurt.”

“I’m not your darling,” Beth spits.

“You will be,” Cassandra purrs.

“You’d like that, I’m sure,” Beth says. “But no matter how many people you try to break down and shape into new molds, none of them can ever replace Annie. Isn’t that right, Sally?”

There are murmurs of confusion in the audience on the alcove above. Cassandra’s dark eyes narrow dangerously.

“Don’t walk this path, Beth. I have you and your friends at my mercy.”

“You’d kill them whether I brought up the truth or not. Don’t fucking bother threatening me, Sal. Won’t work.”

At the word, Sal, Cassandra’s face goes white with rage, and she slams her foot down on Jess’s wounded stomach. The shock sends Beth doubling over in phantom pain, but even as she spasms, her hand fumbles for the smoking gun she has in her pocket. She pulls it out, a small bundle of papers, folded and bound together, dark with sweat and blood but still mostly legible.

She hopes so, anyway.

“Tam,” she chokes out, throwing it to Tamika before Cassandra can react. Tamika catches it with ease, looking over it and slowly opening the papers, one by one. Cassandra turns to face her, growling, ready to pounce, but Beth rushes forward as far as the chain will let her, grabbing Cass from behind and holding her back. Cassandra curses and struggles in her grip, but something akin to adrenaline keeps Beth from letting go.
“Are these real, Beth?” Tamika asks. All eyes are on her.

“Y-yes,” Beth chokes out. “Yes. Cassandra...isn’t...who you thought she was...she’s been lying this whole time.”

“What?” Bev barks. “That’s not fucking possible, you dumb bitch, she couldn’t—”

“Let me see,” Aishah says, and Tamika passes the newspaper articles about Sally to her. As Cassandra struggles in Beth’s grip, the papers make their rounds, each girl’s eyes widening in turn.

“Sally hasn’t been telling you the truth about anything. She keeps us here to try and replace her child and anyone who doesn’t live up to the image is killed. Look at her desk, upstairs. There are...there are flash drives, with security footage of all of us, for years. She’s been spying on us, recording us, and never bothered to mention it. You’ve given yourselves over to an imposter and a liar. And if she’s killing Jess now because she fell for the wrong girl and was in the wrong place at the wrong time, what’s to stop her from killing you next? Would any of you say that you’ve never in your lives broken one of Sally’s rules?”

There are more doubtful mumbles and whispers in the audience. The girls look at each other.

“You know it’s true. God, how many times did you feel like you were being watched? How many times did it feel like she knew everything about you? How many times did it feel like she had eyes everywhere. I thought it was because she’s older, stronger. She said she was 500 years old. But guess what, she’s barely older than Bev—”

“She’s lying. Ashley!”

“Am I? Then why don’t you let the girls see your desk, just to find out? If I’m wrong I’ll walk into the sun myself.”

She sees the blow before it hits her but it doesn’t make any better. Ashley’s fist connects with her chin. Beth drops to the ground with a heavy gasp, her mouth sticky with blood.

“Nice try,” she hears Sally say from above. “Now. If any one of you moves, you’re dead.”

“See?” Beth mocks, groaning as she rolls onto her back, looking up at Sally and Ashley. “She won’t let you.”

“Wait...You’re telling us that if we looked over her shit in her desk, we’d find security footage of all of us? At all times?” Sophie pipes up.

“Trust me,” Beth smirks at Cassandra. “Sally never turns them off. How else would she know all of the things we’ve only said or done in private?”

Sophie goes pale and looks to Tamika, who gives her girlfriend a subtle nod. In the alcove above, the other girls are backing away, looking nervous.

“How dare you accuse me!” Sally snarls, pinning Beth to the ground with her foot. “Worthless, unloved little dyke, you’re nothing without me.” She snaps her head up to survey the terrified crowd. “All of you are nothing without me!”

“If you have nothing to hide, if Beth is lying, then you’d let us see your desk, instead of threatening us,” Tamika says calmly.

“Absolutely not! I demand faith! I—”
“I’ll go check it out,” Wren says suddenly. “I was always kinda curious, to be honest.” She laughs mirthlessly, her eyes wet with tears of fear. Nervously, she starts making her way to the exit before, in a flash of red, Ashley has her pinned against the wall.

“I’ve had enough of this,” Sally says. “Ashley. Kill her and any other traitor that dares question me.”

“With pleasure,” Ashley says flatly. In a single, fluid motion, she grabs the sides of Wren’s head and squeezes, Wren’s screams of shock and pain filling the initiation pit. Finally, with one final wet crunch, her head is caved in by the force of Ashley’s hands, and her body crumbles into dust.

Someone screams.

Then, pandemonium. Everyone moves at once, most making a mad dash for the door, some cowering where they stand in the audience. Ashley runs to catch the would-be deserters, howling and laughing as she grabs Mia and takes off her head.

It’s all happening so fast for Beth or Sally to truly react at first.

She sees Aishah barreling past Violet and Tam, Amy hot on her heels, whether trying to catch or pass her, Beth doesn’t know. She sees Emily spring into action, tugging on her chains and tripping up a distracted Bev on the other end before lunging for Sally’s keys. Together, Beth and Emily tackle her, scrambling for the iron ring of keys in her pocket. Sally hits Beth’s jaw with an elbow, sending her reeling with a sharp crack. The world swirls and spins as Beth’s head snaps back, but before Sally can follow through there’s a grunt and a snapping sound, and Sally is reeling away, gripping a broken finger and snarling as Emily aims a second attack at her other hand. In the chaos, the keys jangle loose from Sally’s pocket, and Beth grabs them, unlocking her own manacle before moving to each of her friends in turn.

Ashley’s shrieking laughter still echoes through the cavernous halls. Beth hears someone scream and abruptly fall silent.

A window breaks.

Someone is sobbing.

Dust and ash drift through the room.

Beth doesn’t get grounded again until she frees Sam and meets her eyes. The green calms her, tethers her back to the earth, helps her focus.

“I’m going after Ashley, Sam tells her. “Can you get the others?”

“Sam…”

“I have to try. I did this to her, I owe it to her to try and save her.” There is no room for argument in her tone.

“Sam, you’ll die,” Beth says, her voice breaking. It’s not a warning. It’s a statement of fact. Sam is weak, spent, and broken, surviving on animal blood and having been beaten and hounded for hours while Ashley is in peak condition and full of unquenchable bloodthirst.

Sam will die.

They all will.
That thought should crush her heart into a fine meaty paste, but instead it calms her. Sam lightly touches Beth’s face and plants a soft kiss to her lips.

“I love you.”

And with that, she’s gone, running after the sound of Ashley’s laughter.

Beth doesn’t have much time to process the chaos before Sally attacks her from behind.

“I will break you, Beth.” Her voice is perfectly calm, casual, like she’s reciting a math fact.

Beth doesn’t dignify her threat with a response. She elbows Sally’s gut and wrenches herself free, focusing on the face of the woman who killed her all those years ago. Her eyes are that familiar deep ocean blue, but there’s no mystery left to them. Beth has scoured their depths and found nothing but dead coral.

The miserable, parasitic husk of a woman who shaped all these years of her long, long life howls with rage and charges. Beth holds her ground.

All the noise around her drowns out as she focuses on her quarry, and as Sally lunges, Beth goes for the throat.

++++

Emily strides forward, trying to navigate her and Jess through chaos. She represses a shudder as she hears Ashley’s creepy cackles reverberating through the halls. They’re so fucked. Their only chance is that madwoman is so distracted murdering the other vamps she doesn’t get around to them.

It’s a forlorn hope. But it’s all they have.

“Come on,” she whispers to Jess. The stench of tar and ash is everywhere. “We gotta move.”

“Where are we going?” Jess asks blearily.

“To the pit.”

“Yippee.”

Emily smiles. “I know.” She wraps an arm around Jess’ waist, propping her up. “I’ve got you, but we gotta move, okay?”

Jess nods. Her sire staggers forward, barely having the energy to hold herself up, the blows to her head evidently taking their toll. Emily grits her teeth, wishing she could find Cassandra and return the fucking favor.

They move as far as they can, twisting and turning through the hall, trying to ignore the screams that are bouncing off the walls. Emily’s spent months studying this place, memorising every damn square inch, waiting for the perfect time to escape. She thought she’d be trying to get out of here, rather than going further into the labyrinth, but it’s safe to say things didn’t turn out exactly how Emily planned.

Finally, they arrive. She shrugs Jess off, frowning as her sire can barely keep herself from falling to the floor. Doesn’t matter, not now, at least. Emily growls, using every inch of her might to pull open the pit’s door.
“Come on,” Emily grouses. The door must be triple reinforced steel and Emily’s barely eaten for days. “Jess, It’s not safe to wait out here. Get in already.”

The pit’s door locks from the inside so Emily uses a stray piece of iron as a doorstop. It takes a couple of minutes they definitely don’t have, but eventually she lodges the door adjar. Jess slumps to the ground, whimpering, but they don’t have time for this so Emily picks her up again, trying not to gag as she hauls Jess’ ass down the stairs. The pit as fetid and foul as she remembers, but she pushes through, her eyes adjusting in the gloom as she scours the floor, looking past the rotting carcusses, desperate to find something breathing.

“Mom!”

“Emily!”

Her mother looks more gaunt than she’s ever seen her, but she’s alive, at least. Emily moves towards her but she shakes her head furiously.

“Get me later. Matt’s just over there.”

“Matt?”

Matt’s right where Cassandra left him, slumped on the putrid floor. Relief washes over her as she disentangles herself from Jess and runs towards him. He’s slumped on his side but she can see him sucking in shallow breaths.

“Matt, it’s okay, we’re-”

She slips, falling to the ground with a strangled yelp.

“What the hell?” she mumbles, staring at her hands in shock.

Blood, blood, everywhere, the sickly sweet smell making Emily’s stomach ache. She suppresses the urge to lick her fingers clean.

“Oh Jesus. Oh Jesus, oh Jesus, oh Jesus.”

She turns her friend onto his back. He looks grey, like all the life has been leached from him.

“Matt,” she cries, shaking him, wincing when all it does is make his gut wound leak. “Matt!”

“Em,” he mumbles. It looks like it’s taking a herculean effort to keep his eyes open.

She slaps him. “No sleeping, Matt. Don’t you goddamn go to sleep on me.”

“Oh god,” her mother moans, covering her mouth.

She looks to her sire, who is staggering towards them.

“Jess!”

Jess mumbles something, slumping against a nearby wall, seemingly too weak to go on.

“Mom. Mom. Help me wake Jess up. She has to tell me how to turn someone.”

“Turn?”
“Yeah, you know, kiss of death, or life, or whatever. You know, vampire shit. Jess. Jess!”

“Yeah?”

“What do I do? He’s lost so much blood...”

“Mmmm,” Jess’ smile is all loopy. “Mmmm, blood.”

“Jess, goddamnit, please,” she begs, feeling tears beginning to snake down her face.

“Oh Emily....”

“Don’t say it, Mom. Don’t you fucking say it. Don’t act as if he’s already-”

“Dead? I’d say he already is, Emily. Or if not, don’t worry, I’ll finish the job.”

