





## Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Table of contents](#)

[Info & Credits](#)

[Complete short story: Boundless](#)

[Complete short story: Familiar](#)

[Complete short story: Monochrome Circus](#)

[Excerpt from The Devil's Mixtape](#)

[Excerpt from Ruby Coral Carnelian](#)

[Excerpt from Firewall, coming in 2014](#)

[Complete book: Origins and Overtures \(Wolf House book 1\)](#)

# Info & Credits

Mary Borsellino is an Australian writer in her thirties. She has a bunch of tattoos and a tendency to get passionately involved in things. Discover more of her writing at <http://maryborsellino.com/books.html> or email [mizmary@gmail.com](mailto:mizmary@gmail.com).

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# Boundless

Every time she refills his coffee, the girl lingers for a few seconds to stare at his forearms and throat. Khepri begins counting how many times it happens, wondering how long it'll take before curiosity gets the better of her.

It's the fourth time around when she finally says, "Do those hurt?" and nods her small sharp chin at the ports running from his wrist to elbow.

"Probably only a little more than those," he replies, nodding in turn at the colorful tattoos which decorate her own arms.

Her nametag says "Teruko" above the logo of the diner, which is a small silvery planet set against nothingness, ringed with the words "End Of The World."

Khepri thinks it's almost cute, in a hubristic, ridiculous kind of way. That the people of this isolated little spaceport have the audacity to call themselves the end of the world.

As if the world ends where the maps end.

"My brother wants to be a pilot," Teruko tells him. "But he's nervous about whether the outfitting hurts too much."

Khepri thinks about telling her something trite about how if her brother really wants it, there shouldn't be any such thing as "too much" standing in his way. But he'll let the recruiters and the zealots keep their catchphrases. "He'll be all right," Khepri tells her instead. "Nobody's ever died of porting yet."

"Nobody's died of this coffee either. Doesn't mean I'm giving it to my little brother," Teruko retorts dryly. Her deadpan tone startles a small laugh out of Khepri, and he smiles.

He thinks about what to tell her. There's no easy way to explain the feel of it, what it's like when the jacks link up to his ports and suddenly he's not just a guy with crooked teeth and long legs, suddenly he's a Li long-distance carrier with two engines and a crew. How it isn't anything like driving a car or even a little spaceport-hopper, where you're just sitting with your hands on the wheel and the world outside your windscreen.

When he's flying, there's no thin glass between Khepri and the endless stretch of space

in all directions. There's just him, guiding his own passage through the dark.

Teruko is still looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to say whatever it is he has to tell her. Khepri clears his throat and says, "Did you know that the light from the Big Bang is still moving? At light speed, obviously. Still racing out, blooming in all directions. There's no way to know what's beyond the edges of that light. Nobody in the universe has ever witnessed anything that's behind that moving line of light. It's totally unknown to us.

"But when we get there, someday ... the pilots are gonna be the ones who see it first."

"So that's why you do it? Exploring?" she asks.

Khepri shrugs. It's as true an answer as any.

"It hurts," he confesses. "Every time I connect. It always hurts. But it's worth it. It's so damn worth it. Because it's so big out there. So big that it's pointless to use words like 'unfathomable' or 'gargantuan.' It's just really, really, really ... BIG. There's no such thing as an end to it, not that I've ever seen. And I've seen a lot.

"Never let yourself think that a dinky little place like this is really the end of anything. You can go anywhere, anytime you like. The world's waiting out there, you know?"

He hasn't heard his own voice get so impassioned about anything in a long, long time. He likes the sound of his own enthusiasm.

It's good to know the strength of feeling that the endless black of the star field can conjure up for him. Even after all these years, he loves it.

"You sound like an old-fashioned sailor," Teruko says, glancing down at her tattoos. Some of them are traditional images from a dozen generations ago, sparrows and nautical stars and white-sailed ocean-ships.

"People don't change," Khepri answers. "Technology changes. Frontiers change. But people don't. Not really."

"I've always teased my brother that he's the sort of kid who would have run away to be a cabin boy, if he'd been born at the right time," Teruko tells him with a fond smile.

"Then he'll be right at home out in the world," Khepri says, gesturing out to the sky beyond the windows of the diner, the whirl of galaxies and planets like a glimmering canvas on

display. "What about you?"

"Me?" Teruko looks surprised at the question. "What do you mean?"

"Are you going to see what's out there? What happens when you go out beyond the end of the world?"

She shrugs. "Perhaps. For now I like being here. Talking to people like you, who come through. Hearing what they say. Borrowing your memories, the same way you borrow the sensors of the ships you pilot. I get to fly out there too, every single time I listen to a story."

With a grin, Teruko fills Khepri's coffee cup and turns away. "I'll be back in a minute. Make sure you choose something grand to tell me, okay?"

He finds himself smiling back at her. "All right," he promises, and sips his drink, staring out at the limitless sprawl of space out in the dark.

# Familiar

The sky is relentlessly blue and bright, the morning hot and windy. The Serenity Cafe's breakfast menu is tacked up in the front window, faded to grey on pale yellow from other mornings as determinedly sunny as this one, and Asha's mouth waters at the list of bacon and sausage dishes. She grins a little at how predictable she is.

"A Bloody Mary, strong, with two celery sticks in it," she tells the waitress as she steps into the relative dark and cool of the little cafe. "And an omelette with at least half a vegetable patch and most of a pig mixed into it."

The waitress just smiles at Asha and gestures to one of the numerous empty tables. "Have a seat."

Asha sits, pulling her cellphone out of one of the pockets of her jacket. The other pocket has several hundred dollars in small bills and a travel-sized toothbrush and toothpaste kit.

Frannie answers on the second ring. "Good morning."

"Isn't it?" Asha agrees, chipper despite her pounding headache and aching muscles. She feels pleasantly exhausted, like a punk who's danced in a slamming pit until sunrise.

She'd been a punk, briefly. Back in the seventies. The spikes and studs had made her uneasy, though. Her head knew that the gleam wasn't true silver, but her heart had never been comfortable around that many foil-shiny points. She'd eventually admitted defeat and abandoned the identity.

"Where are you? I'll bring a car," Frannie says.

Asha gives her the cafe's address. "But no hurry. I'm going to have breakfast first. Anything urgent go on overnight?"

"No, just a few run-of-the-mill things to take care of when you get back. I'll brief you after I pick you up. Have a nice breakfast."

The breakfast is better than nice. It's delicious, and the Bloody Mary soothes Asha's head enough that she starts to feel properly herself again.

"This place is my new favourite," she tells the waitress happily, counting out a sizeable tip on top of her bill. The waitress smiles but shakes her head.

"Don't get too used to it. We're closing down soon. Not making enough overhead to stay open."

Asha frowns, adding another couple of dollars to what she's already put down. "Sorry to hear that."

The waitress shrugs. "Life's a bitch. It happens."



Frannie shows up in one of the town cars, the sleek black paint job and tinted windows looking incongruous in the morning light and dusty street. As Asha slides into the back seat beside her, Frannie raises her eyebrows. “Forgot your sunglasses?”

Asha pulls off the mirrored aviators, hooking them into the collar of her shirt. “Yeah. Got these at a gas station. I kind of like them.”

“Of course you do,” Frannie says, voice breezily neutral and devoid of criticism. Asha has to hold in a smile. Frannie always tries so hard to be supportive and approving, even when Asha’s doing things that Frannie considers ridiculous.

They pull onto the highway, the driver smoothly keeping the car exactly on the speed limit. Asha shrugs off her jacket, wrinkling her nose a little at the crumpled state of it.

“I should start bringing fresh clothes along with me for the mornings,” she remarks to herself. Her hair, short and dyed dark red, is free of twigs and leaves thanks to finger-combing but feels lank and greasy to the touch.

“Okay, so,” Frannie says, rifling through the stack of print-outs she’s holding. “We’ve got four tenders on the development of the LA site for you to look at. Two contracts to renew for Salt Lake City. A restaurant review that the London manager scanned out of the newspaper and sent through for you to see – it’s positive, by the way, since I know you won’t bother reading it. Now, police dispatches from around here last night...” Frannie exchanges one set of print-outs for another and runs a french-tipped fingernail down the lines of text. “A merino ram, a large coop of Cornish-cross chickens. A dog... a kelpie, it looks like. Two cats.”

“Oh, good,” Asha sighs, relieved. “That’s two months in a row with no humans. The accountants will be happy. Send money to the animal owners with the usual story about an exotic pet getting loose. Oh, and while you’re at it, get one of those galleries I bought to sponsor the little cafe you picked me up from, will you? Hold a benefit for an emerging artist there or something like that. Kick their revenue back into gear.”

Frannie makes notes in the voluminous leather diary she always carries, nodding all the while. “All right. The nightclub you did a DJ spot for called about having you back, but the date they offered is a waxing gibbous night, so I wasn’t sure if you’d feel up to it.”

“Hm.” Asha puts her sunglasses back on, sliding lower in the cushy leather seat. “Probably a no-go. Damn. Get another slot from them, for a different night.”

“Right.” Frannie makes another note in the diary. “And, um...”

That makes Asha crack one tired eye open, her posture straightening back up a little. Almost nothing makes Frannie hesitant like that. “What is it?”

“Here.” Frannie hands her a clipping from the morning’s paper. Just a couple of paragraphs, buried in the back half of the edition. A body found, with markings of a wild animal attack, in a side-street just a few miles from the hotel.

“Urgh. *Annoying*,” Asha sighs, flopping her head back. “Okay. Clear my morning tomorrow, get a urinalysis tube and one of those plant-mister sprays, and set aside the suite next to

mine. Wake me when we get there.”

“Sure thing,” Frannie agrees, and then the car is quiet save for the scratch of her pen on the paper.

~

“No matter how much money you have,” Asha says, spraying the edge of the sidewalk and the base of the hotel, walking along from the corner toward the ornate front entrance. stands out of misting-distance, clicking away at a BlackBerry with both thumbs.

“No matter how much poise, and control, and dignity,” Asha goes on. “You’re always three inches of newspaper away from spraying half a quart of diluted piss against the walls of your building.”

“You never had any poise, trust me,” Frannie retorts absent-mindedly, still working.

“I’m trying to be existential here, stop taking me literally.”

Frannie lowers the BlackBerry and sighs. “Okay, okay. We’re all one piece of bad news away from our animal natures. Very profound.”

“Thank you,” Asha retorts primly, turning back to her work. As distasteful as she knows she should find the task, there’s a part of her – a clawed, hot-breathed part of her, with four legs and sharp ears – which delights in it. This place is hers, and now it’s marked as such.

~

The pup arrives mid-morning the next day, just as Asha anticipated she would. The girl is blonde, pretty, young. Dishevelled, her clothes the mismatched, ill-fitting sort that pups often have to resort to when they wake up naked and penniless after their first full moon. Stolen from a charity bin, maybe, or one of the rare outdoor clothes lines that are still occasionally seen strung between apartment blocks. There’s a thin pink burn on the side of her throat, narrow as a razor cut.

Asha’s waiting in the lobby when the girl steps in through the doors, and approaches her swiftly, before the girl can second-guess the instinct that drew her to this other member of her new species.

“Hungry?” Asha asks her, offering a welcoming smile. The naked gratitude on the girl’s face is almost pitiful.

But Asha can remember being in that position, and she knows that pity would be the most useless thing of all for her to feel towards this wounded creature.

“Eat the spinach as well,” Asha orders as the girl devours the thick steak in large pieces, stabbing each with a jewel-green aluminium fork as if she expects the plate to be snatched away from her at any second. “You want meat because you still feel like a wolf, but the human part of you needs nurture too.”

The girl's wide blue eyes give Asha a skittish glance, but she does as instructed and eats a mouthful of the vegetable.

"What's your name?"

"Lorianne."

Even her name sounds fragile and naïve. Asha doesn't make her speak again until the plate is bare. Lorianne manages to restrain herself from licking the juice off it. Asha's impressed. That's far more socially-minded than Asha was after her first full moon.

"Tell me something about yourself. Do you go to school? Work?"

Lorianne nods. "Both. I'm in my last year of art school, and I babysit... oh, God." Her wide eyes become wider and more afraid. "I... I threw up yesterday m-morning and there was a...a t-toe. I didn't... it wasn't..."

"No, no," Asha assures her, glad that the dining room is largely unoccupied this time of day. Still, perhaps it would be better to move things somewhere more private, in case Lorianne becomes noisy and hysterical. "You killed a man in his thirties. No children. I've made sure that his life insurance policy was substantial."

Lorianne's lip trembles, her eyes blinking back shiny tears. "You... you say that so nonchalantly..."

Asha grasps her hand across the table, squeezing. "You'll be amazed at what you'll get used to." She stands up, looking down at the ragged state of her nails. "For instance, I've chosen to get used to having a manicure, a pedicure, and a massage after every full moon. Come on."

~

In the afternoon Asha attends three meetings that are all much longer than they need to be, and manages to skip the fourth only by promising Frannie a large remuneration package in return for taking her place. Frannie has worked for Asha long enough to learn that a certain amount of desperate bribery is par for the course in the aftermath of the full moon.

Lorianne spends the time asleep, as Asha expected her to. The girl wakes before sundown, but only because this far into the summer the sun sinks late in the evening. Asha's waiting in her suite when she finally rouses.

"Don't mind me. Checking emails. My inbox – and my personal assistant – proves unmanageable if I ignore new messages too long," Asha says, sweeping her fingertips over the screen of her pad computer, as Lorianne yawns widely and rubs at her eyes. Computers are still a source of fascination for Asha; she can't believe how quickly they became indispensable for every aspect of life. She closes down the email program and sets the pad aside. "Sleep well?"

Lorianne nods, tying her hair away from her face in a loose knot. The burn on her neck is fainter now than when she arrived.

“From a necklace?” Asha asks, gesturing to the mark. “Silver?”

Lorianne nods again. “Yes. I wore a little Eiffel Tower charm around my neck. Mark and I always said we’d go after I graduate. He bought it for me.”

“Mark’s your boyfriend?”

A third nod, and a whisper-quiet reply. “Yes. He thinks I’m visiting my parents.”

“Okay, well, that’s a good place for us to start, then,” Asha decides. “Werewolves mate for life.”

Lorianne sits up properly, clearly fully awake now. “Are you serious?”

“I don’t think I’ve given any indication that I’d fuck with you, have I?” Asha asks, her voice brusque and businesslike. There’s no way to impart these lessons gently, so it’s better to get it done as clearly and simply as possible. A clean wound is better than a ragged one.

“No,” Lorianne admits. “But... for life?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I guess that’s okay. I mean, at least then you’d never have to wonder, right? Whether he was the One or not. I know I love Mark, but I’ve never... I don’t know if I *love* Mark, you know?”

“You think the alternative is better?” Asha asks flatly, in a tone that could wither crops. “To never be able to change your mind? To never grow beyond who you once were, what you once wanted?”

Lorianne ducks her head in embarrassment. “I guess not, no,” she says quietly. Then, curious, “But how do you do it, then? If you don’t want to mate for life?”

Asha grins, shrugs. “I don’t mate. Simple.”

“But... but...”

“How old do you think I am, Lorianne?”

The sudden swerve of topic catches the girl off-guard, and it’s a few seconds before she answers.

“I don’t know, thirty maybe? You’ve kind of got one of those faces that’s – ”

“Difficult to guess the age of? Yeah, I know. One day, you’ll have one like that too. Because just as werewolves are real, so are some of the myths and legends about them: nothing kills us except for silver. *Nothing*. I don’t know how old I am. I started counting roughly 800 years ago, but I was already old by the time I started keeping track.

“I ran an inn,” Asha goes on. She’s always grateful for a chance to tell her story, to conjure up



early memories and turn them over in her mind like water-polished stones. Smooth from time and gentle touches. “It was what I’d always wanted. I loved making people comfortable. Giving them a kind word and a place to rest, when they were lonely and dusty and exhausted. I haven’t grown tired of it yet... though clearly my ambitions are a little larger now.” She looks around Lorianne’s sumptuous suite with a smirk. “You’ll accrue riches in time, too. Live for long enough, and the rhythms of humanity become easier to catch and follow. You learn how to anticipate the beats and shifts.

“It can be irritating, of course. But there are ample reasons to bother. In particular, wealth allows you to keep an eye on things you want to keep an eye on. I know more about the silver market than anyone else in the world, save perhaps for a few other equally interested wolves in other countries. And when you kill – and you will kill, more often than not; I’ve averaged a body count of ten or so for every year of my long life – money can make the resultant difficulties far less difficult.”

Lorianne looks nauseated. Asha knows that reaction will pass soon enough, too. The longer Lorianne lives this new existence, outside the human race, the less allegiance she’ll feel toward it. “Why stay alive at all? Why not kill yourself?” she asks, voice hushed and hoarse, like the very fact she knows these new things about herself has exhausted her body completely.

Asha gives another shrug. “Like I said, it’s amazing what you can get used to. And I like to watch my family grow and succeed and live.”

“But I thought you said you’d never mated. How can you have a family?”

“I was married when I was human. I gave birth to eight children, three of whom grew to adulthood. They had children, and those children had children. My genetic line is more like a matrix at this point, really.” Asha pauses, then decides to get as much of the grim news over with at once as she can. “Werewolves can’t have children. Our physiology is too unstable to sustain pregnancy. We don’t menstruate, and any fertilised egg that’s implanted through IVF spontaneously aborts the next time we change at full moon.”

Lorianne begins to cry. Softly, silently, her heartbreak too large for screams and sobs. Despite herself, Asha feels a wash of pity for the girl.

“We can hunt them down. The wolf who bit you. We can track their scent, find their lair. You can kill them. I can give you all the silver bullets you want.”

Lorianne doesn’t answer for long minutes, lost in grief for the future she no longer has. Eventually, she raises her head and looks at Asha again.

“Did you? Kill the one who bit you?”

Asha shakes her head. “By the time I met him, I wasn’t angry anymore. It didn’t seem to matter much. And I’d grown to like this new life just as much as I ever did the life I had before. Maybe more. Being a widow with a business to run was even harder then than it is now, more than a modern girl like you can imagine. If anything, I’d come to be grateful for the bite.”

Lorianne’s face darkens with fury. “You’re a monster.”

“So are you, sweetheart. Or have you forgotten midnight snack you had a few nights ago?” Asha leans forward, until she’s right in close to Lorianne, her eyes locked on the girl’s puffy, tear-dewed gaze.

“If you want to live in the world, want to be happy, these are the choices you make. The compromises and sacrifices. If you can’t handle me talking straight with you, you don’t stand a chance out there.”

Asha stands, turning and walking out of the suite without another word. She can hear Lorianne begin to sob as she closes the door.

Let her have her cry. She’ll get over it. There aren’t any other options left to her except to survive this, and so she will. Asha’s seen enough puppies in her time to know that much for certain.

It’s amazing, what you can get used to. What becomes familiar.

~

Asha doesn’t sleep that night. She spends it sifting through her memories, the way a human might examine objects from a box of mementoes. Trinkets and photographs.

Asha doesn’t keep anything like that. Just her memories. It’s safer that way. Things you love, you can lose.

She watches the sun come up. Even dawn is different now to what it once was – pollution shifts the colours, and skylines change the play of light as the day begins.

Everything changes.

Everything except her.

Frannie gives her the morning schedule as she eats breakfast. It’s the usual stuff, a mixture of interesting and mundane. The bricks and mortar of being alive in the world, of having a life.

“The girl called the concierge last night and asked for a French phrasebook,” Frannie says when Asha’s finished looking over the schedule. “I picked one up on my way over. Do you want to give it to her, or shall I send it in with her breakfast later?”

“I’ll take it,” Asha answers, turning the little paperback over in her hands, a small smile on her lips.