Jess cries out as two powerful hands strike her from behind. She crumbles to the ground in a heap. Behind her, Bev leers at them, fangs bared.

“Surprised?”

“Not at all,” Emily growls, almost relishing the righteous fury coursing through her veins. She stands.

“I thought you’d be running like the rest of them. I didn’t think you’d be so stupid to come down here, but you know, Emily, you’re just full of surprises.”

“Oh, please, you came down here as soon as you could. To finish the job, I assume?” She sees Beverly’s eyes flit guiltily to her mother. Emily sneers.

“You think killing the humans would have endeared you to Cassandra? You’d have burned along with the rest of us.”

“I’m loyal. She knows that.”

“Oh,” Emily taunts. “Oh, honey, no. Don’t you get it? She’s cleaning house. And you haven’t made the cut.”

“Fuck you,” Beverly snarls. “What do you know?”

“I know a lot, actually. Three days in the sunpit gave me a lot of time to think.” Emily balls her fist. “Go over old memories.”

Beverly snorts. “Like I give a shit.”

“I know you don’t. But you see, I give a shit. I give a shit that you are a malignant cancer that ruins people’s lives.” Her voice shakes. She doesn’t bother to hide her fury. “You ruined my life.”

“Uhhh,” Beverly grins down at Jess. “I think you’re talking about this bitch.”

“No. I’m talking 2001. November. A father taking his little girl to the movies. They’re laughing and having a good time until you...you lead them to an alleyway and you...” Emily’s voice shakes. Keep it together, she thinks. Keep is together .

“Because it was my dad.”

She lunges at Beverly, pushing her up against the wall. They tussle, arms flailing everywhere, Beverly nails sinking into Emily’s arm. Emily yelps, seething as she tries to smash Beverly’s head against the concrete.

“You bitch!” Beverly snaps, growling as she pushes Emily off her.

She stumbles back. Shit. Beverly is strong. She’s off balance for just a second but it’s enough for Beverly to lunge forward, nails outstretched and reaching for Emily’s eyes. Emily winces, bring her hands to her face, but she’s so slow, so weak….

“Get off.”

Emily’s eyes snap open. Jess is clinging on to Bev’s legs like her life depends on it. Emily would kiss her if she could.

“Fuck off,” Bev grunts, landing another heavy blow to Jess’ face. Her sire gasps, her nose shattering.

Emily screams, the phantom pain on her face spurring her on. She lunches, scrapes her nails against Bev’s skin. Blood oozes from the wound, and something primal within her sings with joy. She ducks a punch, throwing one of her own, hitting Bev square in the jaw. Bev grunts in pain. Emily grins, thinks about how good her face would look all battered and squished to a pulp.

Another punch, this time to Beverly gut. She cries out, pushing Emily away with a kind of force that’s almost awe inspiring. Emily staggers back and can’t evade a sharp kick to her shin. She grunts in pain when Beverly hits her in the arm, then another punch that lands on the collar bone. Something snaps and a pain, hot and aching, shoots up Emily’s arm.

“Bitch,” Emily gasps, trying to punch with her good arm. She misses. Beverly laughs.

“Awww, poor baby getting tired?”

Beverly kicks at her. Emily staggers back but slips in Matt’s blood, falling to the floor. Bev’s cackles, the sound ringing in her ears.

“Whoops.”

The other vamp shapes to pounce but a movement sharp movement to her left catches Emily’s eye. Her mother flings herself forward, hands wrapping her chain around Beverly’s foot.

Beverly hits the ground with a satisfying oof. Emily’s hand gropes around, for something, anything, finding a manacle, one that was probably used to bound one of them a few hours earlier. She surges forward, ignoring her stiff joints, straddling Beverly, who seems stunned to be covered by Matt’s blood. Emily roars and brings down the manacle right on her smirking, childish face. There’s a crack as the heavy metal hits skin. Emily shrieks, bringing the manacle down again. This time there’s a wet squeal as it hits the other vampire’s face. Then again, each blow meeting less force as it hits Beverly, until the skin below is slick with gristle and pulp.

It takes a few, tired blows before, it’s done. Emily drops the manacle with a sharp cry. Bev’s mouth is an open grimace, teeth bloody and missing, an eye lolling grotesquely out of its socket.

Her face is caved in, but still, she has strength within to moan. It’s a choked, quiet sound, tinged the faintest hint of defiance.
Emily rolls her eyes. Goddamn vampires.

“Here,” her mother says, handing her a sharp piece of pipe that doubles as one of Cassandra’s torture implements. “Does it need to be wood?”

“Nah,” Emily grins. “This’ll work just as well.”

With as much force as she can muster she sinks the pipe into Beverly’s chest. Beverly lets out an inhuman shriek, her body jerking off the floor, before she goes rigid, like stone.

Then, with a final choked cry her body goes to mush, dissolving in a wave of sticky, gunk that sinks and slithers across the floor.

“Ew,” Emily says, looking at the black goo that’s caked all over her pants. “This is going to be a bitch to get out.”

++++

Jack had always pictured his assault on Cassandra’s stronghold to be a glorious maelstrom of fire and dust, laughing as the flames of his weapons and the rays of the sun incinerated the fiends that preyed on the weak and desperate. He’d dreamed once of laying his daughter’s ghost to rest by finally destroying the creature pretending to be her, standing before the burning mansion, smoke and ash clouding the sky, paying his last respects to the girl he’d failed to save.

He hadn’t pictured getting trapped under a bookcase, his weapons far away and useless, while undead women ran about, scrambling for windows and doors, hunted and slaughtered by their own kind. It’s a painful thing to watch, their fear, their desperation. Like a pack of wild dogs, whining and howling in fear. Once you see the way they cower, they’re not so different from the things you know.

Whole lot of good that revelation does him now.

He struggles under the weight of the massive mahogany bookcase, straining and trying with everything in him to push up, to rise, to keep fighting. He’s not as young as he used to be, not nearly as strong. When Alex died, it sapped him of his strength. Made him a spectre.

On the day Alex died, he died too.

The vampires, for the most part, ignore him, too concerned with their own safety to even notice his presence. Eventually, he sees a pair of feet run past and then, slowly, hesitantly, walk back to where he lies. He hears someone breathe, which is strange, because walking corpses don’t need to do that.

Knowing what he’ll see, Jack looks up anyway.

Alex looks no different than she did the night she was taken. Eternally frozen in the twilight of adolescence, the cusp of adulthood, Alex is a girl and a woman all at once, stuck forever in the doorway between her childhood and life beyond it. Her eyes are just as soft and sad as he remembers them.

“Dad.”
There’s no malice in her voice, and no trick, either. It’s a brutally frank greeting, an acknowledgment of everything their family had and lost, like a book thrown open.

“Alex,” Jack says, and he knows that she’s the one he’s talking to, not a demon inhabiting her skin. One look into those eyes he loved from the moment they opened, and he knew. “Alex, honey. Run.”

Wordlessly, Alex shakes her head, bending down and picking up the bookcase with one arm, lifting it as casually and as easily as a lantern. Jack breathes out, feeling how the breath burns his lungs, his ribs. He trembles before her.

“Alex, baby...I’m so sorry. I-I’m so, so sorry…”

“Dad, it’s okay,” Alex says. “I...I don’t...please, dad, let’s just go. I hate this place.”

“Not very welcoming, is it.”

Alex smiles, just a little.

“You haven’t changed.”

Jack wishes more than anything that that were true, but he takes his child’s hand anyway, letting her lead him into the early morning air.

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Sam catches her in the foyer, using the remains of a chair to beat a cowering Sophie into submission. Ashley is about to drive the splintered chair leg into Sophie’s chest when Tamika calls out, running towards them and barreling into Ashley’s side. Ashley is stunned for only a fraction of a second before she’s overpowered Tamika, grabbing her throat and slamming her head into the hardwood floor.

“Ash.”

Ashley looks up, her eyes hard, dark shards of jade. She spits out a glob of blood and flesh and exposes her long, manicured fangs.

“Sam.”

Sam walks up to them, slowly, like she’s approaching a cornered snake. Ashley’s eyes never leave hers.

“You want me. Right? I’m the reason you’re like this. Make me pay for it.”

Ashley’s eyes search her face, narrowing. There’s a startling intelligence in her gaze that years of torture and brainwashing have suppressed.

“Why are you offering yourself? Are you that eager to die?” Her voice is flat and deep, all childish affectations gone.

“Enough people have died because of me,” Sam says calmly. “If this is the way to stop it, so be it.”

Ashley stands up. Beneath her, Sophie limps to her feet and runs as fast as she can to Tamika, who
shoots Sam a grateful look before the two disappear down the hallway to the garage. Ashley walks toward Sam, slowly, her feet seeming to glide across the floor. For several seconds, she says nothing.

Then, her mouth opens, jaw stretching wider than it should be able to stretch, and she lets out an earth-shattering roar, hatred burning in her eyes as she pounces. She’s too fast for Sam to dodge or retaliate, her nails cutting into the skin of Sam’s arms as she forces her onto the ground. Sharp teeth cut into her face, leaving welling blood trails on her nose and cheeks as Ashley snaps her jaws on her face, over and over. Then she begins to aim wildly with her fists, going for her jaw, her neck, her temples, each blow sending another dull wave of pain through Sam’s skull. The sounds of chaos and struggle begin to fade, like she’s underwater, but Ashley’s words are still clear as crystal.

“You bitch. You, you fucking bitch. You left me with her! You let her do this to me and you ran! You could have saved me, you, you could have saved him! You fucking coward! You...you...you!”

“I…” Sam chokes out. “I...I’m sorry, Ash…”

“Yeah, I fucking bet you are,” Ashley spits.

“I’m sorry,” Sam repeats. “I’m sorry I let Chris die. I’m sorry—”

“‘Let him die’? You killed him! I saw it happen! You, you pulled off his head!”

“Why would I have done that?”

“I…” Ashley falters. “Because you wanted me to be let into the clan. He had to die to do that. Right? Right? Right…”

“Me killing Chris wouldn’t have saved you. They would have just killed me for my presumptuousness. Besides, if i wanted to try that, I’d be subtle.” Sam’s surprised by the sudden island of clarity emerging from her dazed sea, but the words come easily as a familiar tune. “Beth did that. She gave my mark a tiny cut and let my hunger do the rest. I could have done that, but I didn’t. Because I knew it wouldn’t save you.” She sighs, tasting the rust-metal tang of her own blood. “Chris was a good man. He didn’t deserve what happened to him. What I let happen to him.”

“Why should I believe you.” It’s not really a question. Ashley’s voice is flat as her eyes.

“Because I still remember the way his eyes lit up when he told me about that show he loved, the way he looked at you, the way he laughed when there was no joke. He fought for you until the end, he was never cowed or broken. He loved you more than anything, and I knew that if he was harmed, it would destroy you.” Sam sighs. “I wanted you safe. That’s all I ever wanted.”

Ashley’s face softens for a tiny fraction of a second, and then her scowl returns.

“Well. Good job on keeping me safe,” she growls.

Sam blocks Ashley’s incoming blow instinctively, catching her fist and weakly pushing against it. Ashley raises her other arm and Sam takes the opportunity to strike at her chest, trying to knock her off balance enough to push her off. It’s just enough to knock her off kilter, and Sam pushes Ashley off, getting to a shaky stand while Ashley rises, growling, something faintly shining just visible from her breast pocket.

Before Sam can get a good look at it, Ashley charges, ramming into her with her shoulder and shoving her against the wall. Sam hears something crack as a sharp pain stabs into her ribs from the left side. She grits her teeth and swallows a scream, barely ducking out of the way as Ashley lunges forward again, her teeth snapping at the air. Ashley turns violently, all feral rage and muttered curses,
and the thing in her pocket falls out and skitters across the floor. In another blur of red-white-green, Ashley’s scratching and punching her, howling accusations in Sam’s ear as Sam feels her bones break, distantly hears the peeling and tearing of her skin. With another hard shove, Ashley knocks Sam to the ground, aiming a bloodied fist for her chest, and Sam swerves out of the way just in time for Ashley to barrel into the spot on the floor where Sam had been.

There’s a crack. Everything stops.

Sam’s left eye is half-closed from a swelling cut, and she has to turn her head all the way to the left to see Ashley on her knees, shaking hands cradling something small.

“No...no no no nonononono…” Ashley whimpers, her voice barely audible.

Sam moves as close as she dares and sees what she’s holding: a very familiar pair of cracked, dusty glasses, the wires bent out of shape and the glass falling away in splinters.

“Ashley?”

“Chris...I’m sorry...I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Sam whispers. “None of it. You were used and hurt and broken, and you didn’t deserve any of it. If I have to die for what I did to you, then so be it. I’ve earned that. But you never deserved any of this. It’s not your fault. Know...know that. You...you deserve to have that peace...of...of mind.”

“Chris…”

“It’s not your fault,” Sam repeats, like a mantra, like a desperate prayer. A stab of pain courses through her and she sucks in an unnecessary breath through gritted teeth. “It’s not. Your. Fault.”

Ashley’s face is smooth and expressionless for several seconds. Then, without warning, it crumbles, like a bridge without a keystone. She leans into Sam’s embrace, her entire body shuddering with great, earth-shattering sobs that threatened to tear her and Sam apart. Sam rubs her back and whispers soothing nonsense in her ear as Ashy’s sobs grow louder and louder. The chaos of the world around them dies away, submerging into strange, distant waters, and the only real things were Sam, this broken girl, and the profound debt Sam owes to her.

“I’ll make it up to you, Ashley. I’ll keep you safe.”

“I don’t deserve…”

“Doesn’t matter what you deserve. I’m taking care of you, because I love you, and I never want anyone to harm you ever again.”

“But I...hurt people...so many people…”

“So have I,” Sam whispers. “That’s the beautiful thing about living forever. You have all the time in the world to make things right.”

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Beth’s hits a marble pillar with an ominous thwack, her whole body tight and aching as she slides to the floor.

In the background she hears Hannah and Josh call for her. She blinks, head ringing.
“Stupid child.”

A kick, so swift and fierce it would shatter a mortal’s bones. Beth gasps.

“I gave you everything. And this, this, is what I get in return?”

Beth rolls on her back, flinching, expecting a blow to her face that never comes. Instead, she sees her brother and sister racing towards her sire.

Like a car crash, Beth knows what is going to happen but it doesn’t make it any less horrific, all the same. Cassandra kicks Hannah’s knee with a sickening force, her twin’s body snapping back and crumpling to the floor. Her brother lets out a cry of feral rage, sharp and hollow. He runs at her sire, full of a reckless bravery Beth didn’t know he was capable of, but years of subsistent blood has made him frail. Sally grips his arm, twisting it back until it snaps. Josh kicks at her, spitting, fighting dirty like he used to as a child, but it’s hopeless. Sally just laughs, bringing her heel down on Josh’s foot.

“Josh!” Beth calls out weakly.

Another blow, this time to her brother’s chest. Beth hears something else crack.

“So pretty,” Sally mocks as Josh slumps to the floor. She cradles his chin in her hands. Beth feels a rush of panic when she sees sire grip her brother’s skull and squeeze.

“No, no, no, no,” Josh moans, weakly trying to push Sally away. Her sire’s face is like stone, Medusa looking down upon her prey.

“Josh,” Beth cries out, staggering to her feet. Fear makes her body stiff and clumsy. Josh whimpers, his eyes red and watering as Sally holds him in her vice-like grip. Beth’s too far away. She’s too goddamn far away.

“Ugh,” Sally drops her brother to the floor as Hannah tackles her. Josh slumps forward, wincing as his head hits the ground with an ugly splat. Her sister screams, trying to claw at Sally’s eyes.

“You bitch! Get off of him.”

Beth feels a grim surge of pride as her sister manages to get a few heavy blows in before Sally responds with a heavy blow of her own to Hannah’s face that Beth somehow feels. Sally grabs Hannah and pulls her to her feet.

“Hannah!”

“Stop there.”

Beth does. She’s less than a metre from them, so close she can see her sister’s pupil dilate, sees her sire’s savage glee.

“This. All of this. For you. God. You stupid girl.”

“If I’m so stupid, why don’t you let me leave?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Sally spits, gripping Hannah close to her breast. “You’re mine, Beth. You were mine from the moment I saw you. Haven’t I made myself plain? I saw you.” Sally squeezes Hannah’s shoulder. Her sister squeaks in pain. “You weren’t like every other craven girl. You wanted more. You bucked against convention, against expectation. I saw your hunger, because it’s
my hunger, too. To be something more. Beth. Isn’t it obvious? We’re not meant to be mortal.”

“Cassandra,” Beth’s says. Her sire’s eyes are wide and desperate, and despite herself, Beth feels a tug of understanding. “I know. You’re right. I did want this, this life. To be powerful, untouchable. To be in this world, but not a part of it. I know that. And I know… we went through so much. We shared eras together.” She swallows. Her mouth tastes of ashes. “But time doesn’t stop. Even for us. And what I was? That’s not me anymore.”

“Not you?” Sally spits. “Why do you fight against your own nature? You abhor your power, instead of embracing it. Why is that? Huh? Some left over self loathing from your human days?”

“No,” Beth says calmly. “Cass, I know this is hard, but we’ve learned all we can from one another. You have to let me go.”

Her smile is malignant. “Let you go. Let you go? So you decide when to end this? No. No. I know you. You’re too indulgent. Too indulgent of these creatures.” She pulls Hannah’s hair, tossing clumps of it to the floor. “You’re afraid to leave them behind. Sister, brother, lover. They want to drag you down to their level.” She sneers again. “I won’t let that happen to you. I’ve indulged your humanity for too long, Beth. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make you mine again.”

“No,” Beth roars, advancing on Sally. “I’m not the one who’s afraid, Sally. Huh? I’ve moved on. I don’t want to live as I once did. Even mortals know that nothing is forever! Christ. I’m not the same girl you turned all those years ago. I’m not that fledgling that needed guidance. That void you feel? Find someone else to fill it.”

“No?” Sally snarls, and all at once Beth feels her sire’s anger, her anguish. “Stupid girl. You think I haven’t thought of this already? Nothing is forever. That is why this clan must be extinguished. These girls… I have no use for them. So I’ll burn this place to the ground and start again. We’ll start again. You and I and Ashley. We’ll face new eras. Together.”

Beth gapes at her, aghast at the baseness of her cruelty. “You don’t understand anything, do you? Start again? You never start again. You stay in one spot. Trapped. You call that living? Fuck you. After everything you did, after every fucking lie, you expect me to stay with you? Are you crazy? I should rip your head off.”

“But you won’t. Even with your sister in my arms, you won’t.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me.”

Hate? Love? It’s too hard to distinguish when it comes to Cassandra. Beth doesn’t get the chance to think on it, because Hannah, sensing that Sally’s attention is elsewhere, seizes her chance. She snaps Sally’s wrist, elbowing her in the gut and wriggling free.

Beth pounces, striking her sire across the face. Sally grunts and staggers back. Hannah kicks her, while Beth launches another punch. Hannah’s blow finds its mark, but Beth misses. Sally bares her fangs at them both. Beth and Hannah surround her, aiming punches, kicks, anything, but with every second Sally seems to be gaining strength, evading their punches but not fighting back, an ugly smirk on her face.

She’s playing with them. Hunger and fatigue has made them weak and their numerical advantage isn’t much. In the background she hears her brother moan in pain.

Fear. She feels it, like a block of ice in the pit of her stomach. Three against one is still not good
Dawn. Beth can feel it, can feel how her body tenses slightly, as it always does with the coming of the sun. Might alone won’t defeat Sally. They don’t have it in them. But the sun is a relentless foe, destroying everything in its wake.

Good.

Sally is laughing now, goading Hannah. Her sister is beginning to tire, the strain of the fight starting to show on her face. Beth grits her teeth, throws a few punches she knows won’t land, but directing Sally backwards, towards the wall.

Towards the window.

“You’ll see, Beth,” Sally cheers, evading Hannah’s sloppy punch. “You’ll see. She’s useless. A child. A burden. I’ve seen you try and protect her. After all these years and you’re still looking out for her. And how does she repay you? By bringing you nothing but pain. You’ll be better for this.”

“Shut up!” Hannah snaps.

“Or what? I’ll do this?” Sally unfurls a punch that hits Hannah square in the face. The blow knocks Hannah’s glasses to the ground and her sister cries out, grabbing her nose, black blood seeping through her fingers. Hannah slumps to her knees, beaten. Sally laughs, joyously.

“And I’ll do this.”

Beth grabs Sally and launches her through the air. She flies through the window, glass cracking, shards falling everywhere. Outside she hears a loud thump as her sire lands on the glass below.

Light. Everywhere. The sun is still milky and grey but sharp enough that Beth’s skin prickles immediately as the light from the window hits them both. Beth shields her eyes as Hannah cries out and steps into the darkness.

Outside she hears Sally moan in pain. They’re on the ground floor, and the sun isn’t so bright that her sire won’t be able to return to the room, enraged and bent on revenge.

“Beth!”

Hannah calls out plaintively but it’s too late as Beth throws herself out the window after Sally.

The sun hits with a brutal, almost overpowering, force. Beth gags, the throat closing up in fear, staggering over to her sire who is writhing on the floor.

“Beth,” Sally gasps. Beth collapses on top of her. “Beth, what are you doing?”

Beth grits her teeth, holding her down, taking the sun’s full brunt.

“Ahh, I see. I see. You don’t have the courage to live without me? So your solution is that we both die?” Sally smiles bleakly. Her skin is bubbling, cracking like pork on a spit. “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

“It does,” Beth sobs. “You know it does.”

“You really loathe yourself that much? Pathetic. Get up and fight. Don’t let the sun do your dirty
Beth moans, the pain beginning to overwhelm them both. Older vampires catch alight faster, and they’ve been around the block far longer than most of their kind. She thinks. Beth doesn’t know much about her kind, not really. And now she’ll never know.