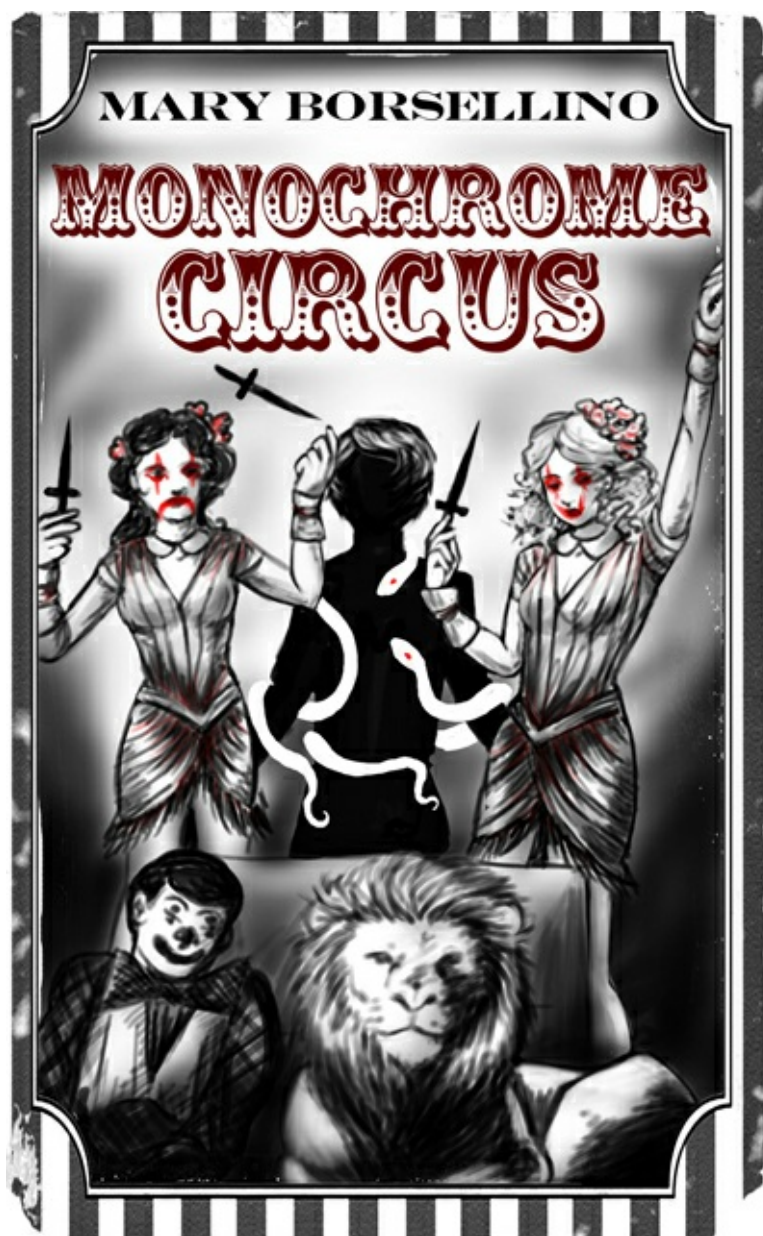
Lorianne’s eyes are red and sleepless-looking, clearly the result of a night no more restful than Asha’s own. But her hair is freshly washed and combed, lying damp on the lapels of the thick white bathrobe she’s wrapped in.

“You wanted this?” Asha asks, stepping inside the suite and over to the chair where Lorianne sits.

The girl takes the book, and gives Asha a shaky smile of thanks.

“Yeah,” Lorianne nods. “I figured... I might as well start learning now, if I ever want to get anywhere. The world’s going to keep on turning either way.”

Asha nods. “Yes. That’s one of the best things about it.”



## MONOCHROME CIRCUS

The man in the photograph looks like he's been sewn out of spare parts, the left-over pieces of a grander and prettier project. It's hard to tell for certain what any of his features look like, because the old greyscale of the picture is as cloudy as filthy water. His nose is too big for his face, florid and dark where his cheeks are pale and his eyes and open mouth are hollow shadows. His skin hangs from his jaw in jowls, as if fitted only loosely over the bones and flesh beneath.

His hands and feet seem overly large for his stubby legs and shortish arms, and the swell of his pot belly strains against the waist of his ill-fitted trousers and the buttons of his grimy shirt.

Above the photo, the words "Spectacular Carnivale" are printed in slightly uneven woodblock



type, and there's a time and location written below it.

"That poster never gets less pathetic, no matter how often I see it," Merry remarks, wrinkling her nose. "Dizzy looks as if he's going to eat a baby any moment now."

"Don't be cruel," Gemma chides, though secretly she agrees completely -- the shabby clown on the playbill looks more threatening than entertaining. "And why a baby, specifically? Why not just say he looks frightening? Why do you always have to choose the most horrible way of saying something?"

Merry shrugs, unrepentant. The gesture makes her curls bounce a little at her shoulders. Since they're moments away from their turn in the ring, her face is painted in a grinning mask of white and black and red, like the comedy half of a comedy-and-tragedy pair. Gemma's face is done for tragedy and the pair of them look strange and comical together. They're very fond of their paint.

Despite being twins -- Merry was born first, then Gemma twenty minutes after, twelve and a half years ago now -- they have never looked very much alike except when they're painted up in their clowning faces. Gemma is two inches taller, and her hair is brown and wavy instead of the yellow-gold curls that Merry wears.

Nevertheless, they have always been a paired set, never far apart, and so it's only natural that their act be for the two of them -- tumbling and acrobatics first, high on the trapeze swings and platforms. They never use a net, because they know the audience gets bored by nets. Gemma and Merry have never felt afraid, so it doesn't matter anyway.

The act before them is wheeled out of sight, the mermaid in her tank who swims and does tricks. The tail-part of the costume is falling to pieces, though, and so it's all a bit pathetic and terrible. Gemma's sure that the only reason the audience pays attention at all is that they're hoping the mermaid's shirt might pull the wrong way in the water and they'll get a peek at her bare chest.

Gemma and Merry scramble up the ladders and begin their tumbling. The crowd oohs and ahhs in the right places, and the twins look at each other and grin happily. This is the best moment in their lives, the time when they're together and playing and everyone is watching.

After the aerialist part of the show, they come back down to the dirt of the ring and begin the second half of their program. Merry juggles knives, three long daggers that they sharpen with a whetstone before every show so that the edges are thin enough to cut the air as they spin up and then down again.

Merry does this part of the routine rather than Gemma because Merry is the friendlier of the two, the sweet and pretty one, and she looks like a little girl playing with a favourite toy as she

sends the weapons up in quick succession and catches them without spilling a drop of her blood.

After she's done with her juggling -- no single part of their act is very long, because the twins know it's better to give an audience less than how much they want of anything, so that they go away hungry instead of satisfied -- it's Gemma's turn with the knives.

This part of the show is their most clownish, a little skit played out to make the crowd chuckle. A big target-board is brought out into the ring, painted with a swirl of red and green that makes the eye go woozy. Gemma positions Merry in front of it, Merry's red-painted smile an O of trepidation and surprise as she stands with her legs apart and her arms held out from her sides.

Gemma throws the first knife and it lands six inches from Merry's left cheek. Merry makes a girlish squeak of surprise, loud enough for the crowd to hear, and the crowd laughs. Then Gemma throws the second knife and the whir-thunk of its flight and landing leave it quivering in the target three inches from Merry's right cheek. This time, Merry's squeak is much louder, and so is the crowd's laugh.

Gemma prepares to throw the third dagger, weighing her stance on her back foot and doing two practice arcs of her hand without losing the blade. On cue, Merry runs away from her place at the target, holding her hands up in front of her to make Gemma stop. The crowd roars with laughter. Gemma puts her hands on her hips, her greasepaint frown turning down even further as she scowls at her sister.

Merry holds up a finger in a 'wait a moment' gesture, then runs out of the ring. Gemma flips her remaining knife up into the air and then pretends to pick her teeth with it, to keep the crowd engaged through the few short seconds until Merry's return.

Merry comes back on carrying a ragdoll as big as she is, its floppy limbs dressed in a costume just the same as Merry's own bright muslin, its golden curls made of frizzy wool. Merry hauls it to the target board, pulling the two knives free and using them as under-arm supports to stick the doll in place. Every movement she makes is exaggerated and cute, and the crowd laps it up like milk. Gemma has to bite back a proud smile. Merry is extremely skilled in making audiences adore her.

Replacement in position, Merry steps away and gestures for Gemma to throw the last knife. Gemma repeats her weighing up of her throw and positioning her weight on her back foot, then lets the dagger fly from her fingertips and embed itself squarely in the soft throat of the ragdoll.

The crowd roars into its biggest laugh yet as Merry shakes her fist in fury and chases Gemma around the ring, finally chasing her away into the shadows and offstage as the next act

begins.

Out of the public eye, they slow their run to a jog and head back to their corner in the long tent everyone is sleeping and dressing in. It's mostly empty now, everyone either waiting for their turn to go on or grabbing a bite to eat after they're finished, free until the evening show in seven hours' time.

Gemma and Merry help each other clean their makeup off. It's not really uncomfortable to wear, and they quite like the way it looks -- the matching comedy and tragedy masks make them look closer to the identical pair that they will never truly be. If they could, they'd wear the paint all afternoon until the evening show, but it's hard to navigate the grounds during a show still painted. Too many stray audience members stop and want an autograph, or to talk. It's boring and exhausting, so off their pretty clownish faces come.

Once they're scrubbed and combed and back in their ordinary cotton dresses, they go together to the long trestle table that serves as the Spectacular Carnivale's dining hall.

"Look," Gemma whispers to Merry, pointing to a sad-looking old man with a droopy face who is chewing slowly at his bread and dripping. "Dizzy's not eating a child after all."

"I didn't say a child, I said a baby. The bones aren't as brittle," Merry says brightly. Gemma feels her face go slightly green.

"Please don't," she begs. "Not when we're about to eat."

Merry just laughs at her, and goes to collect their plates of food.

As they're finishing their meal, a boy a year or two younger than them approaches. He's not a member of the Spectacular Carnivale troupe, they can tell that right away -- they've been travelling with this circus for nearly three years now, and know every face as well as they know each other's -- but he doesn't look like just another ordinary person who's wandered away from the audience mid-show.

He hands Gemma a small square of black paper, slightly larger than a ticket. "Ask for Tommy when you get there," he says.

Gemma glances down at the paper. Written in white on one side are the words MONOCHROME CIRCUS. When she flips it over, there's an address. It's not too far.

"You're Tommy, then?" Merry asks. The boy nods.

"You should come dressed up. In your paint, I mean. You both looked beautiful," he says. Then, before they can answer, he turns on his heel and walks away, leaving them to their meal.

Gemma and Merry look at one another. Over Merry's shoulder, Gemma can see the pathetic sight of Dizzy the clown slowly eating his food. She thinks of the poster of him again, and feels the sharp edges of the small card in her palm.

Merry shrugs. "There's hours until the evening show. We might as well," she says. Gemma nods. They finish their food quickly, and go back to the sleeping tent to reapply their faces.

They keep to the less-used roads as they walk to the Monochrome Circus, so as to avoid seeing anyone who'd been at their show. Neither of them have much love for interacting with the audience beyond hearing the laughter during their act.

As they draw closer, they see the workings and hear the banging and hammering sounds of a circus being set-up on a field ahead of them. There are flags hanging at the edge of the space, as cryptic as the card had been: white writing on black backing, nothing more than the two-word name.

They move closer. All the trappings that Gemma can see are done in white and black -- black seats, white trapeze bars, black poles, all strewn about and waiting to be assembled into a big top. She thinks, as gimmicks go, that having everything in black and white is a clever one. It makes the circus different enough from its competitors to be memorable, but doesn't affect the show's ability to have all the same comfortable favourites that people demand to see when they pay to get into a show.

Near the line of travelling carriages housing the bulkier acts, Gemma and Merry find a wide board papered with fliers, presumably usually placed near the ticket stall. On these posters, at last, is something more than tantalizing words. The illustrations are crisp ink linework, showing off scenes of the performers keeping huge crowds in rapt attention with their talents. Gemma can't help but think of poor Dizzy's terrible photograph, the dim portrait of a baby-eating clown. These pictures are of another league completely.

Between the jugglers and the high-wire dancers hangs the largest poster of the collection. Its sweeping image is of three acrobats in mid-flight, suspended in the moment between one trapeze and the next. A man with strong-looking muscled arms decorated with tattoos gets the least of Gemma's attention, because the other two figures both draw her eye and make her frown in puzzlement.

The centre figure is clearly Tommy. In the drawing his arms are outstretched, as if he is truly flying rather than tumbling through the air. His face is drawn with a wide grin of triumph and delight on his face.

"Why would he ask us to come, if the circus already has an acrobat team?" Merry murmurs, sounding as confused as Gemma feels. "Especially if he's part of it himself?"

Gemma thinks the answer might be found in the third person on the poster. A girl with a froth of golden hair, pinned away from her face but streaming out behind her as she somersaults in a bloom of curls and ringlets.

It's hard to know for absolutely certain when all she has to go by is a sketch, but it looks to Gemma like this girl is more like Merry's twin than she is. The two of them would make quite a sight, throwing themselves back and forth through the empty air, tossing Tommy's smaller form between them like a ball.

Her eyes narrow. If the Monochrome Circus intends to invite them to join on the condition that they split up their act, then Gemma's not going to go down without a fight. She and Merry built themselves up from nothing together, and together is where they belong.

But Gemma knows that if that's what it came down to, she'd step back and let Merry work with this other perfect little blonde doll. Gemma would take on roustabout work, setting up the tents and stands before the shows and breaking them down afterwards. She'd mend costumes, or fetch water for the animals. She'd do whatever was necessary to keep them here, because it's already obvious that the Monochrome Circus is a better opportunity than Spectacular Carnivale is ever going to be, even if only Merry takes the limelight.

Despite her noble resolve on the subject, Gemma's hands clench into fists and her sides and she feels her face go hot underneath the layer of careful greasepaint. She'll give in if that's how it has to go, but she won't go down easy.

Before she has a chance to say anything to Merry about the subject, a voice calls "You made it!" and Tommy slips into view from behind a stack of heavy black canvas, presumably the big top.

His face is painted too, white to match theirs with black shadows around the eyes and a row of small dots along each cheekbone, making him look even younger and more cunning than he'd seemed when he'd first approached them. His mouth, done in black as well, is a leering grin that curls up and out at the corners in a way that makes his sweet face seem almost cruel.

"Here we are," Merry agrees with him. "Now could you please tell us *why* we're here?"

"For a job, of course," Tommy says, his voice so guileless that Gemma's immediately on alert. She's certain that this circus plans to split them up, to put Merry with the girl from the poster.

"Come have a look at our wagons, at least," Tommy says, gesturing to the line of travelling carriages. "This first one here is where Luka lived. He was one of our acrobats, but he's just had to leave without warning. A real pity. So this cart would be for the two of you, if you joined up."

Gemma and Merry look at the little white carriage, with its curved-over roof and window in the side, ready to be linked up with other carts and pulled along a track or road, big enough to live and sleep in.

It's a struggle for Gemma to keep her face plain and not look excited or yearning. The twins have never had a place that was theirs and theirs alone, especially not one so charming as this.

The next carriage is the lion cage. Like everything else in the Monochrome Circus, the curlicues and stars decorating the top and sides of the cage are picked out in black and white, but they're otherwise not so different to the ones on the lion cage back in their own troupe. The painting is neater and in better repair here, though.

Even the lion looks to be in better repair -- Titan, the ancient beast who has been with the Spectacular Carnivale for longer than Gemma can remember, has patchy, dull fur that they have to oil down before performances to give it a properly splendid shine. This lion, on the other hand, is beautiful even when at rest, its golden mane a bushy halo around its velvety face as it chews happily at a pork belly.

"Even the animals here are better fed than we are back home," Merry murmurs in an echo of Gemma's own thoughts. They haven't seen a slice of pork belly on their plates since the summer run down in the seaside towns. In the quieter winter months they're lucky to get a cup of cocoa with their bread and butter in the evenings.

As Tommy leads them on past the lion cage, Gemma turns her head to get one last look at the gorgeous lion. Her empty belly rumbles, and she can't help one last glance at the pork belly, too.

On the bare pink skin still clinging to one side of the haunch of meat there is a small scribble of dark ink, the edge of some larger design, almost as if the pig had worn tattoos.

There's no chance for Gemma to ponder this small oddity, though, as they've already reached the next carriage in the line. This one is a water tank of glass and steel, as huge as the lion cage and filled two-thirds of the way up with murky blue-green water, shot through with beams of yellow sunlight despite the tepid greyness of the day.

As they watch, the slim figure of a girl emerges from the murky recesses of the tank. She's perhaps three or four years older than the twins, her upper half covered by a flimsy black and white camisole that leaves her brown arms bare to swim. The fabric wafts gently around her body, pulled by the movement of the water. Her hair moves in the same way, the dark locks making lazy tendrils around her face. Her eyes are as green as the fabric leaves that rose-sellers dye with arsenic, brilliant-bright, bright as poison.

Below her waist she is not a girl at all, but instead a silver-scaled fish with a tail long enough to completely cover a pair of thin legs. The illusion is perfect, the movement sinuous and graceful, as if there are no knees or ankles or feet hidden inside the costume.

Gemma smiles, delighted by the illusion. She's never seen a mermaid even half as convincing as this beautiful girl.

The girl grins back at her, lips parting to reveal a mouth of tiny sharp teeth, long needle-pointed things stained brown and red with old blood. Gemma takes a step back from the tank in surprise, almost stumbling over. Tommy catches her elbow and helps her find her balance again, shooting a glare at the girl in the tank as he does so.

"Come on, we'd best move on before she decides to sing for us, too," he mutters. "Watch out for her. She thinks that just because she's beautiful, the rules don't apply to her."

"I'd be full of my own cleverness, too, if I could make a mermaid trick look even half that good," Merry says, sounding impressed.

"Oh, she's a trickster all right," Tommy agrees as they walk on, a smile curving his mouth up under his paint.

They meet fire-twirlers with fingernails polished mirror-bright, so the flames seem to leap out of their very fingertips into whirling arcs above their heads. The fortune teller's dark eyes peer at Merry, and then at Gemma, and she gives them a knowing smirk and raises one finger to her lips in a 'shhh' gesture. Her rings glitter, silver and onyx and hematite.

The snake charmer is no older than them, a boy with white hair and pale eyes. A white snake, as long as his forearm and as thin as his thumb, curls around one wrist, and a matching black serpent coils itself against his neck, watching Gemma with unblinking reptile eyes.

"May I touch it?" Gemma asks, gesturing to the white snake now weaving its way between the boy's outstretched fingers. He nods, holding his hand out to her.

"Careful," Merry teases. "I hear that snakes can tell if you have a pure heart, and bite you if you don't."

"Oh, no," the boy assures her. His voice is soft, sibilant. "He never bites the wicked."

The snake winds up her hand, the texture strange and alien against her palm. It tickles and Gemma laughs, nervously. She isn't scared of being bitten, not really, but the snake seems delicate and indestructible all at once, and she wishes that she could be just the same as it. Her laugh is at how strange her sudden envy is -- to want to be a little white serpent with tender red eyes.

Maybe she can be taught to help with the snake-charming, if Merry ends up working in a double-act with that girl from the advertising card. It wouldn't be so bad, maybe.

As if conjured by Gemma's thoughts of her, the next member of the troupe that the twins meet is the rest of Tommy's aerialist act.

"Letitia, this is Gemma and Merry. They might be joining us," Tommy says. Letitia barely gives Gemma a glance before shaking Merry's hand.

"Let me guess, you're an acrobat, like me?" Letitia asks Merry. Merry doesn't hesitate, nodding and smiling in return.

"We both are, yes. Maybe we'll all be working together."

Tommy gives the three of them a sly, appraising glance. "Gemma could just do her knife-throwing, perhaps."

Gemma thinks of the lion's meat, of the mermaid girl's sharp, sharp teeth. Her eyes meet Merry's for the briefest of seconds, and she sees the agreement she was hoping for in her twin's expression.

If the Monochrome Circus is inhabited by monsters, then Gemma and Merry will just have to become monsters, won't they?

It's almost funny, how easy and obvious the choice feels to Gemma.

"Oh, yes!" says Merry, in her most naive and excited tones. "Gemma's knife act is just *wonderful*, Letitia. Let us show you!"

Without missing a beat, Merry positions herself against the side of the cart nearest to them. Gemma draws the knives out of her satchel, where they always live when they're not being used onstage. She takes a half-dozen steps backwards and lets the first one fly, landing it three perfect inches from the side of Merry's face.

Merry holds up her hands. "Wait, wait! We should have Letitia stand here, so she gets the full effect! It really is *sothrilling!*" she coos.

Letitia, clearly still eager to woo Merry into compliant friendship, gives a careless toss of her sumptuous hair. "All right." For the first time, she turns and acknowledges Gemma. "Your aim had better be good, knife-girl."

"My aim is always perfect," Gemma promises, passive behind her painted frown.

The second dagger finds its home in a mirror of the first, a neat three inches, and then it's time for the third.



Gemma almost hesitates, then. She knows that Merry expects her to go for the throat, just like on the cloth dolls in their act. Perhaps Tommy expects that too. But Gemma doesn't want to do it, now that the moment's come.

She goes for Letitia's eye, instead.