“Fight, Beth!”

“I can’t,” Beth moans, holding her down, screaming as her skin begins to bubble and pop. Her sire struggles against her still, tenacious to the last. “You should have let me go. Why didn’t you let me go?”

“Maybe I should have. I didn’t realize how cheaply you value your own life. Huh? And what of your friends inside? You’re abandoning them. Leaving them to the tender mercies of my Ashley. She’ll destroy them. I know she will. She’s loyal, at least.”

“I’m loyal. I’m loyal too. I loved you! I did everything for you. Killed off my own humanity, debased myself. And for what? What? You lied to me. Betrayed me. Every fucking time. So this is what you get. What we get!”

“Oh, Beth.” Sally’s face is twisted, the skin falling off the bone. Even then, Beth swears she sees a sneer on her face. “Tell yourself all you want, but I’m not the one taking the coward’s way out.”

Fuck you, Beth wants to say, but the words curdle in her throat. Her vision blurs as the light bears down on them, her skin leaking, turning into ash, the toxic smell of her own rotting flesh making her gag. In her grasp, Sally twists and turns, her face a grotesque parody of itself, melting and bubbling into tar. But still, Beth holds firm.

In it together, till the very end. It’s only what they deserve.

“Beth!” Two hands grab her and pull her backward. Beth screams, tries to ward her attacker off. This isn’t how it’s supposed to go. No. No. No. Sally could still come back inside.

“Beth, quit fighting me.”

Someone is pulling her back from the brink, through the yard. Beth screams as gravel scrapes the exposed nerves on her back.

“Beth! Hold on.”

That voice. She’d know that voice anywhere.

“Hannah…”

Her sister pulls her inside the initiation pit. The smooth floor is cold on her exposed, fleshy back.

“Oh my god, Beth!”

“Hannah…Jesus, what the fuck…Beth!”

“Josh! She needs blood. Find her blood. There’s a basement full of blood wine. Get me as many bottles as you can find. Down the hall, there’s a staircase.”

“Hannah, what if that crazy bitch comes back?”

“Hannah,” Beth rasps. It hurts to speak. “Hannah, Josh is right. Close the door. Cassandra might get
back in.”

“I’m hoping on it.”

Arms envelop her from behind, and when she looks up Beth sees her brother looking down at her, eyes wide like saucers.

“I’ve got you, Beth.”

To her left, a screech. Beth turns her head, fearing the worse.

Sally is dragging herself through the open door, her skin black and roasting. Her legs have withered away. The thick stench of tar fills Beth’s nostrils. If she were a human, she’d definitely gag.

“Sally? Oh, Sally, we’re over here.”

Her sire snarls, looking up at Hannah. She pulls herself across the floor towards them.

“Isn’t it cute how you think everything will just be fine,” Sally croaks. “Even after all this time, you’re still a stupid, naive little girl.” She spits a wad of phlegm, blood and melted flesh as her lower lip falls away, revealing sharp white teeth and charred, melting gums. “Do you think humans will ever…ever accept your kind? Their tolerance can be taken as...as freely as it’s given. As soon as you’re no longer...useful, they’ll force you back into the shadows to rot.” She keels over and coughs up something that might be part of a lung, shriveled up and black. Then she laughs, a creaking, wheezing sound. “Mankind is worse than I could ever be. Murderers and rapists and wealthy tyrants who strip the poor of everything they treasure so they can buy another goddamn car. By backing them, you sign your own death warrant. They...will use you until you are spent and they’ll devour the husk.” She laughs again, and Beth wants nothing more than to stop the sound forever. “Terrible things are coming. I’ve been alive long enough to see the tide come in. You won’t be prepared for humanity’s fall. And without me, you’ll have no one to save you when they come to your door, baying for your blood. You will bleed. Ha. Ha ha ha. You will bleed.”

“That’s enough out of you,” says a familiar voice, so much like Beth’s own, and Beth looks up to see Hannah striding forward, hateful purpose in her eyes.

Sally glares up at her.

“Traitor. You worthless, pathetic, spare, I should have -”

“Oh my god, just shut up already.”

Her sister rears back and unleashes a powerful punch. Her fist hits Sally’s head with a pulpy thud. Hannah’s fist sinks deep, through skin and tendons and bone until her sire’s head melts away like sodden paper mache. A shriek fills the auditorium. Beth doesn’t know if it’s hers. Or Sally’s. Or maybe both of them, coiled together even in death.

Sally’s body goes rigid before exploding into a mush into the floor, putrid black sludge going everywhere. Beth screams and screams until her voice is raw.

“It’s okay,” her brother mutters, holding her tight. “It’s okay, Beth. It’s okay.”

She shudders, her ruined body slick with sweat as she gazes into the space where her sire used to be.

It’s not okay, but she hopes it will be.
The world is dark and full of deep, cold water. Matt sinks into it, the sounds of chaos and panic reaching him slowly, distantly. His limbs feel numb. His heart is quiet, the beats slow and far apart. He can no longer feel the wound in his abdomen, only a spreading chill as he sinks further into the abyss.

He wonders where his sister is.

Distantly, he feels a tug on his limbs, his body being hoisted into the air. His mind fails to surface, and he remains suspended in the strange waters as his body is carried out of the darkness and into a hallway touched by leaching light. The hallway looks like it was damaged somehow, the wallpaper torn, the windows shattered, the curtains ripped away. His carriers swerve to avoid plumes of light like blades cutting through the dark.

A bit of sunlight hits his face as they move through the ruined hallway. It’s so warm. Matt’s lips twitch into a faint smile. There’s still warmth.

Finally, he’s brought into a dark, quiet, cavernous room. He sees three people, people he thinks he might recognize, huddled together on the ground. The girl lying on her back looks burned. The smell of melted flesh, like rotted, burning pork, hits his nostrils and his stomach lurches, sending a dull throb of pain through his entire body.

So many people are dead. He’ll probably join them soon.

His carriers lay him down on the cool, marble ground, and his mind surfaces long enough to recognize their faces.

“Em…” He croaks. His voice is barely audible, even to him.

“Matt,” Emily sobs. “Matt, Jesus, god, it’ll be okay, we’ll save you. I can save you. I just gotta…I gotta…” She trails off, looking desperately at Jess, who looks like she’s barely maintaining consciousness.

“I don’t know if I can turn him right,” Jess says. “It needs…focus…precision. I might mess up.”

“You have to try, Jess, come on,” Emily says, before adding a desperate, quiet, “…please.”

Before Jess can say anything else, Matt hears a voice he recognizes. A voice he never dreamed would sound this anguished.

“Matt!” Hannah cries. “Matt, oh god, no.”

“We, we can still save him,” Emily tells her. “Help me save him.”

“I…” Hannah hesitates. She’s so beautiful, even with blood on her face and tears in her eyes. “I’ll try, but only if he agrees.”

“Agree! He’s barely conscious! What if he can’t answer?!!”

“I have to try. I won’t turn him into a monster unless that’s what he really wants.” There’s a tremor in Hannah’s voice, and Matt wants to kiss all her fear away, but she’s so far from him, and the water’s closing in again.
“Matt. Matt, can you hear me?”

Matt looks up. Hannah’s face blurs in his vision, but her eyes are clear and bright. He focuses on them like guiding stars in the open ocean, and a bit of his confusion subsides.

“Hannah…you’re okay…” he sighs.

“Matt, honey, stay with me,” Hannah says. “I can save you, but…”

“I’ll be like you,” Matt rasps.

“Yes.”

Something in Hannah’s voice rattles something deep inside of him. He would cry if he still had the strength to do it.

“Hannah…Hannah…I don’t wanna die,” he whimpers.

“I know, it’s just…” Hannah pauses and sniffs. A cold tear hits Matt’s cheek. He hears the others in the background. He can’t be sure how many people are around him, their voices muffled and wet, as if they were underwater. Matt blinks. He needs to focus. Focus on Hannah. That’s all that matters.

“You won’t be the same. You won’t ever get to see the sun again. You’ll watch your family grow old and die. You’ll be trapped as a living corpse for god knows how long. And the bloodlust, Matt. You’ll never be rid of it. It’ll haunt you, make you want to do things, horrible things. It’s not a gift, what we are. I couldn’t do that to you unless you were sure.”

“I…” Matt says, then coughs. His mouth tastes wet and metallic. “My sister…I wanna…protect…my sister. Can’t leave her. Can’t leave…can’t leave you. I’m not finished yet.”

“Matt…”

“Please, Hannah,” Matt says. “Please. Let me stay. I…I love…”

The dark water closes in. Hannah takes his hand.

“So, you choose to change.”

“Yes.”

Hannah nods. When she speaks, there’s resolution in her voice.

“Okay. Matt, if this doesn’t work, I want you to know that I love you. I love you so, so much.”

“Love you too…” Matt sighs. The darkness around him feels comfortable and cool, like falling asleep on an autumn night.

He doesn’t feel the teeth that pierce his neck.

Chapter End Notes
That was...kinda emotional? Or it was for us writing it. Thanks to EVERYONE who stuck with this through thick and thin. We struggled through this last chapter. Life and the length of time being in this universe taking its toll on us both. I think more than anything we wanted to create a fitting end to this story, and one where the really bad dudes got their just deserts.

Also: shut up, Cassandra and Bev.

I really am sorry for the gap in updates. There is still a short epilogue to go, which is vignettes of the gang's life after finally freeing themselves from the cult. Someone has to teach Matt not to chomp on humans, amirite?

Thanks to my co-author. I know this was difficult. But the achievement of (almost) finishing is worth all the effort. I hope you agree xx.

And finally: to the readers. This gargantuan creation would not have been finished without you. I cannot thank you enough. Your feedback has given me enormous pleasure over this past year. It's been a joy to write for you. Really. You guys are the best and it's been a sincere pleasure going on this journey with you.

I don't normally ask so nakedly, but reviews would be super appreciated, just cause we struggled through this and we'd really like to know what you think of it. Even one line will suffice. Every review is nourishing.

And finally, as always, thanks for reading.
Chapter Notes

One thousand years later, the end. Thank you for your patience, and I will be replying to your comments over the next few days.

Title comes from the 2016 song 'Cake by the Ocean' by DNCE.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EPILOGUE

Matt had no idea being dead would only be the start of his problems.

He doesn’t remember much. If he’s lucky he’ll remember a flash of something, but mostly when his thoughts stray to the last few hours of life, he thinks of pain. Awful, visceral, unrelenting pain that still makes his dead flesh go cold.

He still doesn’t know exactly what happened on that night and no one wants seems eager to tell, but he does know that after his life ended, Sam took charge of their motley crew. They couldn’t stay in that insane woman’s mansion, that’s for sure, but somehow Sam found them a pleasant six bedroom house in the middle of nowhere within a month. Hiding in plain sight seems to be the plan, and it’s working out so far.

So far.

Matt sighs, glancing outside at the neat, curated gardens. His senses are insane. If he concentrates he can see every blade of grass from the lawn across the street, every brushstroke on the painting down the hall, every tiny sigh that slips from Hannah’s mouth as she rifles through her closet. If he had these senses back when he was breathing, even a knee reconstruction wouldn’t have stopped him from making it to the NFL. But if he’s being honest it’s more of a curse than a blessing. A car door makes him jump, and he’s prone to getting a splitting headache if he looks at a traffic light for just a shade too long.

Hannah swears he’ll eventually be able to shut it all out, that one day he’ll be apart of the world again.

Matt hopes she’s right.

A flash of anxiety hits him, square in the chest.

He doesn’t bother turning around. “Hey Hannah.”

“Hey,” his girlfriend, his...sire, smiles, coming to sit by him. “How are you?”

He shrugs.
“Have you eaten?”
Matt makes a face.

“Will you? Please?”

“Okay. Yeah. Promise.”

“Good,” she squeezes his hand. He’s grateful she doesn’t flinch at how cold he is.

“You’re going to see them, aren’t you?”

The bond, that weird tie between fledgling and sire means there’s no point to her lying.

“Yeah, I am. Like I promised.”

“Okay. Cool. Cool. Take me with you.”

“Matt,” she sighs.

“Please! I’ll be good. I’ll stay in the car. Hell, lock me in the boot, I don’t care. Just let me hear them. I just want to hear them again!”

“And you will. You will, Matt, I swear. But not now. Not when you’re still so new to all this. It’s not safe.”

“It’s fine. Jeez. You’re overreacting. I’ll be good. I’m going outta my mind just sitting here. I need to know my family are okay. I need to know-”

“They’re okay, Matt. You’ll have to trust me on that. It’s not safe for you to be outside yet. Please.”

Rage scrabbles at his chest. He takes a few deep breaths. It’s a crude imitation of life, but it’s the only way to stop him from flying off the handle. Last time it took Josh and Sam a couple minutes to pin him down, so fierce was his rage. Hannah looks away, a pained expression on her face. At once his anger, always smouldering, burns out. Even after everything, he can’t stand to see her hurt.

“Hey, I’m sorry. It’s just a lot.”

“I know.”

“Will you take pictures? Like last time.”

“Of course. You parents have made Lily resume her French lessons. She’s really quite good.”

“Of course she is,” he says proudly.

She squeezes his hand. “Hey. We’ll get through this, Matt, I swear. You’ll see them again. And soon.” She sighs, sitting up. “But I have to go. It’s so annoying when humans go to sleep so early.” *Humans.* It’s still weird to hear the words come out of her mouth, still weird that she doesn’t mean him when she says it.

She kisses him, soft and slow. “I love you. Wait up for me?”

What else will he do? But he smiles, all placid. “Of course.”

She’s almost out the door when he speaks next.
“They’re still looking for me, right?”

“Oh, Matt,” her smile is sad now. “Every night.”

It’s something, he supposes, watching her get into her car through the window. But it makes him feel even more impotent, stewing every goddamn night when his family is going out of their minds with worry.

Hannah’s been gone for twenty minutes when he hears some teenagers laughing. They sound like they’re right out the door, but knowing his superhuman hearing they’re probably a few houses down. It’s a guy and a girl. The girl is scolding her friend, her voice mockingly sweet and it reminds him of Emily so much it makes his dead heart ache. Emily is out tonight, like everyone else. Probably to see Sakura. It’s fucking unfair. Emily is barely ‘older’ than him, but she gets free rein to roam around Los Angeles despite the fact half the police force would be out looking for her. He’s not sure he would have agreed to all this if he meant he would be caged. Like some animal.

Like some monster.

The kids have doubled back and now sound like they are outside the door. Matt listens. He swears he can hear their heartbeat, steady and slow, in their chests. He comes closer, entranced by the warm pulse of their bodies. He’s been away from humanity for months now. What’s the harm in going outside once in a while? What’s the harm in looking into the faces of living, watching the way their blood surges through their veins?

Matt’s fingertips graze the doorframe. His mouth waters. His teeth feel too large for his mouth. He’s so cold now. He’s always so cold.

“Hey whatcha doing, champ?”

Matt whirls around, snarling, fangs bared and ready.

Josh cocks an eyebrow. “Well, I’m flattered, Matty boy, but if you were going to offer me your fangs you coulda bought me a drink me first.”

“Of course, of all the creatures in this world, it has to be Josh.

“Of course you’re fine. Of course you wouldn’t be trying to go outside, because you promised my sister that you wouldn’t. And you’re a man of your word, aren’t you, Matthew?”

Matt growls. Something awful inside him rears its head, snarling for release. Matt’s blood, what’s left of it, roils, and he thinks about how satisfying it would be sink his fingers into Josh’s skull.

“Are you done?”

Josh sounds impatient. Matt’s growl is more of a whimper now. He looks away, squeezing his eyes shut, suddenly shaken. He was never the most even handed guy, but he never used to get riled up so easily. These days, though he feels like he’s a hare’s breath away from catastrophe.

“We should sit. Take a load off, watch some football. You look like the type to like football, a big boy like you.” He smirks. “My sister has always liked ’em pretty. You should have met her last boyfriend. Movie star good looks and an ass to match.”

Matt would rather walk into a wall than spend time with Josh, but he doubts he has a choice. He takes a seat, mildly surprised the football is on. Is it Friday night already? Saturday? The days all blur together now.
They watch the game in uneasy silence. It’s strange to think they once shared secrets online, back when Josh was pretending to be another grieving man. Back when Matt was blissfully unaware he was the sweet meat in the middle of vampire civil war.

He chews his lip, staring at the screen, barely noticing when the Rams running back scores a touchdown. He remembers what that’s like to be out on the field, how adrenalin made his blood thrum through his veins.

Next to him, Josh snickers. “You haven’t eaten, have you?”

“I’m fine,” he scowls, rolling his eyes.

“Nope. Nope. You are the opposite of fine.”

Josh disappears in a blur of dark hair. Before Matt can comprehend anything, he’s back with a jug of lukewarm blood. Matt swallows as his stomach rumbles, feeling a little bad. Every bit of blood that isn’t going into Beth’s recovery is being given to him. For a second he thinks he should refuse but there’s something in Josh’s eyes that stop him.

Who is he kidding, though, he can’t resist blood when it’s placed in front of him. No amount of bloodlust can hide the thin, sour taste but when he’s finished he feels warm, and that’s enough for now.

“Hannah’s not kidding around, Matt. You need to drink more often.”

He thinks of Beth. “But…”

“No. No. There’s enough for you both. I’ll make sure of that.”

“Cool. Uh. Thanks, I guess.” He’s never liked Josh. He’s too mocking, too knowing. It makes Matt squirm. Which is ridiculous. He’s an undead creature now. You’d think the big brother act would be the least of his problems. “I’m not really feeling the game right now,” he motions towards the television. “I’m going to upstairs. Goodnight.”

“What? And leave me here on my lonesome? Anyway. I’ve been wanting to talk to you, dude. Vamp to vamp.”

He panics. He and Hannah have tried to keep it down, but Matt can’t help it. The tie that binds fledgling and sire means sex between them is a uniquely surreal and intense experience, and it’s not his fault the walls are thin and he’s surrounded by creatures with super human hearing, and -

“Stop panicking. If I wanted to kill you, I would have already.” Josh indicates towards the couch. “Sit.”

He does. Josh is watching him like a hawk.

“So,” Matt clears his throat, uncomfortable. “What -”

“Don’t even pretend you weren’t going outside for a little co ed snack.”

“What?”

“Cut the innocent look, Matt, it doesn’t work with me.” Josh sighs, runs a hand through tousled hair. “We’re trying to protect you. Hannah is trying to protect you. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”
“I’m not…” his mouth is dry. “I wasn’t going to do anything, I swear. I didn’t want to! I just…wanted to get out of the house. It’s too much, being cooped up here sometimes.” He looks down at the floor, tries not to focus on every individual grain of wood. “Please don’t tell Hannah.”

“I won’t. On the condition, the strict condition, you start taking this whole undead experience seriously. Do the meditation. Drink the blood. Then drink some more blood. Listen to your instincts, and maybe sometime this century we’ll let you out of this house.”

Matt blinks back tears, suddenly overcome. Why is Josh being such a hardass? Do the others feel the same way. Why won’t they let him out? Why are they so scared of what he could do?

Surely he’d never hurt his parents. Or Lily. He’d walk into the sun before letting that happen.

“It’s okay dude, I get it. I really, really do. That’s why you need to be careful. The more blood you have in your system, the more control you have. When you get low on blood, that’s… not a good place to be. Trust me on that.”

“How do you know? Em says… Em says you’ve never killed anyone.”

“Ah. Do you think I deserve a medal? Well done me? I hate to disappoint you, but I don’t deserve the Nobel Peace Prize.” Josh’s smile is sharp. “I was alone, in a cave, for decades. All alone with only the rats for company. All alone! Ha!” his laughter is hollow. Matt shudders. “I would have killed my own sisters for a drop of blood. Just a little, tasty morsel. Just a drop. If Sam hadn’t have found me… no scruples in world would have stopped me from being a monster.”

“Whoah. Dark.”

“You try being stuck in a cave for a few decades and then get back to me.” He snorts and takes a swig of beer. “Actually, no. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Well. Maybe that bitch Cassandra. She and my sire can rot for eternity for all I care.”

Matt flinches, the name hitting his face like a slap. He reels. All of a sudden, he’s not safe anymore. He’s shackled to the mansion’s floor. He can smell his own skin burning, hears a woman’s cold laughter as he shrieks and begs for his life.

Matt squeezes his fists, so hard his palms ache. The pain is good, It reminds him where he is. That Cassandra and her goons didn’t destroy him.

Not completely.

“Anyway,” Josh sighs, oblivious. “What I’m saying is, I get it. It blows, dude. I’m sorry this happened to you, but it’s done. And the way I see it, you can ignore your current predicament or you can accept what you are and maybe grow into the man my sister deserves.” He hands Matt a beer. Matt scoffs. Are they going to be buddies now? And anyway, what would be do with a beer? He barely liked it when he was alive. Now it tastes like sooty water. It’s not worth getting into an argument, so he takes a swig, surprised when he feels sleek, heavy blood coat his tongue.

“Good, right?”

“Yeah, it is.”

The fuller his belly, the easier it is to focus on the screen. He squirms. He doesn’t like the implication of that.

“I think it’s possible that the Rams will be even worse this season. Fisher has to go, man, the guy
“Yeah, I’m not optimistic,” Matt smiles, feeling strangely buoyant as the last of the beer blood trickles down his throat. “Since when do you follow football? I thought you just like weird foreign movies.”

“I’ve been around a while. I know a lot about both.”

“I guess.” Something growls, deep within his chest as he shakes his empty beer bottle, disappointed. Without a word, Josh passes him another one.

“Josh?”

“Yeah?”

He swallows. The words don’t want to sneak out. “Does it get… any better? The bloodlust, I mean.”

“Ah. The perennial question. Pfft.” Josh sighs, slumping back into his chair, looking ancient. “I don’t know what to tell you. I’ve lived in this world a long time. I’ve been as close to a human as you can be without a body bag being involved. I guess. I guess… you can restrain the beast. If you try hard enough.”