The kill is instant, unlike the messy and prolonged scene that the throat would have caused. Letitia's face is left frozen in its final smirk, half-slumped against the side of the carriage and half-standing, until Merry steps in close and wrenches the knife free from its warm new sheath. Letitia crumples to the ground like a heavy doll.

"Hardly even a mark in the wood," Merry notes as she pulls the other two daggers out and cleans the single bloodied one on the grass.

"Even more impressive than your matinee show," Tommy says to Gemma. Then he glances at Letitia's body and sighs. "A shame, really. She was such a beautiful, heartless girl. But it takes more than being heartless to get ahead in the Monochrome Circus. You have to be -"

"Ruthless," Gemma finishes for him. The boy nods, his smirk twisting the mouth painted atop his own.

"Yes." He holds his hand out to her, and then to Merry as she comes to stand with them. "Welcome to the troupe, both of you. I think you'll be right at home."



# **the devil's mixtape**

**by**

**Mary Borsellino**

Omnium Gatherum

Los Angeles CA

The Devil's Mixtape

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1.1 First Edition

For Audrey, Erinna, Beckah, Saoirse, Gwen, Kati, Lauren, and so many, many other people. You are the self-rai's'd and the sharpest, and it is because of you that this book exists at all. Thank you.

ELLA

Dear Nattie,

There's a general perception that spree shooters are boys and men. I'm the anomaly, too famous to ignore but considered a glitch in the program. Fuck, if I didn't exist, I imagine that some dreamy fucked-up girlbrain would have had to invent me.

In a way, that's just what happened in the end. Ella Vrenna dreamed up Ellavrenna, and the rest is history. Or the rest is silence, if you prefer to get your linguistic clichés from Shakespeare.

But I'm not an anomaly. Just like female scientists, female politicians, and female musicians get shafted by history, the violent women of the world only get remembered in snatches. (Pun not intended but apt enough that I'll leave it there.)

Jennifer San Marco killed seven people in 2006. Shot them all in a day in late January. One was black, one was Chinese-American, one was Filipino, one was Hispanic, and one was a white neighbor whom Jennifer personally disliked. According to co-workers, Jennifer had a history of being a racist dickbag.

When we were in the library, right after Stacey died, Chris started giving this kid Martin a bunch of shit. Calling him nigger and stuff like that. Then he shot him in the arm and in the chest and in the heart. Martin died, and Chris called him nigger again and kicked the body.

"Don't say that shit," Dean scolded him. "People will say we were racist if you do."

I started laughing. I thought I was gonna pass out from lack of air, I was laughing so hard. I doubled over. My hair falling around my face smelled like my shampoo and the smoke from Darcy's cigarette and guns and fireworks.

"You're a mass murderer," I gasped out eventually. "But you're scared people will think you're an asshole if they find out you used racist language."

That made Chris laugh too. He aimed his gun under one of the other tables and shot the two white kids hiding there.

"There. Equal opportunity. Happy now?"

His broken nose muffled his consonants, and I thought of you, tucked up at home in bed with the babysitter checking your temperature and one of your cartoon tapes on the TV. I felt glad it was a tape because if it had been on broadcast, then the breaking news might've interrupted you.

xE

---

Dear Nattie,

You won't read these for a long time, I hope. If you ever read them at all. Sam thinks I'm using the idea of writing to you as a literary conceit, and the real intended

audience is nobody but my own eyes. Sam's smart about things like that. He knows a lot about doing things for their own value — about integrity. So maybe Sam's right. Maybe I'm writing this for myself, and nobody else will ever read it. But maybe someday, someone will. Stranger things have happened, as the saying goes.

I fucking hate sayings. They're the suburbia of talking, the same beige stucco words that all the neighbors use, and so people copy them to fit in and never say anything that means anything.

Anyway.

One thing you obviously know as well as I do is that you gotta get the iconography right if you wanna be an icon. I took suggestions from everyone in Cobweb, but the final say was mine. If someone didn't like it... well, then, they could be a sad little story on the evening news with a single-digit body count and a footnote in the true crime section to be remembered by.

I made a scrapbook of ideas, stuff I tore out of magazines at the library or copied down from books. I think it's fucked to tear up books, but magazines don't count the same way. I had pictures of Carrie in her sleek pink gown from the prom scene in Carrie, her skinny body splattered slick with bright red blood. I had a picture photocopied from the back of this video that Chris had just gotten from Japan, this amazing horror movie about this ghost woman who could climb out of your TV and kill you just by glaring at you. She had long, long, black hair that covered her face and white robes, and she moved like a puppet on tangled strings.

Chris — do you remember him and Dean? Really remember them, from when you knew them, not just from the newspaper and documentary photos? Chris with his fair hair and summer freckles, thin face and slightly secretive smiles. Dean was taller than me, taller than Chris. His hair was brown and curly. He was goofy, but we liked him even if he was a dork. We were all dorks. Misfits.

Anyway, Chris said her look was based on ancient ghost stories in Japanese

culture, which just goes to prove my point: the right iconography endures. Who knows how many other horror movies got made the same year *Carrie*, but that's the one you remember because she burned herself onto everyone's retinas.

Girls are better at it than guys, lots of the time. I bet you can't remember shit about the suit Kennedy wore when he got shot, but you sure as hell remember Jackie's pink Verdun with the pillbox hat, the nubby tweed splattered with the blood and brains of her husband. You remember Mia Farrow's little pixie hair in *Rosemary's Baby*, her wild terror as she carries Satan's child to term inside her birdlike frame.

But then again you probably also remember Charles Manson's staring eyes and the X he carved into his forehead, and the scrawl of helter skelter on the wall of the massacre he orchestrated. Sometimes guys do get the iconography down, with perfection.

After *Cobweb*, that was the one I got compared to. Manson. They thought what I wrote on the blackboard was my homage to the 'helter skelter'. They thought I had dreams of being a cult leader as notorious and destructive as him.

Which isn't true, by the way. Either part. Manson's Family only killed eleven, for one thing. I may have only murdered three by my own hand - four if you include Chris - but *Cobweb's* total count was forty-eight. If Manson gets the credit for the killings of his followers, then I demand the same treatment.

And it wasn't about anything to do with Manson, what I wrote. The words just came into my head. I didn't know they'd even work out that it had been me who wrote it. ONLY SKY, all in capitals like your band name years later. You were so tiny when it happened, sickly and worried about me on that last morning after I made you drink the mustard water.

You get the iconography thing. That's how you know what to look like and what to say, even what to change your name to, in order to make it as a rock star. We're so alike, you and me.



Like I was saying, girls do that iconography thing pretty well. Take Brenda Spencer, for example. You remember someone who stands at her bedroom window and opens fire on an elementary school playground. But what cements her place in history is that when she was asked why, she said “I don’t like Mondays.” Fuck! Fucking genius, right there. Action heroes on the big screen wish they had lines that fucking good.

She was only sixteen, too. I was already almost eighteen when Cobweb happened.

That’s the name I picked in the end, as you already know. Cobweb. We made up an insignia, too, so that everyone would know that everything was on purpose, not just some awful random coincidence. Not that there was really much chance of that, not when we timed it so all six schools got hit at once. But we had an insignia anyway: a vertical line with a horizontal line through it, like a plus sign. Then two lines at angles through that, so it was all like a big asterisk. Then a spiral, starting from the middle point of the lines and coiling its way out to the edges.

A stylized version of a spider’s web, waiting for the flies.

xE

---

Dear Nattie,

In Alabama in 2010, three people got wounded, and three people died when Amy Bishop stood up forty minutes into a university faculty meeting and pulled out a 9mm handgun. Before the meeting she'd taught her anatomy and neuroscience class. Students said she seemed perfectly normal.

In 2004, Holly Harvey and Sandra Ketchum, a pair of 16-year-old sweethearts, wrote out a detailed plan and broke it down into four simple steps. Holly wrote them on her arm: kill, keys, money, jewelry. They lit some pot in the basement to lure Holly's grandparents, who were raising her, down to where the girls waited with knives. They stabbed the grandmother more than twenty times, the grandfather around fifteen.

Why? Same old shit as always. The grandparents wanted Holly to attend church with them and had forbidden the girls to see one another. The two were basically Romeo and Juliet with better planning skills.

Schools teach kids the greatest love story in all of literature is the one where a 19-year-old guy and his 13-year-old girlfriend rack up a body count and then kill themselves together. Then when kids learn the lesson, everyone blames pop music.

In 1983, Cindy Collier (15) and Shirley Wolf (14) knocked on random doors in California. An elderly woman let them into her condo. Cindy found a butcher knife. Shirley stabbed the woman twenty-eight times. When arrested the girls said that the murder had been 'a kick.' It was fun. They wanted to do another one.

But in the end, ladies often pick poison. In 1988, Laurie Wasserman Dann drove to several homes and left packages of food laced with arsenic on the front porches. She made two more stops and started fires. She then drove to an elementary school and used a .357 Magnum to shoot six kids and kill an 8-year-old. After that, she drove to a house and knocked on the door. She shot the man inside, went up the stairs, locked herself in a room, put a .32 revolver in her mouth, and pulled the trigger.



## AMY

Her name wasn't Sally Oblivion to begin with. She stole the first part of it from Bonnie, better half of Bonnie and Clyde. Most people don't know Bonnie was a writer or that she named her heroine Suicide Sal.

The "Oblivion" was a jab at her father, a big old fuck-you at the bloke who'd spent the first fourteen years of Sally's life trying to beat the sin out of her and promising someday paradise would be her reward.

I don't want paradise, she'd told the old bastard. Give me oblivion any day.

This was 1952, and Bonnie was long dead. So little Suicide Sally Oblivion was a touch out of fashion with her name. Then again, I guess the classics never go out of style.

I first met Sally Oblivion in hot afternoon light on the side of a February highway. She was drinking something oily and amber-coloured, and her hair was the berry-red of too much cheap dye, well before cheap dye was a fashion of its own. Mine was pale and tended to coarseness. I wore it long in a plait. Some had charitably described my eyes as tawny, but they were closer to hazel.

But let me introduce myself later.

"The King is dead. Long live the Queen," Sally said to me and gestured for me to join her on the dusty ground.

I'd been walking since eleven that morning, and my fair skin was toasted to a darker, sorer shade on my bare arms and cheeks. My feet were fine, though. I always wore good shoes.

Sally passed me her bottle. Her skin was a warm, cinnamon brown. Most would take it for a tan.

“To Elizabeth,” I agreed, taking a swallow. It burned and stung my throat, and I coughed. “I don’t know if the new queen would appreciate her coronation being toasted with something like this, though.”

Sally laughed. Her laugh was a deep, belly-full sound, and it opened her mouth so big that I could see the dark gaps where some of her back teeth were gone. Not enough good food and too many parental lessons conducted with knuckle and palm. Her clothes were loose and charity-pale. They looked like they might’ve once belonged to a farm worker.

I was in one of my habitual cotton shifts, the yellow one I think, and my sturdy boots.

Her hair, which looked like it’d been dark blonde before the dye, had been bleached white at the root by the unrelenting sun of the summer.

“Caught any rides today?” I asked, even though I hadn’t seen a single car go past in all the day’s walk. Usually, I preferred to move at night. I was more comfortable that way.

“Not yet. Night’ll bring ‘em out. Blighters are too soft to brave the days in this weather.”

“That makes them smarter than us, then,” I said as I took another gulp from the bottle. My skin was beginning to ache a little less.

“I’m Sally.”

“Amy,” I told her for my part of the exchange. I’ve been so many other names, but

with the sun beating down and the bourbon sharp in my throat, I went with what I knew best. Amy. It's not a bad name as these things go. "Are you a native?"

She choked on her own mouthful. "What?"

"You've got some in you, don't you? The only ones I've ever seen with hair that fair and skin that brown had native in their blood."

She'd always passed. Always. Nobody had ever thought to even wonder before me. Sally told me that later in the same conversation from which I learned the origins of her self-chosen name. The same conversation in which I told her a little of the truth about me.

"Yeah," she answered, there by the side of the road. "Great grandmother. Never knew her. Never knew the truth until I read the old diary of Mum's that I stole when I ran. Funny how diaries can do things like that, isn't it? Be letters from the dead, fulla stuff you never knew before."

Dearest Nattie,

It's been a while since I wrote. Sorry. I didn't know what else to talk about and figured that just rambling about all the other girls who've done violent shit would get boring for you. This time I'm going to write about books and movies and television and rock music and how people say these things can make people like me do the things people like me do.

Chris and Dean and I all loved Natural Born Killers. My favorite part was always right near the beginning when they're in the diner, and Mallory starts snarling along with the L7 song playing on the jukebox while she and Mickey murder everyone. I wanted to be her so badly I could taste it, copper-sweet on my tongue like blood and sugar.

So, Natural Born Killers. You don't even want to know how many teenage murderers cite it as inspirational, but I'm going to tell you anyway. In addition to the various Cobweb participants, there's been Sarah Edmonston, Benjamin Darrus, Michael Carneal, Jeremy Steinke's unnamed 12-year-old girlfriend who helped him kill her parents and 8-year-old brother, a fourteen-year-old boy in Texas who decapitated a classmate, Nathan Martinez, Jason Lewis, an 18-year-old in Massachusetts who murdered an elderly handicapped man, and Eric Tavulares. And that's not even counting the just-turned-twenty killers or the properly adult ones. All because of one movie. And, I mean, I like the movie a lot, but it isn't like it's perfect or anything.

Kip Kinkel's one of the closest matches to me, crime-wise. He killed his parents before he went shooting at his school and only killed two of the twenty-four he wounded once he got there. He didn't have the guts to kill himself, though. I guess I'm lucky I had Dean there to pull the trigger. Sometimes you gotta ask a friend to rip the Band-Aid off for you, you know?

He looked as scared as I felt, face gone white and his hair dark and lank with sweat and blood maybe, I don't know. We were all a little gory by then. Weirdly, I felt better that he was afraid too. We were all in this together, to the end.

So, Kip Kinkel. When police got to his house, his stereo was still on repeat on the song he played all night after killing his parents, before heading off to school the next morning. The song was an aria from Tristan und Isolde by Richard Wagner; the CD in the player was the Romeo + Juliet soundtrack.

Kip Kinkel was only fifteen when he opened fire on his classmates. Those damn early achievers make me feel so old for having planned and waited for so long before Cobweb rolled out.

On his calendar, on Mother's Day the year before Cobweb, Chris wrote 'good wombs have born bad sons.' That's Shakespeare, same as Romeo and Juliet.

Everyone knows that Dean had a Marilyn Manson poster on his wall, but nobody cares that along with the KMFDM and Rammstein, Chris's favorite music was Loreena McKennitt, that new-agey floaty faux-Celtic stuff. Nobody cares that Dean's favorite Nine Inch Nails song was a slow song, a longing song.

When Dan White killed Harvey Milk and George Moscone, he said he had diminished capacity as a result of eating Twinkies.

Twenty-two people died in the San Ysidro McDonald's massacre in California. The gunman's widow said that the monosodium glutamate in the food should be held responsible.

Once the cycle starts, it sometimes keeps itself going. Sixteen-year-old school killer Jeffrey Weise's favorite movie was that one Gus Van Sant made about Cobweb. The movie changed our names, of course, but everyone knew it was about us, even if suddenly Chris was Alex and Dean was Eric and I was Izzy. Names get changed all the time. You don't even go by Nattie anymore.



Seung Hui Cho, who killed 32 people at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, once wrote a paper about the Cobweb attack.

High school shooters Barry Loukaitis and Michael Carneal both read *Rage* by Stephen King, so King had the book pulled from circulation.

Thank fuck nobody told him how dog-eared my copy of *Carrie* was. Do you still have it?

Even while we were planning Cobweb, Chris and I kept getting excellent grades. Dean's were never as good, but they went up a little just before the end. All that strategic thinking, orchestrating a mass murder, made him smarter.

Dean wrote a report for class about Natural Born Killers a couple of months before he put his Intratec TEC-DC9 semi-automatic against my temple and fired. He wrote that Mickey and Mallory 'got lost in their own little world.'

We had names we only called each other. Dean was 'Cordovan,' Chris was 'Indigo,' I was 'Violet.'

Independently from one another, in a coincidence that would not be discovered until after we were dead, Chris and I had both written the same sentence in our diaries in the weeks before we set our plans in motion. Each of us wrote 'I want to burn the world.'

xE

**SALLY**

I've been on my own for two years now, though time's not a measure of much when you keep to your own patterns. I wear a coat in winter and sweat in summer, but for all I care the world might as well be one day over and over forever, overlapping itself like layers on a cake.

I went up first. Really I went North, but after looking at maps in school so often, I always think of North and up as one. I went up from Brisbane to Townsville, mostly in cars and walking for some of it. I've never minded walking, and since I read Mum's diary, I've started to wonder if that's important. I've started wondering that about everything. Nothing's just what it is anymore, now that I know The Secret. I like walking for days and days; does that mean something? I prefer the coast to the bush; does that mean something?

My mother was taken from her own mother when she was four years old. She had me at twenty-four and died at thirty-four. I don't know if my father ever knew she was quarter-caste; the family who adopted her wasn't too pale, and luck had given her unremarkable features. She passed for an especially sun-tanned Irish kid well enough. Annie Pegg. Sounds like just the kind of girl a young farmer like Duncan Fitzpatrick would take as a sweetheart, doesn't it?

They were happy enough, I think. Duncan ruined fast when she was gone, and I can only guess that this is a sign he loved her better than anything else the world had to offer him. He was smacking me around in earnest before she'd been dead a year. I left

at fourteen, and I've never looked back. There's work enough out there for a girl who doesn't mind the sun and just wants food and shelter in return.

I went up to Townsville first. Townsville's where Mum came down from, and we went up once as a family when my grandfather died. Mum didn't cry for him. I don't know if that was just her way or if he was a rotten sort she didn't care to mourn for. I never asked.

After reading Mum's diary and finding out about what really happened when she was a kid, I wanted to see my grandmother again. Now that I knew we didn't share any blood between us, I wanted something else of hers to make a part of me. A habit, a gesture. Something I could inherit, now that I didn't know what anything meant.

She didn't seem surprised to see me when I banged my fist against her door one slow, thick afternoon. The heat in Townsville's enough to kill you even after growing up near Brisbane. Hotter than hell, Mum used to say when I was a kid. I'd end up wondering all the rest of the day if Mum had ever gone down to Hell to confirm the comparison.

My grandmother served us tea, despite the heat. I thought about taking that as the thing of hers I'd carry but couldn't see it ever sticking well. I'm not the sort to serve tea, summertime or not.

She put out the sugar bowl and a bowl of jubes, the soft little sweets I remembered Tom sometimes giving me during the War. The sight of a little bowl of them, there on my grandmother's lace tablecloth, made my eyes sting up a little. The War had been rough, but my Mum had been alive then, and we'd had Nell, and Tom visiting when he could.

"The blacks didn't get a sugar ration," my grandmother explained, seeing how I stared at the jubes. "They got jubes instead. So now we put out both with tea in case you're used to sweetening with one rather than the other." Her soft, old lips twisted up into something wry and ancient. "It'll stay like this for another few years, I reckon. Something like a war leaves the memory fresh for a while. Then we'll be back to the bad old ways.

People will forget the reason they used to put out jubes and just do it out of habit. Then they won't do it at all."

I sat in silence for a few moments.

"Mum had a diary," I said finally. "I read it after she died."

My grandmother nodded, smoothing the already-smooth lace tablecloth between us. We didn't drink our tea.

"Annie was a good girl. She was going to leave off telling you until she thought you were ready. It's a crying shame she didn't last that long."

I felt my chin tilt up, incensed. "I'm ready. I'll never be readier."

My grandmother patted my knee. "Only because you've got no choice in it."

"It's still true."

She nodded. "You're like her, you know. I can see it better now than when you were here as a little one after Frank passed on. She was fiery when she wanted to be."

"Tell me about her?" I tried to keep the pleading from my voice, but it crept in anyway. "Tell me about everything. Her diary... I don't know anything anymore, not like I did. I've run off from Dad."

So my grandmother told me about my mother. About a childhood spent learning how to look and act as white as possible, about the ways to deflect hard questions. About a little girl who loved stories and reading and writing but who knew it was more important not to draw attention and to do the ordinary, expected thing and get married and have babies. She only had one of those, though: me.

I cried for her, for the mother I'd never known as anything but a parent, for all the things she'd never had. I cried because there was nothing to be done about it but to cry and then forget.

As the sun went down, darkening the room where my grandmother and I sat over our cups of tepid, untouched tea, I asked "What was her favourite story?"

My grandmother's smile was sad and fragile. "Little Red Riding Hood. I told it to her when she was small. It was almost the first thing I said to her, the day we got her. I told her the story. For almost a year, she wanted it every night before she slept. My tiny brown baby, curled in one of the box-beds we kept the smallest in. None of my own kids ever wanted stories as much as she wanted them. She'd make up her own ways of telling it, when she grew up bigger. I'd put her with the littler kids to keep them quiet, and she'd tell the strangest ways. Red Riding Hood marrying the wolf, killing the woodcutter. Weird stuff. She wrote some of them down, though I've no notion as to why she bothered. She liked stories better when they got spoken to a crowd than when they were on paper.

"I've got one of them here. You can have it to keep with her diary, if you want."

And I wanted. I wanted more than I knew how to say, so I just nodded my head. My grandmother went to fetch it, this precious treasure, and left me with our forgotten drinks.

I looked at the jube bowl and the sugar bowl.

After a long time, my grandmother came back. The papers in her hands were folded in the same careless, uneven way my mother's linens always ended up, and I had to swallow hard to keep from crying again.

"You can sleep in the spare room at the end of the hall. There's a candle by the bed if you can't wait for morning before reading," my grandmother told me. She sounded so tired.

I couldn't wait. Of course I couldn't. My mother had been gone four years then, and I would have cut my own hands off to hear her voice again.

*Once upon a time, little Annie Pegg began, speaking down the years to a daughter she didn't expect.*

*A wolf lived in the forest with a girl, and they had many children. One day a hunter found them.*

*The hunter said 'I will take these baby wolf-girls and I will tie ropes to their necks, and the ropes will wear welts into their beautiful fur, and they will learn to be obedient.'*

*And the wolf snarled and bared his teeth and said 'You'll do no such thing.'*

*And the girl snarled and raised her old, notched knife and said 'You'll do no such thing.'*

*And the hunter said 'I can do as I please. How can you stop me?'*

*And the wolf and the girl looked at each other, and their eyes were full of sadness because they knew this was the end of all that came before and the beginning of something else. And beginnings can be joyful things, but ends are often sad.*

*And the wolf and the girl looked at each other, and in their eyes they shared a plan.*

*The wolf pounced, the girl ran. She picked her wolf-girl babies up in her arms, and she ran and ran and ran and ran, out into the dark with her hair streaming golden in the night and her feet bare and cut on the rocks. They kept away from the paths, even though the paths did not cut. The girl had sworn long ago that no child of hers would walk that path, down through the trees to the cleared land of the village and the lights of*

*the houses. She had come from there; she would not go back.*

*The wolf and the hunter wrestled through a day and a night, and in the end the hunter won, as the wolf and the girl knew he would. The hunter wins; the wolf is defeated. That's how the ending always comes.*

*And the hunter tied a rope around the wolf's neck and wore a welt in the wolf's grey fur and made him a dog.*

*But the girl found a cave, safe and dark and far from the path, out near the cliff's edge where the waves crash and whisper all through the darkest hours before the sunlight starts again. And there she laid her wolf-girl babies to sleep and stood at the mouth on the rocky sand and watched the moon go down.*

*She didn't howl. She'd need her voice for stories.*

There's more than one meaning in a tale like that. Maybe my mother wrote it about herself, about what she maybe wished had happened: a mother who ran, who wouldn't let her babies be stolen and taken to the village along the path. I wish I could ask her, but I never can. I've only got the words she left.

In the spare bedroom of my grandmother's house, I dreamt I was that running girl, a notched knife at her hip, in love with a wolf and racing through the whipping branches of old, dry trees.

I think that's why I liked Amy the moment I saw her this afternoon, when we met there on that roadside. Me with too much henna in my hair (the blonde I cover with dyes is the only legacy my fair-skinned father left me that I can't outrun with distance), the Little Red lost in the wilds of a country she should feel a tie to but doesn't (does that mean something?).

And here was a girl not much older than me, with eyes like a wolf's, all tawny and

intent. I'm sure that we're meant to stick together. It feels like fate, which I've never much believed in before but will give a try for once.

We're in the back of a car now, the two of us together, while a husband and a wife bicker in the front. The wife's belly's big and round under her dress, and I wonder if the baby can hear the snappy words between his mum and dad. I hope so. Better to get the disappointment done with early.

Amy's staring at me like she's got a question she wants to ask or a puzzle she plans to solve. I smile back, and she blinks her goldy-green eyes in surprise. Like she'd forgotten that I can see her, too.



*From Reign in Hell: Two Weeks in the Life of HUSH*, by Charlotte Waterhouse, Amplify Press, Australia, 2011:

“Fuck that flight. That flight was fucking brutal.”

Few people are at their best at five-thirty in the morning after a fourteen-hour flight, but Tash Vrenna may be among that few. Fresh from the customs crush, she stands beside the doors leading back into Melbourne Airport and smokes like a mountain climber taking hits of oxygen.

It's not that she isn't ruffled and grimy from the travel; it's simply that she wears it like she's woken from a good night's sleep on feather pillows. I get the sense she's slept in far less comfortable places and long ago learned the trick of emerging clean and new.

The rest of her band and their crew are inside, ordering coffee while we all wait for the van to the hotel.

“I'd tour Australia five times a year if it wasn't for that fucking flight,” Tash says. Her voice is quieter than expected, soft beneath the smoker's gravel. She looks a little older than her years, a hard growing-up leaving its mark. She's beautiful, but it is a damaged beauty.

Tash isn't wearing any makeup, her hair is tangled and dull, and the tomato-red polish on her nails is chipped to slivers. In her oversized sunglasses and ruffled black clothes, every aspect of her screams 'rock star.'

“The seats in economy kill at least half the nerves in your ass, the flight attendants leave the lights off for about ten fucking hours so they don't need to cope with you, and you're breathing in other people's germs the whole time. I always get sick after that fucking ordeal. Give it two weeks, and I'll be dying of fucking swine flu or bird flu or whatever. Plane flu, that's what it really fucking is. A long-distance airlock full of coughs

and sneezes. And I love Australia. It's fucking awesome here. But there's no country in the fucking world that's good enough to justify that flight multiple times in a year."

Her guitar tech, Gabriel, joins us and steals a long drag from Tash's cigarette. The knuckles of his hand read 'BURN.' Compact and dark, he has quite a bit of that rock-star aura himself.

"Tour manager says we should just get some cabs, and she'll have the label comp it," he tells Tash. "I think she's scared that Cherry's getting pissed."

He turns to me, explaining, "Last time Cherry lost her temper, she made a roadie cry and got thrown out of the venue. Two hours before the show. I practically had to promise all the kingdoms of the world to the bouncer to get him to let her back in."

Tash snorts. "If she's had her coffee, Cherry's practically a zen master," she explains to me. "She wouldn't care if we were stuck in the airport forever so long as there was espresso to be had."

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I ride with Jacqui and Ben to the hotel, with them in the back and me in the front of the taxi, because I'm the only one of us who knows Melbourne and can help with directions. I point out that the cab is equipped with GPS, but they've spent the last two months in Los Angeles and refuse to trust the little computer.

"Fuckin' LA," Jacqui says derisively as we drive through the early morning toward the city. "It's the most bullshit place in the world. Did you know almost four thousand people die there every year just from the pollution? Their life expectancy's cut by fourteen years from the exhaust fumes in the air. Wrap your head around that for a second. Next time you sort your cardboard from your plastic before you put your trash out, think to yourself: the air in LA is twice as deadly as getting hit by a car."

“Kind of makes you feel like you’re trying to bail water on the Titanic with a thimble, doesn’t it? What difference can any of us make, when LA exists? It’s an evil fuckin’ vortex of shit and superficiality and glossy plastic garbage in every color of the fuckin’ rainbow.”

Ben clears his throat as Jacqui’s rant winds down to discontented grumbling. “Jacqui and I are from Brooklyn. We’re contractually obligated to hate the West Coast.”

As well as similar accents and the rockstar-standard black wardrobe, Jacqui and Ben share a steely sort of melancholy in their mannerisms. I’m sure that most people who meet them assume that their sibling bond is by blood rather than adoption.

I tell Ben that Australia has a rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne that’s very like the LA/NY divide, with Sydney as the Los Angeles and Melbourne as the New York.

“But Sydney’s not as bad as you make LA sound, I guess,” I grudgingly admit.

“You’re from Melbourne?” he guesses with a smirk. I nod and say yes, I’ve lived here almost eight years.

“What do you love about it?”

I have to think for a moment, not because I’m unsure but because I want to phrase it properly. Putting words together is meant to be my job, after all.

“I love the way that people here will open a bar literally anywhere there are two square feet of space together. I love the art galleries with their abstract stained-glass ceilings and whitewash-clean hallways. I love the state library’s panopticon reading room and the collage of eras in its architecture. I love the stencil art in alleyways and side streets, the riot of thought and message and design and brashness that spills over itself in a sublime tangle. I love the restored movie theatres that show blockbusters and sell cheap popcorn. I love its romantic buildings and facades.”

“And where are you from before that?” Ben presses, quietly inquisitive. I laugh, a little defensively, and remind him that I’m supposed to be the one asking the questions.

As the cab draws closer to Melbourne, the skyline of the buildings greeting us in the pale blue dawn, I admit that I grew up in Brisbane. Brisbane’s literacy rate is one of the lowest in Australia. It didn’t have a proper sewerage system until the 1960s.

I have my own, personal reasons for having left Brisbane, but it doesn’t take more than a general overview of the place to get people to understand why I don’t live in the city where I grew up.

“I think that’s where Jo’s from,” Jacqui says. “Sometimes, anyway.”

Jo Domremy, the band’s recalcitrant drummer, is known for giving inconsistent and contradictory life stories to different interviewers. She tends to choose small towns and places known for their dark histories when asked about where she was born. It’s not hard to believe she’d count Brisbane among such places.

Jacqui goes on, speaking mostly to herself at this point. “And Cherry and Tash are from Colorado, of course. Colorado has the lowest rate of obesity in the USA, which sounds impressive as shit until you find out that it’s also rated as the third best state for business out of the whole country. Anywhere populated by a whole bunch of rich corporate fucks is gonna be able to afford healthy food and lots of outdoorsy shit, isn’t it?”

“It’s too early for soapboxing,” Ben replies in a mild voice. Jacqui snorts. “I’m jetlagged as fuck, so I don’t feel like it’s early at all.”

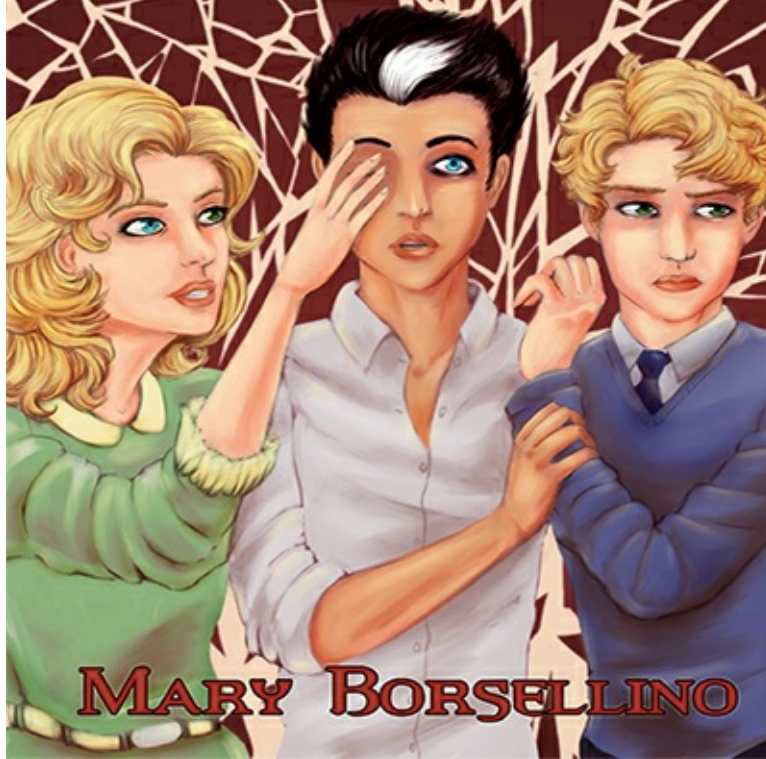
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Much of the band’s earliest publicity focused on Cherry and Tash, to the point where it seemed for a while that their ‘celebrity’ might overwhelm any chance the band

had at a real career. After a while, once it became clear that HUSH's songs contained neither evangelical messages of hope and faith nor dark whispers encouraging evil — except for the regular amounts of evil that some people are determined to hear in any and all rock music — the novelty of the band's Cobweb connection died down.

Now it seems the band has accepted their dubious birthright of notoriety as best they can, confronting it head-on and getting it out of the way: 'And Cherry and Tash are from Colorado, of course.'

# RUBY CORAL CARDELIA



# Ruby Coral Carnelian

by Mary Borsellino

*For Maria, who read fairy tales to me when I was small, and typed in all the spells in King's Quest III.*

Omnium Gatherum

Los Angeles

Ruby Coral Carnelian

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First Electronic Edition

# One

Del is twelve when the Ruby Warlock remarries. This new wife has twin children, a boy and a girl, aged ten. Del can tell from the first that this new wife has never wanted to be a mother and has never quite learned the trick of pretending. That doesn't mean that she's a bad person, or deliberately malicious. Just that the role she's been handed by life doesn't suit her.

A part of Del wonders if he's supposed to find this observation tragic. In his experience life almost never provides people with the things they need, let alone keeps away the things they might not want. As far as burdens go, Nicholas and Kelsie are almost certainly at the better end of the spectrum.

The twins have hair in a deep honey-gold shade, wavy and thick. If they care one way or the other that their mother doesn't want them, Del has never seen them give any indication of it. Most of their time is spent at boarding school, and for Del the pair of them appear and disappear with the end-of-term holidays and are rarely mentioned in-between, at least not by their mother or the Ruby Warlock. Del thinks about them a lot, but that's just inside his own brain. There isn't anyone he could talk about them with while they're gone. During the months when they're away, Del sometimes slips into the unattended bedrooms left behind. The furniture and trinkets are all as still and undisturbed as an abandoned dollhouse, waiting for two perfectly-made china dolls to reappear and breathe life into the air.

Del, despite being older, is shorter than Nicholas and of a height with Kelsie. His skin is paler than theirs and lacks the scatter of tiny freckles which they wear across their noses and the delicate skin beneath their eyes. Del's skin is more like the blue-white of the skimmed milk that the kitchen cat drinks.

Del has been with the Ruby Warlock since before he can remember. He has to call him 'Master', or 'sir.' While spellcasting, Del has to call the Ruby Warlock by his name, which is Addanc. Names are powerful things, in spells. In Del's head,



he is simply 'the Ruby Warlock.'

Sometimes the Ruby Warlock tells people that Del is his bastard child. Other times, he says that Del is a foundling taken in out of charity. On rare occasions, often occurring when an important visitor is in earshot, the Ruby Warlock even claims to have been married to Del's mother and that the three of them were very happy together, for a little while.

Del does not know how much or how little of it is true. All he knows is this: he is an apprentice always, a drudge sometimes, and a son never.

He doesn't mind not being a son. Nicholas has a hard enough time of it, and his mother only mothers him out of obligation. Being a son appears to involve, at the absolute minimum, a lot of questions about being warm enough, and about doing well at lessons, and keeping collars and cuffs clean of ink stains. Far easier, Del thinks, to be an apprentice. Del's real name is Rowan, but he's called that so rarely that he would have to pause and think before answering to it. His hair is straight as pins and falls in sooty locks across his forehead, darkest black-brown save for one thick streak of ashy grey above his right temple where the texture shifts from slippery-fine to coarse as wire.

Del doesn't remember what caused the change but assumes it was some spell gone wrong that has since faded into the general blur of burns and scratches and torn fingernails that preparing ingredients and reagents has strewn across his past.

Kelsie and Nicholas claim to be jealous of Del's life as an apprentice and plead with their mother to let them stay back from their boarding schools to learn at the Ruby Warlock's side instead. Their mother—who doesn't like Del, or indeed even think of him very much at all, since she treats the Ruby Warlock's professional life as something well beyond the scope of her own comfortable world—simply smiles and laughs and shakes her head, claiming to be amused at the wildly fanciful ideas her children dream up.

They might as well have begged to become pirates or gods or candle-flames,

for all the serious consideration she gives their pleas.

In those early years, the three children— if Del can be said to be a child in the same way that Nicholas and Kelsie are children— have a surprisingly uncomplicated, easy-going camaraderie. The twins spend a sufficient amount of the year apart from one another that they are pleased, rather than antagonised, by each other's company during their holiday breaks. Del's quieter demeanour doesn't trouble them and neither does the fact that they have to teach him the rules to all their card games all over again every holiday, the knowledge having been pushed out of his head by incantations and recipes and other difficult things since the last time he saw them.

Nicholas and Kelsie are, to him, something not entirely unlike the black-furred kitchen cat; a friendly and occasionally demanding distraction that makes him smile and provides amusement. But the children who sometimes live upstairs are so different from Del that he never even considers the possibility of being truly close to them.

In many ways, he thinks to himself, he's got more in common with the cat.

For the most part, life after the Ruby Warlock's new marriage is not so different for Del from the life before.

Today is his seventeenth birthday and he gets out of bed, shivering in the autumnal chill before the dawn. His small, sparse bedroom is in the cellar of the house. For the most part Del likes that— it's comforting to think of the warm dark earth on all sides, kept at bay by nothing but the thin walls of wood and brick. But when the weather starts to turn cold, the little room feels like a dark pocket of ice, a place for storing nightmares.

There are some plants that are best plucked as the sun rises, so Del pulls on his boots and climbs the staircase up and out to the garden beds behind the kitchen. When he was very young, that flight of steps seemed to stretch up forever, but now he is almost grown up and the stairs have diminished down to a less impressive size by comparison. His little room isn't the deep-buried

sanctuary he used to imagine it as, a place so far down that nothing from the harsh ordinary world could follow him.

Nowadays, Del understands that there's nothing but a lack of curiosity keeping the Ruby Warlock from descending down into the cellar. It's not a safe place. It never was. There's no such thing.

The dew has frozen into a thin frost on the plants, and Del's hands sting as they're mottled white and blue and pink from the cold. He can't wear gloves for this task— any potency gained from the dawn picking would be lost without the touch of skin to keep the delicate energies in balance.

Today, he knows, is the day when he'll have to decide what he wants to do about his situation. One way or another, something has to change.

He is an excellent apprentice. He prepares ingredients meticulously; he labels and sorts and cleans the work benches in the laboratory; he can titrate or distill a potion to perfection. He can kill a chicken for its entrails and wishbones and feet and then prepare the remaining carcass for a meal, wasting nothing.

His lessons and skills make him the perfect attendant, but are not the makings of an eventual spellcaster in his own right. That has never been the Ruby Warlock's aim; Del has been brought up to be a helper, not a student who will one day gain mastery.

But he is a better learner than the Ruby Warlock planned for. His eyes are quick, his brain quicker. He has a sharp intelligence that absorbs more lessons than intended. And now, seventeen years old today, Del knows he's gotten too good. Very soon the Ruby Warlock will notice that the child in the cellar is very nearly a man grown, and therefore a threat.

He is too good at spellcasting, and too clever at borrowing the Ruby Warlock's wand and knife and brazier when nobody's looking. Very soon he is going to have to decide whether he wants to kill the Ruby Warlock or to run away.

Del's weighed each option, considered the pros and cons on either pathway, but is still torn by indecision. A small, childish part of him is reluctant to admit that the choice must be made at all. If that little part of him had its way, he'd live down in the cellar forever, getting up to pick icy leaves at dawn until the end of time.

Life has taught Del to be pragmatic, though, and so with a sigh, he carries the new plant cuttings into the kitchen and puts on the kettle to boil. Today he'll make a choice. Today he'll decide.

He fixes breakfast for the Ruby Warlock and the Ruby Warlock's wife, makes the day's bread, and gives the kitchen cat some milk in its bowl. It purrs and butts its head against his ankles. Del leans down to give the animal a fond pat on its head.

There's a quiet tap against the frame of the door out to the garden, which Del left open to let some fresh air into the cramped little room. He straightens up from petting the cat and turns. He's surprised to see one of the village girls that Kelsie is friends with standing there.

"You're Kelsie's step-brother, aren't you?" she asks with a small smile. "We don't see you in town much."

Del shrugs. He's never thought of himself as being step-brother to the twins; that would imply that any of the family considered him to be a part of it.

"Kelsie posted me this. Said to give it to you," the girl goes on. Instead of holding out the letter in one gloved hand, she holds out the other hand for him to shake. "I'm Alicia."