“That’s it?” There’s an sharp, hungry look in Josh’s eyes. Matt shudders, looking away. Is that his fate? To be a part of this world, but not truly in it, chasing shadows until he can sink his fangs into his drink?

“Stop brooding, kid. It’s not all bad. You got the whole world at your feet when the hunger abates. I mean, there’s movies. Fast cars. Fast boys in fast cars. And family, of course.” He smiles, takes a swig. “And when that all fails, there’s still football.”

“Yeah,” Matt murmurs, eyes turning back to the screen. That will have to be enough. For now.

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Her mom’s new place is small and a little cramped, but it’s undoubtedly nicer than the shitty apartment they used to live in. Turns out Cassandra was sitting on quite the goldmine of unused assets, and before long the lot of them had been up to their eyeballs in more money than Emily had seen in her entire life. Enough to get Emily’s mother a decent place to live, for once. Enough to keep Matt’s family from ever having to worry about Lily’s college. Enough to get all of them a place to crash, big enough for all of them and away from a mansion full of awful memories and the torture chambers they’d filled in with cement before they’d gone.

Josh knew a guy who knew a guy who does that sort of thing, gets rid of evidence and fills in rooms full of questionable histories. Because of course he did.

Emily sighs and fiddles with one of the zippers of her jacket, bouncing up and down on her heels as she waits for her mom to answer the door. She looks over her shoulder at Jess, who gives her a thumbs up from their car in the driveway. Emily flips her the bird. Jess winks.
The sound of the front door opening pulls Emily away from that embarrassing little exchange. Her mom stands in the doorway, new lines showing up on her face as she smiles. Her hair looks greyer than it used to, before all of this.

Emily hasn’t changed. She won’t, not ever. The thought of standing still while everyone else marches on to the end makes her suppress a shudder.


“Yeah, that’s fine,” Emily tells her as she crosses the threshold. “Since when are you a tea person anyway, mom?”

Her mom’s lips press into a thin line as she closes the door behind them.

“Uh, well. After you went missing, I, uh, sort of needed something to calm my nerves. Chamomile did the trick. Usually.”

“Oh, god, mom, I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Em. None of this was your fault.” She looks her square in the eye. “You understand that, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I...I know whose fault this is.”

“And we don’t have to worry about them anymore.” Her mother’s words are meant to be an affirmation, Emily thinks, but it comes out sounding more like a plea for reassurance. She gets that. Sometimes even now she finds herself looking over her shoulder, waiting for Cassandra to step out of the shadows and reveal some elaborate gambit that allowed her to survive. It’s ridiculous. Then again, so is a race of pretty immortals that drink blood and burn up in the sun. Very few things surprise her anymore.

“You’re right,” she says. Her mother chuckles.

“Moms usually are.”

Emily walks into the little living room, sitting down at the couch while her mother walks into the kitchenette to the side. The room is nice, if a little kitschy, with plush, off-white carpeting and mismatched furniture that looks altogether like it was bought at a hipster’s garage sale. It shouldn’t work, but it does. There’s a fully-filled bookshelf and a modern-ish television, both of which are topped off with an assortment of knick-knacks covering every flat surface. It’s altogether far cry from the sleek, modern design in their new apartment, or at least in the parts Emily got to design.

Her mom comes back in with two small mugs, passing one to her and keeping the other as she sits on the couch beside her. No doubt the tea will just taste like tepid water to her, but it smells nice, at least, like fresh pomegranate. The heat of the steam hitting her face is nice too, like those first unexpectedly warm nights in spring. Maybe it’s weird that she’s mostly just smelling the drink and not drinking it, but her mother doesn’t comment either way.

“...So,” her mother says, then pauses.

“So?”

“How, um, how have you been? You’ve changed so much, and I...well, I missed most of it, didn’t I? You went through this awful, traumatic thing and I couldn’t be there for you.”
The words rush out like she’d been meaning to say this all night, but couldn’t bring herself to say anything until just now. Emily swallows.

“I mean, what you went through was plenty traumatic too, and I wasn’t there, so...you know. No guilt. It happened. We don’t need to tear ourselves to pieces over it.”

Her mother chuckles.

“When did you become the wise one around here?”

“I’m not. I just don’t like feeling bad.”

Her mother smiles but says nothing. Emily wonders if her eyes always looked so sad or if she’s just noticing these things for the first time.

It’s a little sad that it took literally dying for her to stop being so self-absorbed.

“I, uh, well. How much do you know about...about what I am?”

Her mother shrugs.

“What I know from movies, I guess.”

Emily looks down at her knees. She’s not really sure how to go through all this, confess everything she’s done. If there’s anyone who deserves to know, it’s her mother. Still, the thought of it, of seeing the horror and disgust on her face as her daughter recounts murder after murder, nearly stops her cold.

“I...well, what’s important is that I need to drink blood to survive, and for a while, I...the people who took me and I all thought that the only blood we could have was, uh, human blood.”

There’s a long pause, then:

“That….woman. Cassandra. She said you killed people.”

“Yes.”

“Is it true.”

“...Yes.”

“Was it always for food? Because you thought you had to?”

The temptation to lie is a burning weight in her chest. Her hands shake. Her eyes sting with unshed tears.

“No. Not always. The first two...Katie and Jason...I killed because of what they did.”

“The video?”

She has to remember to breathe. It makes her lungs ache. “Yeah.”

“Emily…”

“I’m not...I’m not gonna try to justify it. What I did was horrible, and you...fuck...you have a right to know.”
Another pause. Emily’s hands ball up into fists, anger surging. Anger at what though? Herself? Jess? The part of her that roared with delight as the light faded from their eyes? Emily buys herself time, staring down at the frayed wood on the dining table, unable to meet her mother’s gaze.

Her mother sighs. Emily braces herself, ready for the rejection, ready to be cast off for good. Instead, her mother reaches over, clasps her corpse-cold hand with her own, warm, supple human one.

“Okay,” her mother’s voice is ragged and seeped with resignation. “Well. It is what it is.”

“Mom. How can you say that. ‘Oh, it is what it is’? It’s one thing to feed. It’s another thing to kill just for the sake of it. Just cause I was so hell bent on -”

“What, Emily? What do you want me to say? You want me to turn you out? You want me to pretend that I can’t love you, even though...you’re like this . Well. I can’t. I won’t. You are what you are. I’m so sorry for those poor families, but I don’t care what you did: you’re my child.” She grits her teeth. There’s a cold fury in her eyes. “I am not leaving you. Maybe that makes me a monster. So be it. I’ll take that up with God when the times comes. Now.” She squeezes Emily’s hand. “Where were we?”

They talk, stiltedly, for another forty minutes before her mom is too tired to continue. Emily skulks in the shadows outside, watching her mom as she goes about her night time rituals. She looks frail. Gaunt. The type of person Beverly would mock, sneer that she’s not ’even good enough for a meal. ’

It’s not how Emily remembers her. She was the fulcrum of her family. She worked two jobs but was there when Emily needed. Now, when she finally has more than two dimes to scrape together, she looks lost. Spent.

And Emily was the one to do that to her.

Nice work there, kid.

“You should stop blaming yourself.”

Emily scowls. “Did I invite you to get inside my head, Jess?”

“I didn’t need to. You’re easier to read than you think, Em.”

“That’s fair,” Emily concedes, turning to face her sire. She cocks an eyebrow. “You don’t have to come with me, you know. It can’t be fun hanging out here by yourself.”

“I don’t mind waiting. Besides, I know I’m not exactly Momma Davis’s favorite, what with the killing and all.” Jess smirks. “In fact, I’ve never been the type of girl you bring home to mommy.”

“Lucky you,” Emily says drolly as they make their way to the car.

Emily’s mom’s place is in a nice suburb, the kind where people stroll through peacefully at night. Where kids are let outside to mingle with their friends, where even women can walk around unmolested. It means her and Jess, in their smart clothes and sleek car, don’t stand out.

Emily can’t help but stare as a broad shouldered, dark haired man strolls past. He has a nice, open face, but more to the point, he has a nice, thick neck. Emily can see his skin quivering, his veins full and luscious with blood. Even from here, she swears she can hear the dull, steady pulse of his heart. Her mouth waters.

The man notices. His steps slow, arching an eyebrow, misinterpreting Emily’s hungry gaze.
Jess snickers. She throws an arm over Emily’s shoulder, tossing the man a derisive looks before pulling Emily in for a messy, possessive kiss.

“That’ll show him.” She whispers against Emily’s lips.

“Jess,” Emily laughs, but leans in for another kiss anyway. “You’re terrible.”

“I am,” Jess laughs, pecking Emily’s nose. “You want me to drop you home? You look like you should eat.”

She frowns, a bit hurt. “No. I. No. I thought, we were, you know. Spending the night together.”

Jess’ face softens, a fleeting look of apprehension skirting across her face. “I need to go clubbing tonight. I need to. Damnit.” She growls, hitting the dashboard, frustrated.

Emily swallows down a faint sense of panic. “Jess. You’re not telling me something.”

“Ugh, Em, please, don’t go there.”

“Jess. Cut the crap. You promised me there would never be any secrets between us again. So. What do you mean when you say...clubbing?”

“Ugh. Fine. Fine. Twist my rubber, undead arm,” Jess looks to the sky, as if it'll offer absolution. “I haven’t told the others yet. But they… they’re different. They can survive just on animal blood. Good for them. But I can’t, Em. I can’t be strong like Sam. Like Beth. I never have been.”

“You haven’t... You’ve been killing-”

“Not killing,” Jess interrupts. “Never killing. I just do what we used to. Find someone who is high as a kite. Flutter my eyelashes, take 'em somewhere private. I only drink enough to take the edge off. God, it’s practically no more than a freaking blood donation. They’re still blissed out and happy and I am not climbing the walls.” Jess sighs. “I am not telling Sam or the others how to live. And I never want to hurt someone again. But I can’t pretend I don’t need human blood, Emily. I just can’t. But I never want you to...” Jess sighs. Emily feels a sharp stab of shame. The feeling isn’t hers. “I didn’t give you a choice in the beginning. I won’t do that again.”

“You haven’t told the others? God. Sam would lose her shit.”

“Sammy would disapprove, but then again, she’s been disapproving of me for half a century. I can deal. I think Beth knows. But she’s got her own crap to deal with. And she’s never been hard on me. Even when she should. So.” The pause is heavy. “Are you sure you want to come clubbing with me?”

Emily stares into Jess’ inky eyes and hears the question within the question.

This really isn’t what she wanted. She wanted to live facing the world with the sun on her face, not skulking in the shadows. But then, as her mother says, she is what she is . Why pretend otherwise? Besides, even when dead she can do a lot of living. She’s got eternity to figure out how this world works. And, she thinks, looking at the lovely, earnest girl beside her, who better to be by her side than Jess?

She takes her sire’s hands. They’re cool. Not dead, but not quite alive, either.