He shakes her hand perfunctorily, but when he tries to pull away she squeezes his fingers for a moment and gives him another smile. "I work at the butcher's shop. You should come down the hill and say hello sometime."

She hands him the note and turns to leave.

Del leans against the door frame and watches her as she picks her way between the rows of plants in the garden. He can tell when somebody is flirting with him, even if it doesn't happen particularly often. He doesn't leave the house and its grounds enough for it to happen often. Alicia was definitely flirting with him.

It isn't that she isn't pretty or friendly— she's both— it's just that Del has never been interested in anybody, not like that. He feels very old and very tired inside his skin, and romance and love and flirting have always seemed like things which have nothing to do with him.

There are a lot of things in the world that other people have which have nothing to do with him. If he loses this apprenticeship, he's not sure there'll be anything much else left that's his at all, except for magic.

Before he has a chance to open the letter from Kelsie, one of the bells from upstairs rings. One chore leads into another, and hours pass before he gets a minute to himself again. His hands are sooty from topping up the fireplaces (the day hasn't grown any warmer than it was at sunrise, and the house is large and drafty, so there are a lot of fireplaces for Del to contend with), so he heads back downstairs to wash his hands at the kitchen pump before handling the envelope.

As Del passes by the Ruby Warlock's upstairs study, he hears muffled voices from inside and stops to eavesdrop. Nobody's ever bothered to teach him that it's not well-mannered to listen in on other people's conversations. Even if they had he wouldn't care. Del spends too much of his life afraid of genuine dangers to bother getting worried about whether he's being properly polite or not.

He can tell, by the wavering echo that lingers after each word and sentence, that the Ruby Warlock is talking to somebody via the obsidian scrying bowl that's always kept polished to a perfect reflective shine.

“—you truly no longer want him. Name your price. I've been meaning to invest in another live specimen. There's a limit to how much substituting a familiar can accomplish. I haven't been able to set up anymore trapdoors in the

city since the last child got used up. Do you imagine how trying it is to only have one point of access to a metropolis? Most inconvenient.”

Del knows that voice; it belongs to a magician that the Ruby Warlock has known for years— the Coral Sorcerer, an even more powerful spellcaster than Del’s extremely adept owner. Del has never liked the man. Even by the indifferent standards by which he judges all the magical adults he’s met there’s something in the way that he looks at Del that has always felt... appraising.

Now, that creeping feeling Del has always had on the back of his neck in the Coral Sorcerer’s presence makes complete sense. He truly was being evaluated, judged for his suitability as a future spell ingredient.

Del feels a little sick and desperately hopes he’s misunderstanding the conversation.

“Careful,” the Ruby Warlock warns. “He’s more powerful than you might expect. That’s why I’m keen to be rid of him.”

All right, so it seems he wasn’t misunderstanding, then. Del barely dares to breathe.

The voice echoes and ripples from the scrying bowl.

The Coral Sorcerer laughs.

“There are easy charms to block the magics of a child, Addanc. Don’t fret on that account.”

The Ruby Warlock doesn’t respond immediately.

Del wants to believe that this is because the Ruby Warlock is hesitating. That he’s having second thoughts about selling off the boy he sometimes claims as his own son.

It’s a hard lie for Del to tell himself, though. He knows it’s far more likely that

**the Ruby Warlock is pausing to consider how much money he can make.**

**“You can come collect him in the morning,” the Ruby Warlock says. Del moves away from the door as quickly and quietly as he’s able. Down the stairs and back into the kitchen, the cat is lazing in a sunbeam, washing itself as if there isn’t a single thing wrong in all the world. Del goes over to the sink, works the water pump a few times and scrubs his hands clean with harsh soap. The gritty texture against his skin is rough enough to wake him up a little, enough that his eyes begin to sting and he has to blink several times to clear his vision.**

**Despite Del’s pragmatism in the frozen garden just a few hours earlier, his certainty then about the need to run away, there’s still a sharp cold thread of pain in his heart. He feels angry at himself as he dries his eyes. It’s so stupid to get upset when he’s got things to do that have to be done as quickly as possible.**

**He feels as if he can’t properly get his footing on the stairs as he climbs down into his cellar.**

**A leather drawstring pouch that used to hold a set of runes is more than sturdy enough to withstand a spell to make the inside bigger than the outside, so Del casts it twice and shoves all his spare clothes and some of his bedding as well into the space created.**

**Then he adds in some of the harder-to-get reagents that he might need for potions or spells. Del’s glad that most of the supplies for the Ruby Warlock’s work are kept in the room where his apprentice sleeps. It would be too difficult and dangerous to risk a trip to anywhere else in the house on the way to making an escape.**

**Del’s bag contains an extra shirt and pants, a waterproof cloak, some spare socks and underclothes, a screw-top jar of beetle wings, a stoppered flask of powdered snakeskin, and a small silk purse full of shards of wood from an old Ouija board.**

**He has very little money saved up, but doesn’t dare go hunting through the**

house in search of more. Every second counts, as there's no telling when the Ruby Warlock will appear to prepare Del for collection in the morning.

Tying the leather bag to his belt, Del climbs up the stairs out of his cellar for the last time. He doesn't stop for a nostalgic last look. In a way, maybe leaving like this— with no time to plan or wallow in emotions— is better. It makes him concentrate on what's important.

Del cuts through the garden beds and out into the fields beyond, moving as quickly as he can from cover to cover. When he's a few miles away, he stops to get his bearings. It's only then that he remembers that Kelsie's letter is still in his pocket.

Her handwriting is all loops and flourishes, which is a nice change from the boxy, angular calligraphy that most spell books and tomes are written in.

*Del*

*Since this letter is being delivered to you directly, I don't have to speak in code or mince my words. Nicky is in trouble. I hate that the three of us are so far away from one another for so much of the time. The most sensible course of action is for us to run away. Come to my school as soon as you're able & we will set out to help and collect Nicky.*

*If unable to assist please send reply informing of such.*

*xK*

Her words make Del smile. Perhaps he has a little luck on his side after all. This might be exactly what he needs: a game of running-away played by children who have no true danger in their lives.

A day or two of indulging Kelsie— Del highly doubts it'll ever get far enough to involve Nicholas as well— will make it easier to run away in earnest when the time comes. It will make the whole transition feel less abrupt, more lighthearted.



The night is very dark once he's past the periphery of the illumination from the house's windows, and Del's grateful for that small mercy. Every moment that his escape goes undetected is another step toward freedom.

Kelsie's school is a two days' ride away. Del decides that flying is his best option, but that he should wait until morning to attempt going such a distance in a form he isn't used to.

In the meantime, he pauses for long enough to find a fairly straight and sturdy branch in the underbrush. Fresh wands aren't as reliable as broken-in ones, but any wand is better than none at all.

He turns himself into a girl and then back again, trying to keep his walking pace as even and rapid as possible through the transformations so that he doesn't lose too much momentum to the exercise. Twice, and then a third time, he shifts back and forth between form and gender. When he's confident that the wand will manage a full swap, he turns himself into a girl and stays that way.

When the sun comes up, Del steps out into the open and transforms into a crow. It feels good to fly and to give his aching legs a rest. As long as he can avoid being shot down by poachers, the rest of the journey to the school should be easy enough to accomplish.

# Two

Del's never seen a school before, except in illustrations. It looks impressive; something like a hospital and something like a house and something completely different all at once. There are a lot of girls in matching pinafores and straw hats and shiny shoes walking around in the midday sunshine when he gets there.

He spots a small laundry shed set on the edge of the grounds and a bit of distance away from any of the small strolling cliques. There's a washtub with a scrubbing board and a drying-mangle set outside the little walled room. Several long lines of wet clothes are hung up on cords strung between one side of the laundry and a series of sturdy posts planted a distance away.

Del swoops down low— not too fast, in case anybody should notice a swift-diving crow and decide to investigate— and flies through the unglassed open square in the wall of the laundry building which serves as its window.

After looking around to be certain that nobody can see him, Del shifts back to human form. The instant he does so, his nose begins to bleed.

Magic often has that effect on him when he pushes the limit of his powers. Flying that far without pausing is one of the biggest strains he's ever attempted, let alone accomplished, so it's no surprise that blood drips steadily off his chin and into his cupped hands as he remembers how to stand steady on human feet.

The bloody nose doesn't hurt particularly, but it does make his head throb, and there won't be any point to getting dressed until he can staunch the mess.

Del closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, drawing in the invisible

filaments of life and energy in the world around him, the delicate auras around people and animals and grass and in the heavy motes of late pollen floating in the sunshine. The weather here is much more comfortable against Del's skin than the icier temperatures of home had been.

No. Not home. Nowhere is home, now.

When the nosebleed finally stops, Del washes his face in the sink and looks out the window. Several white pinafore aprons and dark under-dresses and woollen stockings are pegged to the lines beside the laundry room. They sway in the breeze as much as their heavy weight allows in the light wind.

Del frowns. He'd hoped there would be hats, too. His own shoes are nondescript enough that they'll suffice, but he doesn't have anything like the dark blue felt winter hat, or even the jaunty straw summer hat, that most of the girls wear.

"Nothing for it," he mutters to himself under his breath, wincing and closing his eyes. Growing hair isn't an especially exhausting little spell, but it feels incredibly peculiar as the change takes place. It makes an uncomfortable shudder run up Del's back. By the time he's done his hair is past his shoulder blades, a fine brittle fall of black with the single colourless lock on one temple.

With a hat, he might have passed for a girl even without changing his form—Del's chin when he's a boy is almost as sharp-angled as it is when he's a girl, his nose is about the same either way, and his lashes are always pale and long regardless.

In the age-spotted little mirror above the laundry sink, Del looks as pretty as any legitimate student at the school could hope to. Del makes his face smile at the reflection as he tucks that one pale streak of hair behind his ear. Perfect.

The clothes he steals from the washing line smell pleasantly of lemon and soap. Del dries the dampness from them absentmindedly as he makes his way back into the little laundry room, then curses his thoughtlessness as he has to

**deal with another nosebleed.**

**The clothes are well-made; more complicated than the simple working shirts and breeches he wears at... that he's used to wearing. After wrestling with the lace collar and the turned heels of the stockings for a little while, Del manages to get everything settled. His leather pouch fits neatly into the pocket of the dress, and he sets out to find Kelsie.**

# Three

The way her expression lights up when she sees him makes it clear that Kelsie has recognised him despite the disguise. Without even bothering to bid farewell to the friends she's walking with, she breaks off from the small group and runs to him, grabbing him tight in hug that knocks the breath out of him with its strength.

“You came!” Kelsie exclaims still hugging him. Del can't remember the last time they embraced— it has probably been close to a year, or maybe even longer. Perhaps his current form of a girl removes some of the awkwardness that has crept into their friendship ever since their childhoods drew to a close.

She has the soap-sunshine-lemons smell to her too, from her own uniform, but beneath that Del catches the scent of her on his inhale. It reminds him of strawberries and smoke, though maybe it's nothing like either of those things at all and he only thinks of them because whenever he smells those things he thinks of her. On warm summer nights when she and Nicholas were home from school, the candles Kelsie kept in her room to read by were scented like strawberries. The smoke would cling to her come morning, caught in the thick waves of her hair.

Early morning and just-before-bedtime were the moments Del could most easily steal for himself; the Ruby Warlock would be busy with the business of being a good and dutiful husband to his wife. Del and Kelsie and Nicholas would climb trees then, or play cards, or chase each other up and down between the rows of vegetable patches.

It seems unfair, somehow, that Kelsie should smell the same now as she did then, as if nothing much has changed in the time since.

**“I came,” he agrees.**

**“Let’s go to my dormitory where we can talk properly. The other girls will be out here for ages.” She takes his hand, half-leading and half-dragging him towards the school buildings.**

**The room Kelsie shares with eleven other girls reminds Del in some indefinable way of his cellar. The curious similarity between the two places puts him more at ease, and so he stands still and submits to Kelsie’s delighted examination of his girl-form disguise.**

**“It’s wonderful! Can you make me a boy?”**

**“If you want,” Del replies. “I’ll probably have to if we’re going to Nicholas’s school. We’ll get spotted straight away if we try to creep around as girls.”**

**The mention of her brother makes Kelsie’s expression darken. “Yes. I suppose I should pack some clothes for the journey, shouldn’t I?”**

**“Collect whatever money you’ve got, too,” Del says. “I didn’t have a chance to look for any at the house before I left, beyond what I already had saved up under my own mattress.”**

**Kelsie looks up at Del at that, her hands stilled on the brass handles of her chest of drawers. She looks touched, like he’s said something kind, and after a moment he realises the misunderstanding. Kelsie obviously thinks that he immediately rushed off to be at her side— she’s got no way of knowing that he’d already run away for his own reasons and that her letter was pure coincidence.**

**Del decides to let the misunderstanding remain as it is. It’s nice to be thought of with admiration, even if it’s not deserved.**

**“I’ll need a coat,” Kelsie murmurs to herself as she shoves clothing into a canvas satchel. “It’s colder where Nicky is.” She glances at Del. “You will too. If you don’t have one, my old one should fit you since your arms and shoulders are smaller than mine.”**

**“What’s prompted all this, anyway?” Del feels obligated to enter into the spirit of Kelsie’s adventure as much as possible, now that he’s gone and accidentally made her think that he’s taken her letter seriously. He doesn’t want his last memory of her to be of her hurt feelings at him.**

**And it wouldn’t be so bad to see Nicholas one last time if they end up going to his school after all.**

**“I’ll show you the letter,” Kelsie says, and pulls a torn-open envelope out of the front pocket of the half-filled satchel.**

**Del reads over the short message and shrugs. “It looks normal enough to me.”**

**Kelsie frowns, shaking her head a little. “What are you talking about? It doesn’t sound like him at all! I wasn’t even a sentence in before I knew something must be very wrong.”**

**“Maybe he’s distracted. School life seems pretty full of things to distract someone.”**

**“No.” Kelsie takes the letter back, scanning her eyes over the scrawled paragraphs of handwriting. “I can tell. I can tell something’s bad.”**

**“There might be another ex—”**

**“No!” The word cuts him off like a knife in the air. “I’m certain.”**

**She sounds it, too. Del wonders what that’s like, to know and trust someone so completely that you can be certain of something about them. It must be nice. Even when the certainty is bad. Even then, it must be nice.**

**“All right. We’ll go as soon as everyone’s gone to bed tonight,” Del agrees.**

**Mollified, Kelsie nods. “Okay. Come on, you can wait in the old infirmary**

room upstairs. Nobody will go in there. I'll bring you up something for dinner a bit later."

She leads him up to a room which smells, paradoxically, like stale antiseptic and dusty soap. There are two teenager-sized stretchers fitted out with thin mattresses. When Del sits down on one it feels hard and unforgiving even to his healthy flesh. He thinks it's probably a very miserable thing, to get sick while away at school.

Too anxious to relax properly, Del spends his time contemplating where he'll eventually try to end up, when this distraction with the twins is over. Maybe he can find an out-of-the-way farm somewhere, one that needs somebody to work in the kitchen and the garden. They might appreciate somebody who can do a bit of household magic here and there. They might never get sick of him or want to sell him off when he gets to be too much trouble.

When Kelsie brings him something to eat, it's on a tray containing a large-ish china plate with a domed silver cover on top of it.

"Here, I brought you dinner," she says. "It's just the same as what we all got in the hall, sorry. Lamb chops with mint sauce and carrots and peas on the side. Oh, and I stole you one of the little trifles that were for dessert, but it got a bit of mint sauce spilled on it, so it might taste a bit off now. Cider to drink."

"How on earth did you get any of that?" Del asks before he recovers from his shock sufficiently to add "And thank you, obviously."

"I asked for it, of course," Kelsie replies, putting the plate down on a chair and removing the lid. She pushes the makeshift dining table over to where Del sits on the edge of the stretcher.

Del stares at her, puzzled. "Didn't anybody want to know what you needed all that spare food for? Or where you were taking it?"

"If you look like you know why you're doing something, most people don't



ask what your reason is," she tells him. "That's half of how most criminals get away with things, I think. They just make it so nobody thinks to stop and check that they're supposed to do what they're doing."

Del nods. "Yes, that sounds about right." Despite his hunger, he's yet to touch knife or fork to the plate of food before him. The vegetables are brightly-hued and heaped high and the meat smells so good that Del's mouth is watering a little. "And the other half of how criminals get away with things is that they make ordinary people think that they're smarter than the criminals. That's how confidence men— con men, they call themselves— work. They make you think you're much cleverer than them, and so people will keep on getting sucked deeper into the scheme because they can't bear to admit that they've been had."

"Sounds like it's ego that's the trouble, either way," muses Kelsie. "But anyway, enough talking; your food will get cold if we chatter on."

"Mm," Del replies, noncommittal, but since there seems no way to put it off any longer without being impolite he cuts a small piece of lamb, adds mint sauce to it, and puts it in his mouth. It's delicious. He isn't sure why that makes him feel so guilty.

"I like your locket," Del says, attempting to distract himself from the strange feelings that the gift of food is giving him.

Kelsie smiles a little, touching the glass-fronted pendant at her throat. "Thanks. I always keep it in the drawer near my bed when I'm here at school or in my music box when I'm home at summer. Even though I never wear it, I... I didn't want to leave it here. I thought that, well, if I'm determined to take it with me, then I might as well wear it.

"It's a mourning locket," she goes on. "Some great-aunt of father's left it to me in her will."

Kelsie's tone is chatty but Del has known her long enough to be able to tell when something is of genuine importance to her. This locket is more than just a

trinket.

“It had a lock of my father’s hair in it when I got it, but I don’t remember him so I don’t miss him like I’m supposed to,” she goes on. “So Nicky and I replaced it with a bit of Nicky’s hair instead.”

She blinks her eyes closed for a few long, quiet seconds. “We need to help him. No matter what. I need to help him.”

This is a Kelsie very different from the one Del knew when they were children. It isn’t just that she’s growing up or that they’ve begun to move away from the closeness they had in younger years. There’s a deep, slow sadness in her pretty mismatched eyes— one blue, one green, both long-lashed and large in her small face— and it makes Del wonder if he ever really knew her at all before now.

“I’ll be back soon,” she says as she leaves again.

The time passes more quickly, now that he’s got a stomach full of warm food, and it’s not long at all before the school has gone mostly dark and mostly quiet all around the little hospital room.

When Kelsie returns, dressed for travel and with firm resolve on her features, Del pushes the infirmary’s window open as wide as it will go, and whistles softly out into the night air.

“Do you have any handkerchiefs spare?” he asks her as he waits. She rummages in the satchel slung at her hip, pulling out a small stack of them. Handing one over to Del, Kelsie puts the rest of them in back her bag. Del approves. They’re useful things to have around. He keeps his in his hand.

A few minutes later a bat alights on the sill of the window. It looks up at Del with its ugly little bat-face and bright, curious eyes.

“This is going to sting a little,” Del warns, and shrinks himself and Kelsie down to thimble-size. His nose begins to bleed, and he jams the handkerchief up against his nostrils to stop the flow.

**“Eugh. You might have warned me. I’d’ve given you one of the old ones.”**

**“What did you think I’d want a hanky for, except for something horrible coming out of my nose?” Del asks, his voice a bit muffled by the hanky in question. “That what they’re for.”**

**Kelsie shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know! I thought you might be making a magic carpet or a hot air balloon or something out of it. You didn’t say anything about blood or bats!”**

**“A hot air balloon?” Del repeats scathingly. Or, at least, it would be scathing if it didn’t come out sounding like ‘a hot air balloon?’ He rolls his eyes and follows Kelsie as she clambers up onto the bat’s back and settles in, looking as confident as someone who sat on giant flying rodents every night of the week.**

**Since his nose is already a mess, Del casts a quick harnessing spell to keep them from falling off mid-air and then chirrup to the bat. With an answering trill, it flaps its wings and flies up into the huge blackness of the sky.**

**Kelsie’s composure vanishes completely once they’re in the air. Her delighted, thrilled laugh is just the same as Del remembers from when she was ten years old and he turned her paper kite into a dragon for the first time.**

**For a while, they just enjoy the strange joy of the experience, the gargantuan scope of the starlit world spread out below them as they fly. Eventually even that spectacle’s not enough to keep the two of them enraptured, though, and so they sit facing one another on the bat’s soft furred back, and start chatting again.**

**“When we moved from the prep grades into the higher school, we all had our magic levels tested. I did quite well,” Kelsie tells Del. “But you know what Mother’s like. She wouldn’t hear a word of it, not for me. If Nicky had shown any talent for it, I’m sure he’d have been allowed to go on to study it, but he’s completely hopeless. He can’t even dowse.”**

**Del’s earliest memories are of dowsing. He’d been barely old enough to walk,**

his legs unsteady under him on those first tries. Divining for water and metal buried underground with a forked stick has long been used as a roughshod way of testing if someone has any natural magical propensity because even children can demonstrate the skill successfully if they have the talent for it.

It had always seemed like a grand game, toddling around the garden beds in search of the coins and thimbles that the Ruby Warlock had buried for him to find.

Del gives a few hard blinks to clear his vision, hoping Kelsie hasn't noticed the memory's effect on him. Her attention is on the rushing scenery below them, though, and Del feels relief at that.

"So thanks to my ever-so-vigilant mother," Kelsie goes on, and for the first time Del catches an edge of bitterness in Kelsie's voice. "All I've really done is play with sparklers at parties, and that kite you enchanted for me when we were young. I've always wanted to give it a proper try."

"We've got time now, if you like," Del says.

"What could we do up there, though?"

He grins. "This." He waves his hand and swaps their eyes, leaving her with his light, light silver-blue ones and him with her one-blue one-green ones. Kelsie leans in to inspect the changed colour of Del's irises.

"Ha! If Mother knew magic could get rid of the parts of my face she thinks are ugly, she probably wouldn't be against me using it at all," Kelsie notes wryly. "She'd probably insist I keep them like this forever, whether I wanted them or not."

"I can swap them back, if you want."

"No, let's leave them like this. Just for now. See how long it takes Nicky to notice."

When they finally reach Nicholas's school, deep in the darkest part of the

night, Del teaches Kelsie the trick of sneaking into the laundry rooms to find a suitable disguise.

“All right, now make me a boy,” she says, as soon as they’ve cobbled together enough of a costume for each of them and abandoned their pinafores and under-dresses.

Del transforms Kelsie first. She pulls a lock of her hair forward and frowns at it, confused.

“I’ve still got long hair.”

“Yes?” Del answers, confused by the statement. With a wince— his nose is already starting to bleed and it’s about to get much worse— he closes his eyes and casts the same transformation on himself. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“Because we’re boys now. You got long hair when you made yourself a girl.”

Del shakes his head. “I grew that separately. Hair length’s got nothing to do, physically, with whether you’re a boy or a girl.”

“Oh.” Kelsie screws her mouth up to one side, thinking. “We’ll have to tuck it under caps. It’ll look a little strange, but I’m not cutting my hair off just for a rescue mission, even if I can just grow it back later with magic. I worked hard at this hair.”

So they dig out two caps from the laundry’s extensive array of random clothing, and hide their long hair underneath.

“How are we going to find out where he is?” Del asks.

Kelsie gives him an odd look. “I know which dormitory he’s in, of course. Not everybody is as bad at replying to letters as you are.”

Del follows her, puzzled. Yes, Kelsie’s sent letters home to him from time to time over the years, friendly little notes about what she’s studying and how the

weather's been. He'd always assumed they must be for writing exercises in class. He'd never even considered the idea of sending something back in reply— what was there in his life that someone such as Kelsie would possibly be interested in hearing about?

They creep along the halls to the dormitory. The handle of the door squeaks as Kelsie opens it, and they both wince at the sound as it pierces the stillness

By the faint moonlight through the room's large windows, they can see that one of the beds is empty and stripped of its bedding.

“See, I told you there was trouble,” Kelsie hisses at Del. “He's been moved.”

They close the door again— careful not to let the handle squeak— and stand in the hallway, at a loss for where to go next.

“Is there an infirmary here, too?” Del asks. “Maybe he's there?”

They slip back out into the increasingly chilly open air. The wind has a vicious bite to it— not so cold as where Del's journey began, but with a sharp dryness that leaves him trying to stop the chatter of his teeth.

A glance over at Kelsie gives him something else to worry about, on top of the increasingly ridiculous pile of concerns already present in his current predicament. The cold is as cruel against Kelsie's skin as it is against his own, and has left her face a chilly white and her cheeks flushed with two high, bright spots as vivid as cherries.

Boy or girl, hair spilled loose or hidden away, Kelsie is always very pretty. But with her colouring heightened to its current white-as-snow, red-as-blood confection, she is nothing short of heartbreaking.

Anyone who sees them won't be able to resist the opportunity to stop and talk to her. And if someone does that, it won't be long before they notice the long hair hidden away under the caps Kelsie and Del are wearing. They'll be found out as intruders and everything will plunge from 'bad' to 'horribly worse.'

Fear like a lump of lead in his stomach, Del follows Kelsie across a paved courtyard, then inside another building and up several long staircases. With every turn they make and corridor they navigate, Del imagines the discovery that surely awaits them any second now.

“This school is even less practical than mine,” Kelsie notes as they finally approach the hospital wing. “Imagine how many sickly students have had to make this stupid trek while they’ve got horrid illnesses and are feeling wretched. Ugh.”

At Kelsie’s school, the infirmary rooms had been rather like doctor’s offices. Here, they’re closer to bedrooms. The first one that Del and Kelsie check is unoccupied and has the dank smell of somewhere shut up too long, of slightly sweaty skin.

In the second room, they find Nicholas.

He’s sitting up in bed reading a paperback novel with a lurid sea monster attacking a pirate ship on the cover.

He looks incredibly puzzled to see them at first, two strangers dressed in poorly-fitting uniforms and caps, but a split second later he recognises them and leaps out of bed to give Kelsie a hug.

Kelsie was surprisingly different from the last time Del remembered seeing her, but Nicholas is even more changed than that. He’s taller, and his jaw has broadened ever so slightly from the gamine pixie chin he and his sister had shared in childhood.

The strongest memory that Del has of Nicholas, from when they were young, is of an autumn afternoon and feeling confused.

Del’s never expected the world to make sense— who could, when working with magic every day— but it’s been his experience that people each had their own internal consistency. He learned very early in his life how to predict what things would make the Ruby Warlock angry, so that he could avoid them.

Nicholas, however, remained a mystery, because of that one autumn afternoon when Del was fourteen.

The twins came home from school the same as usual: a little taller, older, and smarter, full of stories about friendships and lessons and dramas and adventures. Even after a few years to grow accustomed to the routine, Del still didn't quite know what to make of them— something he still found impossible even at seventeen. Kelsie and Nicholas were like something from another world, where growing up was entirely different.

Kelsie was friendly and funny, doing her best to stay as patient as she could while she reminded Del of how to play the old card games, and taught him new ones.

Nicholas started off by acting as he had in the past, ignoring Del for the most part and grudgingly tolerating him for the rest. The twins, despite being relative newcomers to the area, had made a solid mob of friends in the village, and Nicholas was usually to be found with them, being a nuisance in the square or hatching schemes out in the woods after being thrown out of the town proper by exasperated shopkeepers.

Autumn was a good time for ingredients— things were at their most potent for magic just when they stopped growing, before the cold. Del made trips back and forth between the village and the Ruby Warlock's house many times a day during the season, delivering the charms and unguents people had ordered.

One of these trips led him right past the group of boys lounging around the edge of the square's central fountain. They were all around the same age as him and Nicholas, but where Nicholas had joined their ranks with ease, Del wouldn't have the first idea of how to even talk to them, let alone make friends.

As he'd walked past, one of them had muttered something in a low voice and several of the others had snickered in reply, including one who sounded like Nicholas. Del didn't bother to react, or even to look over in their direction. He was used to it; the only thing that was different during the holidays was the number of



voices in the laughter.

Another quiet comment and more laughing, but this time the Nicholas voice said, “come on, that’s—” before trailing off. In the sharp reply that followed, Del heard the word ‘freak’, but anything after that was cut off from ever being said by a scuffle and a loud splash.

Nicholas had shoved one of the others backwards into the chill water of the fountain, and was standing with one hand clenched in a fist, as if he was daring the others to say a word. None of them did.

Back at the house, though, Nicholas was even more quiet and surly than usual, and the next day it was time for the twins to go back to school.

All that was years ago, but somehow Del’s never forgotten it. No other memory from before that day or since gave that moment by the fountain an understandable context. Nicholas didn’t care whether Del was alive or dead, so why defend him against something as inconsequential as the daily cruelties of the village boys?

Maybe Nicholas wanted to keep the sport of insulting Del all to himself, and someone else having a go made him furious. Was that something people did, something they felt? Del had never heard of anything like that, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t true. There were lots of things he didn’t know, especially about people.

Nicholas doesn’t look noticeably different now to what he was like the last time Del saw him. He has the same locks of wavy gold-brown hair falling forward into his eyes, the same long-fingered hands and knobby wrists. His shirt collar isn’t flattened properly, which is a long-held bad habit, always making Nicholas look hurried and careless as a result. Del is faintly impressed that Nicholas manages to exhibit this same quirk even whilst clad in pajamas.

But the familiar things about Nicholas, the similarities in his appearance to earlier times, just make it even more obvious that something’s wrong. Very wrong.

It's in the way his shoulders hunch, in how his eyes dart. Nicholas has the air of a prey animal about him, a squirrel or a hare. A creature always on the watch for the snapping jaw of razor teeth to close around it.

When Nicholas looks up at them from his book, Del catches sight of the graphite-grey tracery of veins in his throat, faint and fine and colourless as pencil-shading. Del's seen that before, on the wrists and arms of other children—apprentices and servants he's know, who hunched their shoulders and observed the world with sharp bright eyes.

To see that uncanny grey under Nicholas's skin makes something hot and fierce that Del doesn't have a name for flare and spit in his chest, a fire determined to get out.

"You came," Nicholas says, his voice muffled from being buried against his sister's shoulder. He sounds grateful and tired and young.

After a moment his shoulders stiffen and he steps back, holding Kelsie at arm's length. "You shouldn't have come. It's not... you shouldn't be here."

"Of course I came." She frowns, eyes narrowing as she stares at him. "Nicky, I—"

Nicholas is frowning too, his lips a tense line. "Kels," he says in a warning tone. Then his posture deflates; a clear surrender to the fact of her presence. "Thank you for coming to visit me."

"Nicky, what the bloody hell is going on? What's—"

"Why'd you bring him?" Nicholas asks, nodding his sharp chin in Del's direction. "He's too important and special to bother with the likes of us. Why would a clever wizard-in-training care about a couple of pathetic children? He—"

"Stop!" Kelsie snaps, cutting off her brother's mocking words. "He ran away to come help you! Stop being like this!"

**“Is that true?” Nicholas asks Del.**

**“I ran away,” Del confirms, because that much is the truth.**

**Mollified by the answer, or maybe just bored with the interrogation, Nicholas shrugs and looks away, scratching at the mark on his neck.**

**“You haven’t answered my question,” Kelsie reminds him, implacable steel in her voice.**

**There’s a sound in the corridor, on the other side of the door at Del and Kelsie’s backs. The three of them all start in surprise.**

**Nicholas’s eyes widen and his gaze locks on Del’s. There’s stark terror in Nicholas’s eyes as if he’s afraid not about what’s going to happen to him, what has been happening to him, but of the thought of having to tell Kelsie about it, of seeing her face as the knowledge sinks in.**

**The handle on the door turns and the hinges creak as they begin to swing open.**

**“Onto the roof. Quick,” Nicholas orders them in a sharp voice.**

**There isn’t time even for scrambling across the room and out over the sill. In the only moment afforded them, Del waves his hand. The air gives a crack, smelling sharply of ozone as Del and Kelsie shrink down to sparrows. Their flight out the window is more wobbling than it is graceful, but the important thing is that it’s faster than it would have been if they’d stayed as people.**

**They fly to sit atop the eave hanging over the window. Del makes them into themselves again, but keeps them the size of the birds they’d been. He’s got yet another bloody nose for his trouble, and the cumulative effect of so many of them makes him lightheaded enough that he sits down and rests his head on his hands.**

**Their hiding spot abruptly goes dim, as someone inside the room draws the**

curtains closed.

The world is meant to look small from up high. People always describe it that way in stories. To Del the opposite has always felt true: when he's up high and can see so much of the world, he always feels tiny. A speck inside a huge and fast-moving universe. Tiny and very far away from everyone so far down below.

“You tell me right now—” Kelsie starts to say.

“Blood magic,” Del interrupts her. “It's... it's blood magic.”

Even the dim borrowed light from the window, Del can see how pale Kelsie's face goes at that. “Oh, well, that's not so terrible, is it?” she says with false brightness. “A little cut, or something like that? Nicky's had worse...”

“It's...” Del tries to think of a delicate way of phrasing it, of protecting her as much as possible. But he knows that if he tries, Kelsie will just stop and demand the full truth anyway.

“All magic is about energy,” he tells her. “Most spell casters get it from small amounts of different things, mixed together. Mostly it's just elements in the air—scents, breath, sound, light. Sometimes it's ingredients, and when people use ingredients mixed up with mortar and pestle, the resulting mix will be a unique colour. No two magic users are the exact same shade; that's why no two of them have the same title.”

“We covered that at school,” Kelsie says. “The less powerful ones are things like turquoise and jade, then there's the middle level where they're garnet and ruby, and right up the tip are brownier ones like rust and jasper.”

“Yes,” Del agrees. He can still remember with stark clarity just how furious the Ruby Warlock had been when Del's colour turned out to be a ruddy ochre, at least two steps up in natural talent from the Warlock's own blue-tinged red. “Well... all those colours are words for substances that aren't alive, aren't they? Stones and minerals. But most of the really powerful colours, up the red-brown

end, they're—”

“Amber or carmine or coral,” Kelsie interrupts, bringing one hand up to cover her mouth in shock and disgust.

“Blood magic’s not really about blood, blood’s just the vessel for it, like water is in water magic, or air is in the magic you’ve seen me do. It plays a role, obviously, but the most important role it plays is as a conduit for energy. And in blood magic, that energy is—”

“Nicky,” Kelsie finishes quietly. Del nods.

“I’ll kill them.” Kelsie’s voice is soft and even and cold. “I’m going to kill them.”

Since he’s older than her, Del thinks he’s probably supposed to give her a lecture at this point, to tell her all the reasons that she shouldn’t want such a terrible thing as an opportunity to murder. But he doesn’t know any way to say it that wouldn’t ring hollow and false, so he just stays quiet.

“Why,” Kelsie asks, so sad and quiet that Del wouldn’t have heard her if he was any further away than right beside her. “Why would someone do that?”

“Blood magic can give the caster all of the stupid things you’d expect somebody like that to want,” Del replies. “Power over other people, fame, wealth, youth, secrets. Think of anything greedy and selfish, and it’s likely that you can take it from blood magic.

“It’s not that there’s anything inherently wicked about blood magic— there’s nothing inherently anything about any kind of magic, just like there’s nothing kind or cruel about the rain or the sunshine. It’s all about what people do with them. But people who use blood magic nearly always use it for something terrible, because why else choose that instead of some other kind of spell?”

There’s a greenish pallor to Kelsie’s features now. “It sounds wicked to me. There’s nothing neutral about stealing somebody else’s blood.”

**“It doesn’t have to be stolen. In fact, the magic is much more powerful if the blood is given freely than if it’s taken. I’d say—”** Del cuts himself off, biting his lip. Kelsie’s eyes narrow.

**“What were you going to say?”**

**“Nothing. It doesn’t matter.”**

**She presses her mouth into a thin pale frown. “Say it.”**

**“Whoever it is doing it, they’re probably making Nicholas cut his own skin. So that the magic’s stronger. But magic isn’t stupid. It would know that something like that can’t be given freely, not in a circumstance like this.”**

**The greenish tinge in Kelsie’s face has given way to a marble-white cast on her features, pale and icy and implacable. Del looks away from her, desperate to give her some distraction from the thought of horrors.**

**“There’s a bird’s nest up over there,”** he says, gesturing to a chimney a few feet above them on the slope of the roof. **“We’re small enough to sleep in it, if you like. I don’t think it’s inhabited anymore. Or I can make it so we can jump down to the ground without getting hurt. That much I can do with this wand, anyway. It’s a focus for my abilities, but it still needs to temper over time.”**

**He’s still talking when Kelsie shakes her head sharply. “I need to see. Make me a bird, so I can go closer to the window and look in at the edge of the curtain.”**

**“But—”** Del starts to object, before her expression makes him shut his mouth. **This is not a discussion, or even a negotiation, as far as Kelsie’s concerned.**

**“Make me a bird,”** she repeats, through gritted teeth.

**“I’m not your servant anymore!”** Del snaps in reply. Kelsie flinches like he’s slapped her.

Before their argument can escalate, there's a high, frightened cry from inside — Nicholas's voice, but not as Del has ever heard it before.

Kelsie, looking terribly panicked and afraid, grabs one of Del's hands in both of her own. Her grip is bone-hard, hard enough that he wonders for a moment if it'll bruise.

"Please," she whispers.

So he makes her a bird, a sparrow the same deep honey-gold shade of brown as her hair, and Kelsie flits down to perch on the sill of her brother's window.

After all the casting Del's been doing lately, this isn't enough to make his nose bleed, but he feels sick and exhausted enough from the effort that he sits down on the roof again and decides to just wait for her right there.

It's the very darkest part of the night, now, but from this close to so many lights it's hard to see much in the way of stars above. Del hunts to catch a glimpse between the clouds anyway, to find the gleams bright enough that an entire school of lamps and candles can't dim their twinkle.

He wonders why Kelsie wrote to him. What reason she had for including him in their plans of escape.

It's idiotic, wondering about something like that. Even as he indulges in it, Del knows that it's idiotic. Kelsie asked for his help because of his magic, of course. There's no other possible reason. It's just her good luck that he was planning an escape of his own that coincided with her call for aid.

He wonders, just for a moment, if he would have come anyway if he hadn't had an urgency to propel him. If it had meant leaving behind his little life with its cellar and its chores and cold mornings.

But before he can decide one way or another, Del shakes himself out of his thoughts. There's no point in wondering about what might have happened if he'd read Kelsie's letter before overhearing the Ruby Warlock's conversation. Things

are as they are, and wondering doesn't change anything.

After that, he just stares up at the stars and waits for Kelsie and tries not to think about anything at all.

When the Kelsie-sparrow comes up to rejoin him, Del doesn't turn her back right away. Instead, he tosses her pieces of bread from his pouch, small as crumbs in his current state, and lets her have a moment to just be a bird.

Once she's human again, she sits beside him and uses her fingers to comb out the tangles in her hair, then smooths creases out of her trousers with almost-steady palms. She doesn't say anything, worrying her lower lip between her teeth as she very carefully adjusts every fold and hem and pocket of her clothes.

"You can cry if you want. I've cast a silencing cone around us. Nobody will hear," Del assures her.

Kelsie's head whips up again, the same struck look on her face as when Del had snapped that he wasn't her servant anymore. Her eyes narrow.

"You don't know us at all, do you?" she asks in an even voice, dangerously quiet.

"No," Del answers. "Not really. Only card games and holidays."

"And even those didn't mean the same things to you that they did to us," Kelsie says softly, sounding small and hollow and alone.

He feels bad for causing that, especially considering the rest of the situation they've managed to find themselves in. The last thing Kelsie needs is to feel that she and her brother are trusting themselves to a magic-user who doesn't even like them.

Del likes them just fine. He just doesn't know them very well.

"What do you want to do next?" he asks her. Del's never had the knack of



knowing the right thing to say to comfort someone or make them feel better. He hopes planning their escape will distract Kelsie from her sadness.

“Kill him. I told you that,” she tells him. “Did you think that I was joking?”

Del shakes his head. “No. I knew you weren’t. But murdering a person, especially someone larger and stronger than you are, isn’t some small thing. We’ll still need to think of a plan, whether it’s for escape or for, um, that.”

Kelsie smiles. There is nothing warm or sweet about the expression.

“I already have one,” she says. “And don’t worry. I won’t be murdering anyone.”

She’s polite enough to give him a new handkerchief for his nose, before they break into the teacher’s room.

The lock on the door is simple enough that Kelsie cracks it with a hairpin and a few minutes’ fiddling. They open the door as quietly as they can and creep inside.

They aren’t quiet enough. The man sits up in bed as they step inside, the blurriness of sleep dissipating from his eyes as he stares at the intruders. Del’s heart thuds with fear, arms and legs going cold in a rush.

“Do it,” Kelsie says, her voice as chill as Del’s blood feels. Confusion gives way to anger in the teacher’s face as Del raises his hand, new wand gripped tight in the curl of his fist.

What they’re doing is monstrous, really. But Del can’t find it in himself to feel guilty. And if his own agreement to the plan is a passive compliance, then Kelsie’s masterminding of it is an active defiance of caring about things like being monstrous or taking away somebody’s humanity and agency.