“Yeah. Let’s get the fuck outta here and have some fun.”
It’s not quite like how living with Josh was in those first few years. Josh had been an animal, frightened and hungry, motivated by instinct and a bloodlust he barely understood. Ashley is far from feral. She’s sharp-eyed and cunning, and far less of a woman child than she’d led Cassandra to believe. But she’s still dangerous, twitchy and angry and programmed to solve all her problems with violence.

Josh has shown Sam movies about sleeper agents and Manchurian candidates, brainwashed and broken down into loyal servants of enemy states. Ashley’s a bit like that, she supposes. Somewhere between a loyal tool and a twisted replacement daughter.

In any case, the first few attempts at deprogramming are a bitch.

Sam hasn’t been a therapist for that long, comparatively speaking, and most of her clients deal with fairly common ailments; depression, anxiety, grief, that sort of thing. She’s worked with a trauma victim exactly once, and even then, the trauma stemmed from a single instance. She’s never dealt with a case like Ashley’s.

It doesn’t help that this whole mess is largely her fault.

Ash doesn’t let her forget that part, either.

“We wouldn’t have to do this if you hadn’t fucked off without me,” she spits one night after a particularly unproductive and tiring conversation about ripping apart neighbors’ pets.

“I know, and I’m sorry,” Sam replies. “But neither of us can change that now.”

“I bet that’s what you tell yourself whenever you look at me,” Ash says through gritted teeth. They’re still terribly sharp, even now.

“I’m trying to help you, Ash.”

“*She* said the same thing.”

Sam fights the urge to sigh. Ash hates that. It’s something Cassandra would do when one of her girls would disappoint her. A sigh, and then a smile, and then a strike so fast you wouldn’t even feel one of your ribs break until about five seconds later.

“Look, I can’t make things better unless you help me. I can’t make you get better, alright? This only works if you buy in.”

Ashley rolls her eyes and twists her mouth into a sneer.

“You’re a shit shrink.”

“Maybe, but I can’t name any other vampire shrinks off the top of my head, so I’m all we’ve got to work with, presently.”

They hear a crash and a string of curses in the other room. Sam follows the sound into the kitchen to find Josh frowning at a shattered bottle of blood wine on the kitchen floor. He looks up and meets her eyes.

“Nice one, King Klutz,” she tells him. Josh winces.
“‘King Klutz.’ ‘King.’ ‘Klutz.’ Really?”

“It’s been a long night, Josh. I’m fresh out of snappy insults.”

Josh peers past Sam into the room where she knows Ashley is quietly stewing.

“Let me talk to her,” Josh says. “I think I can sort of get the whole former monster thing she’s going through right now.”

“Is this just an excuse to get me to clean up this mess for you?”

“Yeah. But that’s not the point,” Josh tells her. “Seriously. I’ve been watching her for a bit now. I think...I think I want to see if I can get through to her. I think I know how.”

“She doesn’t know you so well.”

Josh shrugs.

“Maybe that’ll help. There’s a reason most people pour their guts out to therapists more than friends, right?”

Sam looks at him, trying to read his face. His expression is maddeningly hard to read, the way it once had back when they were all humans, lying through their teeth to themselves and each other.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Let me try at least. If it doesn’t work, no harm no foul.”

“Unless she kills you.”

I don’t think even Ashley is ballsy enough to invoke the wrath of my sisters like that,” Josh points out.

“Fair.”

“So,” Josh says again. “Can I try?”

“If you’re sure.”

“I am,” Josh says. “You won’t regret this.” He walks past her, headed into the room where Ashley waits. He turns back to look at her one more time.

“There’s blood on your shoe, by the way.”

Sam rolls her eyes and tries to hide her smile.

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It’s Josh who comes into the room after a few minutes, not Sam. Ashley’s not sure what to make of that. She doesn’t know Josh, doesn’t understand him the way she understands Sam almost too well. There’s none of the guilt choking up his veins, none of the all-consuming desire to change what can’t be changed. He just looks at her like she’s a mildly interesting stranger on a train, then sits down
across from her.

“Hey.”

Ashley glares at him. Josh coughs.

“Tough room. Alright.” He clears his throat.

“Our little therapist needed some backup?” Ashley sneers.

“Happens to the best of us,” Josh tells her. His posture is infuriatingly relaxed. He doesn’t even know how weak he is, how vulnerable. If he acted all relaxed and laid back like this without his little band of real vampires to protect him, he would have been ripped to shreds long ago.

“What do you want, Josh.” It’s not really a question. It leaves her tongue, somewhere between a threat and a jab, but Josh just meets her gaze, steady and even.

“I wanted to talk about killing,” he says, all casual, like he’s talking about some TV show he saw last night. Ashley snorts.

“Need some pointers?”

“Pointers? But I already got some!” Josh says, grinning and baring his fangs. Ashley groans.

“Seriously, though. When I was all fucked up in a mine shaft, killing things was all I thought about. Sure, I was just killing rats and shit, but I got real lost there, and if some kid fell down the shaft one day, well. I don’t think it would have stopped me.” He rubs the back of his head, lost in thought.

“There’s a...rush, I guess, when you kill. This feeling, like, you’re something that matters because you’re important enough to end something else. You broke things, changed things, forced things to shift and turn and respect you. You don’t just let things happen to you, you prove that you’re powerful, dangerous, somebody. Killing things, hurting things, it makes you feel like less of a victim.”

The last word hangs in the air. Victim. Something in her recoils, sickened, at the term. Her stomach churns. She grits her teeth.

“Get to the fucking point, Washington.”

“I don’t tell Sam this,” Josh tells her, “but sometimes I’ll head out, close to morning when I know most of you guys are going to bed, and I’ll find a possum or a racoon or some shit, and I’ll just wring the fucker’s neck. Make it slow. Feel it try to fight and slowly give up. It feels...good. Really good. You get that, right?”

A thousand bloody memories, countless faces contorted in pain, come to her mind. She bites her lip.

“I guess.”

“It feels good, to know that you’re bigger than something. Stronger. That something out there is worse off than you.”

“There are a lot of things worse off than us. That’s why we’re supposed to eat them. That’s how it works. We’re stronger than humans, so we hunt them.” It’s her voice that says it, but she swears that for a second she hears an echo of Cassandra in her words, drifting like a ghost between syllables.

“If you really felt that way, you wouldn’t have held onto a dead human’s glasses for almost fifty years,” Josh says.
“Shut up,” Ashley snaps.

“If humanity made you weak, why did you hold onto a vestige of it? Why not just forget what you were? It probably would have made things easier.”

A tense silence hangs in the air like something rotten. The silence sparks something anxious and twitchy in the back of her brain. Ashley gnaws on her lower lip and clenches her hands into fists.

“Cassandra took everything from me,” Ashley says after a moment or two. “It was the only thing I could keep. It was mine.”

“He was yours.”

Ashley sighs. She hadn’t wanted to think about him.

“Yeah.”

“You held onto something human in spite of what Cassandra told you, forced you to think, because it was your only chance at some measure of freedom. Every inch of humanity you regain is a rebellion against her, and a rebuke of what she did to you. If you have no other reason to regain as much humanity as you can, do it out of spite.”

Ashley snorts.

“That’s the only reason you ever do anything.”

“Yep. And look how I turned out,” Josh says. There’s something unreadable in his eyes. “The longer you hold onto what she taught you, the greater hold she gets to keep over you. Becoming everything she hates is your best revenge.”

“I don’t know about that. I could always find a way to bring her back and kill her again,” Ashley says.

“She’s really not worth the effort,” Josh replies.

Ashley looks away, out the nearest window. It’s too dark to see much. She wonders which members of their doomed clan are still out there, surviving on back-alley murder and bloodied rat corpses. It’s almost grimly poetic, how their group went from the most feared and powerful clan on the West Coast to a scattered band of starving, sun-scorned parasites.

“I didn’t ask for this. Any of this. I just wanted to live my normal shitty bohemian life and not bother anyone. What did I do?”

“Nothing. You didn’t deserve this, none of us did,” Josh says. “Random vast uncaring cosmos and all that shit. You can’t count on justice, or karma, or some purpose or meaning to all of this. All you can do is try to do better than you did yesterday, and make people’s lives marginally less shitty, if you can.”

“You sound like a badly-written self help book that’s trying to be edgy,” Ashley tells him, and she’s surprised by the teasing lilt her voice takes. Josh grins, his pitiful little fangs glinting in the soft light.

“Well damn if that ain’t my whole existence summed up in one sentence. Ya got me,” he tells her, holding up his hands in mock surrender. Ashley snorts.

“So. Is therapy over?”
“Nope. Never,” Josh says. “But you don’t have to keep talking to me tonight if you don’t want. I get that you need your beauty sleep.”

“It’s not even close to morning.”


“Did you even do anything remotely tiring today?”

“I talked to you.”

Ashley throws the lid of a nearby vase at him. It misses his head and crashes against the opposite wall. In the other room, she can hear Sam sigh.

“Sleep well then, you obnoxious bastard,” she tells him. Josh just smirks, the prick.

“Likewise,” he tells her. “Remember, if you ever need someone to talk to, or, you know, pummel, I’m here.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Ashley says as she stands up and leaves the room. She feels oddly light, lighter than she has in countless years. That day, she sleeps deeply and long, with no nightmares at all.

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Movies, like everything else, have changed a lot since Beth was human. Instead of being intimate affairs, they’re bigger, badder, more bombastic than ever more. Pyrotechnics light up the screen, and the surround sound reverberates through her ears, rattles around in her skull.

Cinemas are different too. They used to be a destination in of itself. Beautiful, opulent places where you could escape for an hour and watch Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton or any other star from her youth light up the screen. Now they’re large, nondescript places, stuck in the back of multiplexes where the air is dry and drenched with the smell of buttered popcorn.

Call Beth old fashioned, but some things don’t get better with the passage of time.

She almost didn’t come out tonight. It’s nerve wracking to leave the mansion for the first time since her world crumbled beneath her feet.

“Josh. If you put ‘Gone with the Wind’ on again, so help you God, I will turn you into a puddle of goo.”

“Emily, you philistine. It’s a modern classic.”

“It’s about as modern as the Titanic.”

“Pshhhh. It’s not like time matters to us anyway. Han, you agree with me, right?”

“Don’t bring me into this, Josh.”

“Fine! Fine. Well, Emily, do you have a better idea?”
“Can’t we all just get along,” Matt starts, before Emily’s voice talks over him.

“I already suggested Slumdog Millionaire.”

“You just like it because it’s foreign,” her brother sneers.

“It won an Oscar!” Emily screeches.

“I should step in,” Beth mutters to herself before a warm hand touches hers.

“It’s fine,” Jess says. “Go.”

“But they’re about -”

“No one is being murdered tonight. Probably.” Beth’s mouth dropped open, but Jess let out an unpracticed huff. “Seriously. Now that your skin’s grown back, being a shut in isn’t working for you. You can leave us alone for a night.”

Beth thinks of Ashley, who rarely leaves her room. Josh swears she’s getting better, but -

“Jeez, Beth, you’re going to give us both hives. Stop stressing. Go spend the evening with your lady love.”

“But...”

“Beth. I love you, but get lost.”