The energy of revenge makes for incredibly powerful, chaotic magic. The little wooden stick in Del’s hand feels like it’s writhing against his skin, lashing

with the strength of the energy coursing through it.

In what feels like no time at all, a swirling split-second of wildness that Del and Kelsie can barely stand against, let alone control, the spell is done. On the bed, where a moment before the man had been, is a spider. .

It's the size of a loaf of bread, thick-bodied and covered in wiry brown hair. Del's skin crawls at the sight of it, at the glassy black sheen of its myriad eyes blinking awake and its long hairy legs jerking and writhing in their first awkward movements.

Kelsie grabs one of the legs, the spindly joint thicker than her thumb. She's back to her usual girl-body now, and her movements are graceless and brutal as she shoves the creature into the pillowcase in her other hand. Del tries to stop the blood coming out of his nose from getting all over the floor or the bedding—the last thing they need is to make the place look like a crime scene.

She ties a knot at the end of the pillowcase, trapping the creature inside, and drops the twitching little cotton sack to the floor. Without a word, she begins to kick and stamp. Her boots make soft thuds which are drowned out almost completely by the rattling, hissing, screeching sounds the spider makes as she kills it. Her eyes are shiny-bright with wetness, but she doesn't cry, doesn't make a sound. Her face is very pale, except for two spots of high colour on her cheeks, like those on a fever victim.

By the time the pillowcase has stopped moving, and dark spots have begun to seep through the lumpy shape of the cotton, Del realises that he and Kelsie have both been holding their breath. Kelsie lets out a long sigh, her shoulders slumping as tension gives way to weary defeat in her posture. Del breathes out along with her, and only then notices Nicholas leaning against the door frame.

There's a new bruise high on one of his cheeks, the red and purple bloom of it blotting out the sight of the delicate freckles that Del knows are usually scattered across that thin skin. He's clearly more prone to crying than his sister—his eyes are red and raw with it, and the patrician paleness of his nose is spoiled

a little by blotchy redness from blowing.

He's watching the pair of them, his damp-lashed eyes unreadable as they flit between Del's face, and Kelsie's, and the pillowcase on the floor. Awkwardly, Del picks it up by the knot before the blood can seep through and stain the carpet underneath.

"I suppose I should gather some clothes," Nicholas remarks, voice as blank as his expression. "I'll meet you downstairs in a few minutes. That'll give you time to get rid of the mess you've made."

Del bristles, frowning in annoyance. It isn't that he thinks Nicholas should thank them for committing murder to avenge mistreatment against him, but... well, all right. Maybe Del did expect a thank-you, as stupid as that sounds. Something a little bit more grateful than a sardonic quip about making a mess, at least.

Kelsie sees his expression and smacks him lightly on the back of the hand holding the pillowcase. "Don't you start being stupid too. Come on, we've got to hurry and get rid of this."

Getting back downstairs and out of the school grounds is worse than breaking in had been. The pillowcase grows heavier in Del's hands the longer he has to carry it, which is exhausting. But the more exhausted he gets, the more the enchantment wavers and fades, and that makes the spider-body inside weigh more and more as it tries to revert to its natural state. Dead things don't stay transformed without constant attention.

Kelsie manages to pry up a paving stone, right where two pathways across the courtyard cross.

"Site of protection," she explains to Del, panting from the exertion. "The dead don't come back when they're buried at crossroads."

"I don't think we have to worry about that," Del says.

**Kelsie shrugs one shoulder.**

**“Probably not. But it doesn’t hurt to be sure,” she says as she and takes the pillowcase from him. The unexpected weight of it makes her ‘oof’ in surprise, and she hauls it into the space where the stone had been. With an unceremonious shove, she replaces the paving, crushing the spider underneath.**

**Del is bone weary. The excitements of the last day coupled with the fact that he’s done far more complex magic— and bled many times as a result— than ever before, have left him feeling utterly drained.**

**He almost wishes that it was him under the paving slab, that he had nothing left to worry about and nowhere left to go.**

**No point in thoughts like that, though. They still have a long way left to go.**

**Dawn is lending slow grey light to the world around them by the time the three of them are ready to go, their bags full up with stolen food from the kitchen, even though none of them have any kind of appetite. Del knows that they’ll need the energy from food to keep up a good walking pace, but despite the sense and practicality of insisting that they all eat he can’t bring himself to say anything. Being hungry for one day is unlikely to be the thing that thwarts their escape. And no matter how weary Del feels, he... he can’t eat. Not right now. Not yet.**

**Nicholas manages four hours of walking before he faints. The complete lack of melodrama exhibited— he just drops into a crumple on the muddy ground between one step and the next— is the thing that frightens Del and Kelsie the most.**

**They get him sitting up and Kelsie gives him sips from her water bottle. The colourless pallor in Nicholas’s cheeks is too close to the drained grey he’d had at the school. It makes Del feel helpless and angry.**

**Children are playing a noisy game, somewhere close enough that their shouts are in earshot.**

**“I’ll be back soon,” Del promises the twins, and heads towards the noise.**

**It’s a cottage, with a vegetable garden in long rows beside it and a lady with white hair shelling peas on the front stoop. Children are chasing one another across the open field next to the house, playing a game with no obvious objective or rules. A bemused cow stands in the middle of the open grass and ignores the shrieks around her.**

**“Good morning, ma’am,” Del says to the lady. “I’m...”**

**He’s not very good at asking for help. Doing that has been something Del has staunchly avoided in his life, and so it doesn’t come easily to him even when he needs to.**

**“My friend needs to rest for a while,” he says finally. Truth will have to stand in for manners. “If he can lie down inside your house, my other friend and I will help you with chores until he’s recovered.”**

**“It’s not contagious, is it? Octavia— she’s my youngest— isn’t a hearty lass. I won’t have her exposed to fevers or chills.”**

**Del shakes his head. “No, nothing like that. It’s not catching. He’s just weak.”**

**“Mm, all right then,” she agrees with a nod. “Bring him over.”**

**“He’s not... always polite,” Del warns, as diplomatic as possible.**

**“I can survive without polite,” says the lady. “Polite has nothing to do with whether a person’s good or bad. Is he good?”**

**Del remembers the splash of the fountain in the village square, in an autumn long ago.**

**“I think so,” he answers.**

**Del goes back to Nicholas and Kelsie, and the three of them make their way**

to the cottage at a slow, unsteady pace. Nicholas refuses to rest against either of them, but with just his own feet to carry him he's halting and unsteady.

When they get there the lady— who introduces herself as Philomena, and doesn't ask them what their own names are— bundles Nicholas inside and sits him in a large rocking chair with blankets and a cup of tea.

“I've got two jobs that need doing: peeling potatoes or chopping firewood—”

“I'll do firewood,” Kelsie states before Philomena's even finished talking. Which leaves Del to pick up a knife and a potato, sitting down on the stoop beside Philomena as the children keep on playing their game.

A while later, one of the children darts over to where Philomena and Del are sitting, appearing out of nowhere from around the side of the building. The little girl crouches, giggling, behind the scraps barrel.

“You Princess Aria, then?” Philomena asks. The girl nods, her delighted grin showing off a missing front tooth.

“A hide-and-seek game?” Del asks. Philomena's words have stirred a dark, panicked feeling in him, making his heart beat double-fast and his hands shake. He's never liked games where the players wear different names to fit their roles. Somehow that feels very different than disguises, in a way he wouldn't know how to articulate if asked. A name is who you are. Disguises are just who other people think you are.

That's why he doesn't like being called Rowan. That doesn't happen very often, but when it does it always strikes him as a fundamental wrongness. He's not Rowan. He's Del.

“Aye. One girl hides— like Octavia Elizabeth here— and all the boys have to race around and look for her. If two of them run into each other in the meantime, they have to have a scuffle to see who's dead and who gets to keep on looking. The lad who finds Princess Aria is the Prince, and wins.”

**“Sometimes they try to kiss me,” Octavia says, clearly disgusted. “And I never get to be anyone but the Princess, because I’m a girl. If I want to play, it’s this or nothing.” She sighs, her happy smile momentarily becoming a mournful frown.**

**“Well, you just stay hiding there and those boys will have all killed each other long before you’re found,” Philomena assures her.**

**“Octavia Elizabeth is a big name for a little girl,” Del remarks. “Very grand.”**

**Octavia wrinkles her nose. “Not really. ‘Dandelion’ is a big word but that don’t make it grand; they’re too common for that. I’m only Octavia Elizabeth so as to tell me apart from Octavia Rose who lives near the mill, and Octavia Alexandra and Octavia Dora over the river. We’re only as fancy as dandelions, really. Common as weeds.”**

# Four

When Nicholas is strong enough to set off walking again, Del offers Philomena some of the food they stole from the school as a thank you.

“No need to give up what you can’t spare, not just for use of shade and a comfortable chair,” she tells him. “Learn to take things when they’re offered, without worrying about how to even out the score. Life tends to find a way to pay you back what you’ve earned, and charge for what you’ve bought from it.”

They stay in the forest and off the paths until well after nightfall, keeping their pace a fraction slower for Nicholas’s sake. When the passing traffic of people on horseback and on foot, and carriages and carts, has slowed to nothing, they emerge out onto the road. After hours of picking their way through knotted roots and branches, stumbling into creeks and getting feet caught in burrow entrances, the level pebbled pathway is a luxury even in the almost total dark.

“Can’t you make the clouds part, so we’ve got starlight at least?” Nicholas complains, scuffing his shoe against the grass on the edge of the path to clean off yet another horse dropping that he’s stepped in.

“I’m as tired as you are,” Del warns. “That makes magic unstable. We might end up rained on if I try to push the wind. I’m not going to risk that just so you don’t step in things.”

“Now you’re worried about being responsible and careful?” Nicholas retorts, sullen and sarcastic. “I bet if Kelsie asked, you would.”

“Fine,” Del says through gritted teeth. “Here.”

He holds his little stick-wand above his head and chants a short rhyme.

There’s an ominous rumble of thunder and a few small zaps of lightning, like the sky is reminding them of the near-limitless power they’re trying to influence. But the downpour Del feared doesn’t follow the warning, and after a few moments the heavy grey-black clouds have parted enough that they can see the stars and moon.

The thin silvery light washes Del and Kelsie and Nicholas, and the road and the forest around them, and makes them at least a little visible to one another.

“Thank you,” Kelsie says. Nicholas just makes a small grunting sound and picks up his walking pace.

Del shrugs at Kelsie, not sure how he’s expected to respond to her thanks.

The night goes quickly after that, the road remaining easily navigable over miles of hills and fields and orchards and woods. When their appetites return they argue about whether to climb a fence to steal some fruit or vegetables, or even a few eggs from a chicken coop, but in the end they decide not to. They’re still too close to Nicholas’s school, and they don’t want anyone to guess which direction they’re heading.

Hungry and tired, they leave the road again as the sun rises, and make their way into the forest.

“What about that tree?” Nicholas suggests, pointing to a hollow trunk large enough to fit the three of them.



They manage to settle in comfortably enough with Kelsie taking the middle so that Nicholas and Del will stop complaining about being jabbed with each other's skinny elbows.

It's not actually so bad, being squashed up together like that, because it keeps them warm and makes everything that's happened feel a little less huge and frightening. It doesn't take long before Del's eyes slide closed and he falls into a deep sleep.

He wakes in the mid-afternoon, and gently shakes Kelsie awake. If he could reach, he'd shake Nicholas awake too—probably a little less gently— but there isn't a lot of room to move inside the hollow until Kelsie wriggles out into the open air, and by then Nicholas has woken of his own accord.

They walk a few hours more, until twilight. By now even Kelsie is snappish with hunger, and they all feel grimy and stiff and sore from their sleeping arrangements.

In the next big valley there's a small village. It's not impressive, not compared to the larger and more prosperous village that the Ruby Warlock lived near, but to three tired teenagers the golden rectangles of light in the few windows are so welcoming that Kelsie lets out of a little gasp of exhausted delight at the sight of them.

The tavern is warm in the chill evening, and smells comfortingly of wood smoke inside. It makes Del think of his snug little cellar room, and he lets himself feel one small, sweet pang of homesickness before pushing the thought aside and paying for three plates of cheese and bread, and three mugs of wine.

For a while they don't make conversation, concentrating instead on eating as much as they can as fast as they can.

"Ordinary food tastes different than magical food," Kelsie eventually says, breaking the silence. She sounds surprised at the discovery.

"Does it?" Nicholas asks.

Del blinks at the two of them, confused for a moment before he realises that Kelsie never had reason to eat magical food before the bread he'd fed her as a sparrow, and Nicholas has never eaten it at all.

Del thinks of all the nights when he'd had to stir up a final reserve of energy out of his aching young body to conjure up a cup of soup or a ham sandwich before crawling into bed, having been given nothing by the Ruby Warlock during the day.

He tries to feel glad on the twins' behalf, that they've never been in that position. It's hard to work up a particularly enthusiastic charitable impulse in that regard.

"Yes," Kelsie answers her brother, interrupting Del's train of thought before he feels too bitter or jealous. The past is the past. It doesn't matter now— they're all stuck in the same predicament. "Not better or worse, or anything like that. Just different."

"Magical food isn't as filling, even if it feels like it is," Del tells her. "If you only ever ate conjurations, you'd die of starvation soon enough."

"Well, we've got enough money to buy proper food for a while yet, so we'll be all right," she says. She's turning her hand back and forth, looking at the palm with a perplexed expression. "My scar's gone."

"The one from when you got your finger caught in the spinning wheel?" Nicholas asks.

Kelsie nods.

"Yes. I had a great horrid scar right across the pad of my finger, from where it got pinched. But it's gone now."

“You switched from girl to boy and back again. That always heals anything hurt,” Del explains around a mouthful of cheese. After swallowing, he drinks a mouthful of wine, and then looks up at the twins. They’re both staring at him, something like pity on their faces.

He bristles at the look, trying not to scowl too obviously and only partly succeeding. “What?”

“You don’t have any scars?” Kelsie asks.

“No.” Del shakes his head. “Oh, well. I have this.” He touches the grey lock of hair above his temple. “That stays, no matter what I turn into. I don’t know why.”

The room they rent is standard fare for cheap lodgings: a fireplace, a washstand and chamber pot, a window rheumy with frost, and a wide bed.

“Sleeps five grown men in a row, that one does,” the innkeeper tells them. That might be stretching the truth somewhat, in Del’s opinion, but it’s certainly enough space for three small teenagers.

Yet when they’re done unlacing their boots and washing their faces, Del feels a strange apprehension at the thought of being so vulnerable in front of the twins. It’s not that he doesn’t trust them, it’s just that a proper bed— however lumpy and scratchy and questionably clean— will mean he might finally get a proper rest, might fall asleep in a way not possible in hollow trees.

Del has never let anybody see him like that, so unguarded and defenceless. He isn’t ready for Nicholas and Kelsie to see it now, not when he needs for them to think of him as powerful and useful and fundamental to their escape.

He can’t risk losing them, which means he can’t let himself go and collapse into deep slumber.

Del sits down on the floor, his back resting against the door. “Better for my back,” he explains to the quizzical Kelsie.

She looks skeptical. “There’s lots of room…”

“No, really, I’m fine.

“Let him be uncomfortable if he wants,” Nicholas says in a breezy voice, climbing into bed on the far side from the door. “It’s no skin off our noses if he enjoys being stupid.”

Kelsie gives her brother an irritated glance, but doesn’t attempt to persuade Del again. She turns down the lamp to nothing but the faintest amber glow and climbs into the other side of the bed.

The wind outside makes the panes of glass in the window rattle. Del draws his knees up to his chest and waits for morning.

They eat bread and cheese and dried apple for breakfast, and buy more to carry with them. The air is cold and clear, the morning cloudless and bright.

Despite his near-sleepless night, Del discovers he’s in quite a good mood. He’s smiling as they set off.

# Excerpt from *Firewall*, coming in 2014

by Mary Borsellino

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Hannah, the girl in the red rabbit mask, brings food to Olivia's cell twice a day. Hannah is at least two or three years older than Olivia, but no taller and much thinner, and she stares at the trays of food -- rice and gravy and vegetables -- as if these small cold meals are the most important thing she's ever seen and much, much more valuable than Olivia's money.

Two meals is less than Olivia's used to, but on the third day she pushes her hunger out of her mind as much as she can and eats only a small portion of the rice and vegetables before offering the tray to Hannah.

"Do you want some?"

"I'm not supposed to," Hannah says, but Olivia can see her eyes behind the red rabbit mask, and Hannah's eyes look more like those of a starving wolf than any kind of rabbit.

"Who am I gonna tell?" Olivia replies, gesturing to the tiny, empty cement space of the room. That makes Hannah smirk. It's the first smile Olivia's seen from her.

"Go on. Really." Olivia holds the tray out again, and after another moment's hesitation Hannah takes it from her.

Hannah eats like she expects the food to be snatched away from her at any moment, scooping mouthfuls in almost without stopping to chew. Her sleeve falls back as she raises the spoon to her mouth again, and Olivia can see that Hannah's skin looks sore and tight around the ports installed in her thin wrist. She must have had them put in very young, for her body to have grown that much around them.

That makes Olivia feel sorry for her. That Hannah had ports put in and yet still wound up here, masked and starving, is the most unfair thing Olivia has ever seen in her life.

"Do you guys still have my schoolbag?" she asks Hannah as Hannah eats. "Or have you sent it to my parents as proof of life or whatever? I'm just asking because my glasses are in there, and I want to take my contact lenses out."

"We still have it. I'll ask," Hannah says. She eats the next bite of food more slowly, like she's realised that Olivia gave it to her in exchange for glasses. Olivia's pretty sure that people who're kidnapped aren't supposed to start making little unspoken trades like that, but she

can't really see why not. This whole stupid awful thing is supposed to be about giving everyone something they want, isn't it? The maskers want money, Olivia's parents want Olivia back. Everyone wins. Hannah wants dinner and Olivia wants her glasses.

Olivia also wants to know how much they think she's worth, but hasn't found a way to ask that won't sound weird and creepy.

"I'll see what I can do," says Hannah.

Olivia smiles. "Thank you."

"Don't," Hannah says sharply, putting down the spoon and leaving the room. Olivia notices that despite the dramatic exit, Hannah finished all the food before departing.

Olivia's room looks like it used to be a store room. There are little holes in a spaced-out, regular pattern around the walls, like there used to be shelving attached to them. Everything's been scrubbed, so it isn't dusty or dirty. Olivia appreciates that, and makes a note that she should tell Hannah to say thank-you to the other captors on Olivia's behalf.

It sucks being locked up in here, but Olivia's always been the kind of person who cheers herself up by noticing all the ways that things could suck even more than they do. Like: they gave her a bucket with a lid to use as a toilet, which is about a thousand times better than a bucket without a lid would have been. There's a flickering, faintly buzzing bare lightbulb attached to the ceiling, and the switch is located by the door so she can turn it on or off as she wants. There's a small slatted window high up on one wall, which doesn't do much in the way of light but keeps her from running out of air to breathe, and that's absolutely something that belongs in the 'plus' column of things going on in her life right now.

The bedroll they've given her doesn't do much to stop the cement floor from being hard and cold, but she has a blanket and a pillow. At home she has quilts and cushions and everything else she could possibly want for a good night's sleep, but since Hannah doesn't even seem to get much food, Olivia suspects that comfortable bedding is probably not something that happens much in her kidnappers' lives. She's pretty sure that they've given her the same level of luxury that they have themselves, maybe even better.

It's not like she *likes* being held hostage. It's just that it's not especially awful, considering.

A few hours later Hannah comes back, Olivia's schoolbag in her hands.

"Am I allowed to say thank you now, or are you gonna get all weird and broody at me again if I do?" Olivia asks.

She can't tell for certain, what with the mask in the way, but she's pretty sure that Hannah rolls her eyes.

“You’re *weird*,” Hannah says.

“You’re a *masker*,” Olivia retorts, dumping her school supplies on the floor and picking up the little case of contacts stuff from the resulting pile of rubble.

“Yeah, but that’s a cool kind of weird,” insists Hannah. Olivia snorts.

“Please. Anything that needs to be stridently defended as cool is automatically not cool. And ooo, scary, I got ambushed by a bunny and a cat and a fox and a mouse. What a joke.”

It’s a lie, though, the bravado, and Olivia’s pretty sure that Hannah isn’t fooled for a second. It had been terrifying, being grabbed like that, her face covered by a pillow case as she was picked up and thrown into the back of a van. Olivia hadn’t known before that moment that it truly was possible to be so frightened that she couldn’t even scream.