Jess’ eyes are beaming bright, her ivory skin glowing, plumped warm by blood. She and Emily don’t exude the same sharp hunger as the rest. They must be tasting humans on the side, but as long as they aren’t leaving a trail of bodies in their wake, Beth doesn’t have it in her to care. Maybe that means she’s a bad sire, but fuck it, she knew that a long time ago.

“Beth?” Sam’s voice breaks into her head.

“Yeah. Hey.” Beth shakes her thoughts away, blinking down at Sam. Her fledgling beams back at her.

“So,” Beth looks around. It’s barely after dusk. The humans are enjoying the early evening air, and if she closes her eyes and concentrates she’d be able to hear their heartbeats. Instead, she turns to see a group of children cavorting down the street away from them. “Aren’t we a bit early for the movie?”

“Yeah. But I thought I’d take you somewhere special.”

“Oh?” Beth frowns. They’re in an upmarket part of town, the type of suburb she rarely went to unless she was helping negotiate a property deal with some Cassandra’s investors. “This isn’t really your scene. There’s better bars a few blocks away.”

“I know. But don’t you recognise it? Look.” She points to a block of apartments across the road.

“Uh. Sam. Are you trying to get my opinion on LA’s property bubble? Cause you could have just asked.”

“Hardy har. Look around, Beth. Properly.”

She does. The area is affluent enough to retain some of its former character. The street lights are wrought iron, and in between the sleek modern aparts are a few stray art deco buildings. But other
than that, It looks like any other street in downtown LA.

Except. There’s a small apartment complex, a few houses down. It’s outside facade is stylish, old fashioned the best kind of way, the sort of building she admired when she was still alive, looking up at the bright lights and marvelling at humanity’s ingenuity.

When she was alive…

“Wait,” Beth’s eyes widen. She looks at the apartment block in front of her, then back at the building on the corner. “Is this… is this where we’d go watch all my dad’s movies? That old cinema downtown?”

“Ding ding ding. Give a bouquet to the pretty lady.”

“Jeez. It is. It’s right here. That old movie theatre was right here.”

“Yeah. I remember we’d go watch films here all the time. Even scary ones.”

“You hated the scary ones.”

“You were there, though. You always made me feel safe.”

“And look how I repaid you.” She can’t keep the scowl off her face. Her rage, always lurking, curls through her chest. The apartment building, in all its soulless glory, feels like a rebuke. “What the hell, Sam. First time out of the house and this is where you take me? What, you want to rub my nose in it?”

“In what?”

Beth growls, turning on her heels and storming off down the street. Behind her, a curse, and two tiny feet struggling to keep up.

“Beth, wait. Beth!”

A cold hand grips her arm. Beth whirls around, opens her mouth to bear her fangs before she’s shoved into an alleyway.

“Have you gone soft in the head? Put those away. Right now.” Sam scolds as Beth reluctantly complies. “What crawled up your butt and died?”

She doesn’t get it. Beth scoffs, looking around at their new, seedier location. Despite the relative opulence of the area, its backstreets are squalid. It’s remarkable what humans will tolerate in the shadows.

“Beth?”

“Why are doing this, Sam? What, did you think a trip down memory lane would be romantic? Oh, look at how lovely it used to be, before I turned into a monster.”

“Beth, wait-”

“And an alleyway, huh? Nostalgic all of a sudden? Wanna go on a walking tour? It would have to be around here, right? The place where I murdered you.”

“Beth, please-”
“Why would you do this, Sam. Don’t you get it? I just want to get on with my life.”

“Don’t you get it? You can’t keep going on like this.”

“Like what?”

“Pretending the last few decades didn’t matter.”

“Didn’t matter! What the fuck. Like I want to remember any of it.”

“But you do. You have to. You have to remember it all.”

“Why would that be?” Beth shakes. Inside, her hunger growls and snaps at her ribs.

“Why do you think? You can’t move on without it.”

“Do you want me to remember all the girls I coaxed to their deaths? Girls like you. Like me. I fed off their shame and then discarded them like they were nothing. I used them up and left their husks to rot.”

“I know.”

“So many people, Sam. You want me to move on? I can’t move on. There is no moving on for creatures like me.” And fuck. Her body, her traitorous, damned body, turns on her. She rubs at her eyes, pressing her palms down hard to stem the tide of tears that threaten to overwhelm her.

She doesn’t deserve to cry.

“There are too many. Too many pretty girls” Beth says miserably. “I can’t even remember them. I can’t even give them that.”

“It’s impossible to remember them all. I know I can’t. But, I think about Anna all the time. Remember how gorgeous she was? I swear if I close my eyes I can still hear her singing.”

Why is Sam doing this? Beth thought she’d be romancing her first fledgling, not trawling over corpses.

“That’s the thing, I guess. This is what I tell myself everyday: I can’t erase what went before. None of us can. The only way to honor the past is to live, better than before.”

“Better?” Beth knows her grin is wild. “You think hiding away in the suburbs is living the good life? You think I want to spend decades debating my brother over what movie to watch?”

“No. I spent twenty years arguing with Josh. It gets old fast.”

Beth blinks. Sam grins up at her, wiggling her eyebrows in such a flamboyant way that Beth can’t help but bark out a laugh. Around them, the tension ebbs from the air.

“Sorry. Sorry. Shit, I just…” Beth sighs, staring off into the distance. Would Sam still love her if she knew she missed Cassandra? At least with her, Beth had a role. A purpose. Sometimes it felt like the whole of Los Angeles would bend to their wishes. Now, it feels like eternity is stretched out in front of her, flat and grey and empty.

“You miss her, don’t you?”

Beth rubs at her face. Her fingers come away wet. “I’m awful, aren’t I?”
Sam shrugs. “I’m not one to judge.”

“Maybe you should. Judge me, I mean.” Beth’s mouth is dry. “Sam, I’m not sure, if I can stand this life. I’m not sure that I’m built for it.”

“I know.” Sam sighs. “I have an idea, though, but I need your help.”

“My help? With what?”

“How much do you think we plundered from Cassandra?”

“Uh. A lot.”

“But there’s more, right? You said she had…contacts. In real estate and all that.”

Not just real estate. Beth has gone through her sire’s accounts, seen that she had wormed her way into many different crevices. If there was money and influence to be made, Cassandra was alive to it.

“Yeah. There’s a lot more.”

“Alright,” Sam looks eager. “Beth, think about it. Think of what we could do with that money. What we could put right. Come on.” Sam drags her away from the back alley, and back into civilization again. She tries not to flinch as humans brush past her.

“Look around you. Even here, there’s poverty, misery. And back where we used to hunt? It’s worse than when I was in the cult. All those people fighting against a system stacked against them.”

“Sam. I seem to be remember you used to be a better date.”

“Shut up,” she laughs, knocking her shoulder against Beth’s. “That’s the thing. I need you, Beth. None of us know how to function in this world like you do. With Cassandra’s money and your knowhow… think of the good we can do. The people we could save.” Her voice drops. “The girls we can help.”

Help? The word echoes around her skull. Beth frowns, thinking about a slippery future that feels almost within her grasp.

They have more money than they need. But perhaps, they have just enough money to nudge the needle towards something better.

“That’s…I didn’t think of it that way”

“I know. That’s why you keep me around.”

“Oh. Well. That’s absolutely not the only reason.”

“Well that’s a relief,” Sam’s voice is a low, husky rumble. “Cause I can think of plenty of ways I can be of use to you.”

“Sam.” Beth looks around, panicked. Around them humans walk blithely by, barely giving them a glance.

“What?” Sam’s little nose twitches as she smiles impishly. It takes every inch of Beth’s resolve not to brush her lips against it.

“You can’t say that.”
“Why not?”

“There are...people here.”

“Mhmmm. So?” Sam takes her hands, steps into her personal space. If Beth still breathed, the air would catch in her lungs. “Let them look. I’m proud to be with you.”

“Sam,” that muscle memory, that old urge to hide, rears its head. She looks around. Surely people are gawking at them, at their flagrant display. “People are looking.”

“If they are it’s ‘cause they’re jealous of me. That I’ve got you on my arm.”

“I doubt it.”

Beth thinks of her scars. It’s taken almost eighteen months for her body to recover from that awful night. It was excruciating. There were times when she thought she’d be condemned to live out her days as a hideous, disfigured gargoyle. But her body is a miracle, and thankfully she no longer looks like something exhumed from the bottom of a lake. Still, she’s vain enough to admit she hates the faint, white scars that marr her face.

“What? You’re beautiful. I always thought that. Even when I was girl.” Sam’s eyes crinkle as she laughs. “I was so drawn to you back then. Looking back on it, I can’t believe I didn’t know how much I loved you.”

“Oh,” Beth ducks her head, stares at how their pale fingers entwine. “I know. It was the same for me, but we couldn’t…. Be like that. Back then.”

“I know,” Sam says, tugging Beth down. “I know.”

“Sam,” Beth tries to pull away, but Sam’s hands are like steel. “We can’t.”

“We can,” Sam whispers, before she presses their lips together, just like that.

It’s fairly brief as far as kisses go, but Sam’s lips are just as soft as she remembers, and when Beth pulls away, she feels lightheaded.

She glances around. A few people shoot them curious glances, but their eyes then slide away, disinterested.

“See?”

“I’ve never…” Has the world passed Beth by? She shakes her head. “Am I dreaming?”

“Nope.”

“Are you sure?” Beth squeezes Sam’s fingers, tugs her so close their bodies tangle together. “This could be an elaborate dream.”

“Hmm,” Sam pretends to ponder, the moonlight almost caressing her lovely, round face. Beth shivers, a little awestruck. Sam’s still gorgeous. Time has not sullied her. If anything, she’s more beautiful now than she ever has been.

“Well,” Sam continues. “This is not a dream, but just to make sure, I think you need another reminder.”

Beth’s laugh is muffled as Sam pulls her down and kisses her softly. Sweetly. With purpose.
It’s all the reminder Beth ever needs.

Chapter End Notes

I must admit to feeling a little emotional as I post this. This has been a labour of love, at times joyful and arduous. Speaking for myself, this has been the most rewarding story I have ever worked on. While it has flaws (hoo boy, does it need an editor) I have found it to be enormously rewarding, and in the end, we wanted the future for these undead kids to be somewhat hopeful.

Finally, some thanks. First to my co-author. I know the last six months have been difficult, but throughout this journey you have been the best partner a gal could ask for: engaged, kind, passionate and insightful. Some of the most beautiful passages of this story have been crafted by your hands and I could not have done this without you. Some of your words here have brought me to tears. That’s real talent. Thank you for agreeing to do this story with me.

Finally, finally, finally. Thank you to the readers. This has been a long, long story that absolutely would not have been done without your continued support and enthusiasm. Every time I would get a review my heart would jump in my chest and a smile would stretch across my face (one time I was away at a festival with my partner and she literally was like: ‘can your readers wait?!’). It made all the hard times worthwhile. Some of you have even been here from the start, and to you, I can say this: we would not have finished this behemoth without you. You guys are the best, more engaged set of readers I have come across and I cannot thank you enough. Truly. Truly. Truly.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much for reading.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!