The memory makes her hands shake, so she puts aside the contacts case for the time being and looks up at Hannah instead. Hannah’s hands are a little lighter than Olivia’s own. The rest of her skin is covered by her worn, faded clothes and her mask.

“Are the others your family? Your parents?” Olivia asks. Hannah shakes her head.

“No. My parents are dead.”

Olivia wants to say ‘I’m sorry’ or something like that, but knows that to do so is risking another abrupt exit from Hannah, and Olivia doesn’t want her to go.

“They’re just a gang I’m running with,” Hannah goes on, breaking the short stretch of silence. “I don’t care one way or the other about them, and they don’t care about me. It’s a job, not a family. What’s that?”

She points at a smaller drawstring bag among the stuff from inside Olivia’s schoolbag. It’s printed with a design of cutesy cartoon sharks and dolphins.

“Oh. My swimming stuff. I would’ve had gym today.” Her hands are steadier now, so Olivia starts taking out her contacts. “I really love it. I’m shitty at it, but I still love it. I had to beg my parents to let me do it. My dad wanted me to do riding instead. I had to really fight for it.”

“You must love it,” Hannah agrees, a dubious note in her voice, like she can’t imagine why anyone would.

Olivia’s glasses feel comforting on her nose, like there’s a thin layer of force-field between her and everything around her. Usually she only wears her glasses at home, in the evenings. Her mother says she’s prettier when people can see her face properly, so in public she always wears her contacts. It would be silly to worry about being pretty among maskers, though.

They don't think a person's face has anything at all to do with who they are.

"I swam in the real ocean once."

"Bull," Hannah says bluntly. "I don't care how rich you are, nobody swims in the ocean. All the money in the world isn't gonna stop you from rotting inside and out if you get that shit on you."

"Not this ocean, loser," Olivia shoots back, unsurprised by Hannah's protest. "One of the safe ones. You can stay in the water for an hour and not get sick at all. The hotel that owned the area even had sand imported and heaped up all along the edge of the water, so it was just like being on a beach from an old movie. There was a palm tree."

"If they'd gone to that much trouble to simulate it, why not have a tide pool like everywhere else, where people could stay in it as long as they liked?"

"Because the real ocean is nothing like a tide pool. Nothing."

"Well excuse me, your majesty. Us ordinary mortals don't have your wisdom on such matters."

"One day I hope you *do* see the ocean. I hope you get to swim in it. And I hope I'm there to call you dumb names when it happens."

Hannah shakes her head. "How much money do you *have*, that you can do insane impossible fairy-tale things like swim in the ocean?"

"Not me. My dad. Me and my brothers and sisters don't even get pocket money -- we have to ask him to buy anything we want. My mother has to do that as well. Since our servants buy the groceries, he says she'd just spend it on stupid stuff. He gets to pick what dresses she wears. That's where his money comes from, dresses. He has a factory."

"*Dresses?* Nobody gets rich enough for a proper kidnapping from *dresses*." The look Hannah gives Olivia is dripping in disbelief, even with the mask in the way.

"Well, it's not just dresses. Shirts and blouses and socks and things, too. All the cotton and wool that they use is unmodded, so people pay a lot for it."

Hannah gives a low whistle. "I bet. That's crazy."

"Unmodded sheep have this oil in their wool, lanolin. I'm allergic to it. My dad still makes me wear clothes made in his factory, even when they itch me. He says it'd be bad for his reputation if his own children were ever seen dressed in anything but his label."

"What's so special about unmodded, anyway, that makes it so expensive?"

Olivia shrugs, as puzzled as Hannah. “My dad says it’s more *authentic* than other kinds. Here, this is one of the most expensive ones he sells.” She picks up her coat from where it lies crumpled among her school stuff and passes it to Hannah.

“It’s so soft,” Hannah marvels, stroking her hand over the sheepskin as if it’s the pelt of a small warm animal.

“Astrakhan. That’s what this kind’s called. It’s not wool, really. It’s still on the hide,” Olivia explains, surprising herself with how much of her father’s lectures she’s retained. “I guess it’s leather, or fur. Skin. The ewes are cut open while they’re pregnant and the fetus is skinned. That’s how you get astrakhan.”

Hannah pulls her hand away from the coat as abruptly as someone touching flame. Her face wears an expression of deep revulsion for a few seconds, but it fades soon enough. Olivia thinks it’s probably hard to hold onto horror for very long if you live in Hannah’s world. Otherwise you’d never have a chance to feel anything else.

“Gross,” is all Hannah says, handing the coat back.

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The next morning Olivia has a runny nose and feels achy and tired all over and is just plain old *cranky*. She wants a cup of chicken soup and her own bed and cartoons to watch.

“Has my dad given you money yet?” she snaps, when Hannah brings her the early meal of the day, even though she knows the answer must be ‘no’ or she wouldn’t still be here.

“He says he wants to negotiate with us, but every time we try to actually talk seriously with him it’s like he’s stalling,” Hannah answers, obviously seeing no reason to tell Olivia anything but the truth.

“He probably hopes you’ll get sick of me and settle for much cheaper,” Olivia quips, only half-joking.

“Your father’s an asshole.”

Nobody’s actually said that out loud to Olivia before. She blinks. “Yeah, I guess so. Joke’s on him though, huh? Kidnappers kill hostages if the families don’t pay.”

Hannah snorts. “He probably thinks we wouldn’t dare.”

There’s something hard, icy, in her tone that makes Olivia shudder. All at once she’s reminded that, whatever weird rapport they’ve managed to strike up, Hannah is still part of the masker gang that holds Olivia’s life in their hands.

“Hey, no,” Hannah says, putting down the tray of food and grabbing Olivia’s hand between her own. “Nobody’s killing anyone, ‘k? If he’s still being a wad in another couple of days, we’ll cut your hair off and send it to him. He’ll pay right away when that happens, trust me. They always want to stop it before it gets to an ear or finger.”

Hair. That’s fine. Olivia doesn’t care about her hair.

“Have you done this lots of times before, then?” she asks. Hannah nods.

“Yeah, lots. Well... not me, exactly. No. I haven’t. I only threw in with this crew a few months ago. But they’ve done it a lot. That’s why I wanted in with them, because they get shit done, they don’t just sit around talking and talking and starving down to bones, like the last lot I was with.”

Olivia decides not to point out that all she and Hannah have done since Olivia got here is talk and talk. Instead, she asks, “Were you a red rabbit with them, too?”

“Yep. That’s me, always. One and only,” Hannah says, flicking a fingertip against one of the worn leather ears.

“I can’t imagine you without it,” confesses Olivia.

“You probably won’t ever see my face any other way. I mean, unless I die while you get rescued,” Hannah says. “You might see my underneath-face then. Anyway, enough talk. Eat your breakfast and you’ll feel better.”

“Cut my hair off now. Tell the others that I don’t care. Do it now, prove to my parents that you’re serious.”

“And you call *me* melodramatic,” teases Hannah. Then, in a less playful tone, she adds, “I’ll tell the others, okay? We’re all getting a little antsy. They might go for it.”

Olivia doesn’t see her again until after nightfall, when the room’s getting cold enough to make her shiver. There’s a camera, a newspaper front page, and a slightly rusty pair of shears in Hannah’s hands.

“Oooh, my first fashion shoot,” Olivia says, determined to be as light-hearted about this as she can manage. It’s going to happen no matter what; the only variable she has any control over is how she reacts to it. She she’s going to be as optimistic as possible.

Hannah cuts Olivia’s hair off quickly, taking the ponytail in one snip and then clipping away the rest.

“My heads gonna get cold,” Olivia grumbles, trying not to look at the ponytail on the ground



beside her, the long thick locks that her mother said were her best feature.

“Drape your blanket over it,” suggests Hannah.

“I’ll look like a dork if I do that.”

“Nobody’s gonna see you except me, and I know you *are* a dork. Hold this.” Hannah shoves the newspaper page into Olivia’s hands and steps back, snapping a few shots with the camera. The flash makes lights dance in Olivia’s vision. “Proof that we did it today, you see?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” Olivia nods. Her head feels so light without her hair. It’s weird.

That night it takes her a long time to get to sleep. She tells herself it’s just because of the cold, because of trying to huddle up small enough under the blanket that she can cover her head as well. That doesn’t explain why she’s crying, though.

She doesn’t miss her parents. Not like she’s supposed to, not as much as someone in her position should. But she feels guilty that the girl they’re going to get back at the end of all this is going to be even more disappointing than she already was, even uglier and stranger.

It’s nearly dawn before she manages to drift off, exhausted from her tears.

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“Your reader’s full of shit,” Hannah announces instead of saying hello the next morning. Olivia didn’t even notice that it was missing from among her stuff. Hannah’s waving the thin slate in one hand. “There’s nothing on here but schoolbooks and assigned novels. *Nothing.*”

“So?”

“Ugh.” Hannah shakes her head in despair. “You don’t even know how great books are, do you? You’re as empty and full of shit as your reader.”

“Hey, fuck you too,” Olivia scowls. “What am I *supposed* to have on my reader, then? A reader that the government can look through *any time they feel like it*, might I add. Sure, I’ll fill that up with illegal shit right now, what a great idea!”

“Lame. There’s some okay stuff on the permit list, if you bother to look, which I bet you never have. And jail breaking readers to they can’t be scanned by wifi is kid’s stuff, come on. I had to hack part of it before I even turned it on, so the GPS wouldn’t kick in.”

“Don’t jail break my reader, asshole! People get in trouble for that.”

“People get in trouble for that,” Hannah mimics in a sarcastic baby-talk voice.

“Cut it out. Just because I don’t care about your dumb books doesn’t mean you get to be a humourless asshole. Even straight mathematics is about a thousand percent less stupid than reading.”

“I can see your natural aptitude for it, with terms like ‘a thousand percent,’” snarks Hannah. Olivia rolls her eyes. “You’ve been locked up your whole life,” Hannah goes on. “In a cell so much tinier than this room right here. You don’t know... you haven’t got any idea how great words and stories can be.”

“And *you* don’t know how beautiful numbers are. Patterns, puzzles, interconnected systems. The whole universe is made of that stuff!”

“Whatever, you stubborn lunatic.” Hannah’s voice is breezy. “I’m gonna bring you some of my paperbacks, and give you pop quizzes on them in exchange for your meals. If you don’t read them, you don’t eat.”

Olivia splutters in futile outrage. “You can’t give me *homework*! You’re my *kidnapper*!”

“I’m pretty sure that means I get to do what I want,” comes the retort. And sure enough, when Olivia next sees Hannah the rabbit-masked girl is carrying a pile of battered, softened-corner books.

She puts them down beside Olivia and gives the uppermost cover a fond pat. “There. Pick whichever you like; I’ve read them all often enough to think up quiz questions on the fly. Just let me know which one you’ve read when I come in later.”

Olivia can’t imagine being thrilled about reading a book once, let alone liking the experience enough to do it again multiple times. But she’s got no real say in the matter, however she might feel about it, so she picks up the top book – *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham – and opens it to the first page.

~

For the rest of her life, regardless of how often she’s read it or where she is at the time, *The Day of the Triffids* always takes her back to that little cement room, to the changing shape of the square of light on the floor as the sun moves across the sky outside the window.

The fear and boredom of her own captive life falls away as she follows Josella and Bill on their desperate escape from apocalyptic London, out into the countryside. She’s afraid when they are, she cries when they cry, she hears the plaintive notes of a song across the darkened ruins right along with them.

When it seems for a while that maybe, just maybe, they can build a new life on the farm they’ve filled with other misfits they’ve found along the way, protect its perimeter from danger

and be happy, Olivia's heart sings for them. And when, at the very end, they have to run away again because the greedy tyrants they've fled in London have found them again, Olivia feels like her heart is so full of so many different things that it's going to explode for sure.

As soon as Hannah opens the door that night, Olivia's on her feet, meeting Hannah just inside the room and taking the tray from her excitedly.

"I read *Day of the Triffids*. It was *amazing*."

"Am I allowed to say 'I told you so'?" Hannah asks, following her deeper into the room.

"Because I did."

"You didn't *tell* me anything. You threatened to withhold my food," Olivia corrects her without malice. It's hard to be angry at Hannah for giving Olivia something so precious. She sits down and begins to eat.

"Semantics." Hannah waves one hand, brushing away the accusation. "If you liked that, I think I put my copy of *The Midw-*"

The end of her sentence is drowned out by a bang, like a door being kicked open somewhere close by, and then the even louder – so shatteringly loud that Olivia feels like she can hear it inside every tooth and bone in her body – the sound of a gunshot.

She's on her feet before her brain has registered that she's going to move. Hannah's frozen on the spot but seems to remember how to move at the same moment that Olivia does. They draw closer to one another by instinct, their movements matched as they both start in fright at the noise of a second gunshot rapidly followed by a third.

There's seconds, less than seconds, of time, but it's time enough for Olivia to act. She grabs one of the long ears of Hannah's red rabbit mask and pulls up, wrenching the whole thing away from the other girl's face in one sharp motion and sending it flying into the corner of the room, among the small pile of stuff from Olivia's own schoolbag.

Hannah's hair is cropped short, not as short as Olivia's own hacked-off locks but nearly so. She's younger than Olivia had guessed her to be. They might even be the same age. Hannah looks even more frightened than Olivia feels.

Olivia grabs Hannah in a hug and clings on, pressing Hannah's face down against her own shoulder as the door bangs open.

The guy standing there is so broad and tall that it's as if he fills the whole space of the doorframe, barring any chance of freedom as effectively as the door had.

"She was here when I got here," Olivia says, still clinging tight to Hannah, praying that Hannah

will go along with this flimsy excuse for a plan. “She doesn’t speak. I don’t know how long she’s been a hostage here.”

The gun in his hands is huge. Horrifying. Olivia knows with a sick rush of cold through her limbs that she’ll be seeing that gun in her nightmares for the rest of her life. He gives Hannah the barest of glances, his concentration focused on Olivia.

“Your father sent us,” he tells her. “Come on.”

They follow him out the door, Hannah clutching as tightly to Olivia’s hand as Olivia is to hers. Two dirty, frightened girls, led together through the remains of a masker hideout.

In the main room, the bodies of the other three kidnappers are still lying where they fell. One, the fox, has a bullet hole through the forehead of his mask, and the blood looks almost fake, too red, where it’s pooled under him. The mouse and the cat were trying to get away when they died and so their wounds are on their backs, their bodies lying face-down on the concrete floor.

Hannah chokes on a sob. Olivia squeezes her hand even tighter.

There are two other men, broad and tall as the first, checking each room with their guns at the ready. As she follows the first man through the space, towards the entrance, Olivia clears her throat and addresses all three of them.

“That’s all. It was only three: mouse, cat, and fox.” She hopes that it’ll be a long, long time before anyone discovers that there was a red rabbit as well.

It doesn’t surprise her when they all ignore her.

Outside, the air is colder than it was in the building but there are no smells of gunpowder, shit or blood, so Olivia takes a deep breath despite the chill.

“Here.” The man points to a van. The symmetry of her arrival to this place and her departure strikes Olivia as weirdly funny. She wants to laugh out loud, or maybe cry.

Olivia climbs in first, pulling Hannah after her before anyone can say otherwise. It’d be much too dangerous for Hannah to try to run now; hopefully an opportune moment will present itself.

The man climbs into the drivers’ seat.

“What about the others?” Olivia asks. There are tears on Hannah’s face now, and her hand is trembling hard in Olivia’s grasp. Strangely, Olivia’s own fear has melted away. Every nerve in her body is thrumming, so much so that she feels lightheaded, but she doesn’t feel scared.

Saving Hannah is all that matters for now. There'll be time for her to feel scared later.

"They'll meet me later, after they've checked for others," the man tells her. Olivia holds back from telling him again that there were only three.

Instead, she asks "Are we going straight to my home, or to a hospital first?"

"Hospital. It's regulation."

Inside she almost wilts with relief, but outside all she does is nod in acknowledgement, and squeeze Hannah's hand again.

"What's your name, hon?" the man asks Hannah now, looking at them both in his rearview mirror. Hannah just shakes her head, gulping on her sobs.

"We can ask the police if they recognise her face when we're at the hospital," Olivia says. She's pretty sure Hannah will be able to get away before that happens, and even if they do get a picture of her then well, she's a masker, right? Hopefully that means they don't have any pictures of her real face on file as connected to any crimes.

The man's telephone rings, the shrill beeps making both girls start in surprise. The streetlights are painting moving stripes of light over them as they drive past each one.

The man says 'mm', 'mhm' and 'yeah' a few times, then hangs up. He meets Olivia's eyes in the mirror again before he addresses her.

"That was your dad. The hospital we were going to meet at just got locked down with some infection thing. Your parents got the staff to let them out of the ER, but we can't meet them there now, obviously. We're going to St Bridget's over the hill instead. It's about 45 minutes away, so try to get some sleep if you want."

"There aren't any closer hospitals?" Olivia asks. She's not very surprised that her dad didn't ask to talk to her, even after she'd been kidnapped and then violently rescued. His brain just doesn't work like that.

"None worth going to," the man answers her.

Forty-five minutes is a long time to sit in silent fear, but Olivia's almost used to it after so long spent in the room. She's learned how to retreat into her head, where time doesn't seem to matter in the same way. As skills go she thinks it's probably more creepy than useful, but it does mean that right now she's not as likely to throw up from fear as she might've done before everything started.

Instead she spends the time trying to come up with a way for Hannah to get away, but Olivia's

life experiences so far offer no toehold from which to mount a daring criminal escape.

After about twenty minutes, Hannah stirs, sitting up straighter. Her voice, when she speaks, is a rasping whisper.

“May I use your phone?” she asks the man.

He passes it into the backseat, and Hannah enters a number with unsteady hands and then brings the phone to her ear. Olivia can't hear a dial tone or the purr of ringing waiting to be connected, but after a few seconds Hannah begins to speak rapidly.

“Hi Annie. It's Lissa. I know, sweetheart, I know. I've missed you so much too, my little red riding hood. Can you put Mama on?”

Hannah's voice is croaky and quiet, and after exactly three quick shallow breaths of silence she begins to speak again. “Mama. Mama, it's Lissa. I'm on my way to St Bridget's. I'm safe. Please come get me. I've missed you so much.”

And then, without waiting for any kind of reply, she ends the call and passes the phone back through between the front seats.

“My mother will collect me,” she whispers to the man. Olivia does her best to hide her confusion and surprise, because she's pretty sure Hannah said she didn't have parents. This must be someone else she knows, someone willing to help with an alibi at a moment's notice. Olivia wonders what Hannah has promised in exchange for the favour, or if the mystery person already owed Hannah for something in the past.

“She'll give you money,” Hannah goes on. “Not so much as the ransom was. She doesn't have that. But some.” Her inflections and manner are totally different to those of the Hannah that Olivia's started to get to know but really, that doesn't mean much of anything. It's not like Olivia has any idea about Hannah's life or where she'll go or what she'll do now. And there's never going to be a chance to ask.

“You don't have to pay me, sweetheart,” the man tells Hannah. “We've already been compensated for our trouble. You were in the right place at the right time. It's your lucky day.”

“She'll still pay you,” Hannah insists. Olivia squeezes her hand again, hoping it'll convey to Hannah how smart Olivia thinks her words are. Giving the men some money will make them like her, give them a reason not to question anything she or her 'mother' tells them.

It seems to Olivia that this whole emergency plan is probably going to leave Hannah deeply indebted to whoever is coming to her rescue, but that can't be helped. Better to be indebted and alive than cold and bloodied on a cement floor like the others.

Olivia wonders if they were younger than she guessed, too, like Hannah is. Mouse, cat, fox. Maybe they were the same age as her.

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Finally, finally, they reach St Bridget's, and Olivia and Hannah climb out of the van still clasping each other's hands but then there's a flurry of people all around them, and raised voices, and Olivia's parents are there and grabbing her tightly in frantic hugs, and a woman is calling Hannah 'Lissa' and catching her up as well, and Olivia and Hannah's hands get pulled apart from one another in the confusion and Olivia doesn't see her again after that.

She gets bundled up and whisked away to a private room, where her mother cries and her father looks relieved and they both fuss over her as she tries to assure them that she's fine, she's fine.

The doctors check her for concussion and bruises and broken bones and malnutrition, and put her on an IV that makes her feel so cold that her teeth start to chatter, and then she's allowed to take a long warm shower that feels like absolute heaven against her aches and pains.

When she's dressed in fluffy new pajamas and given hot cocoa and told that she just needs to be kept overnight for observation, Olivia feels so overwhelmed with people being kind and nice and gentle that she starts to cry a bit, which makes everyone even kinder and nicer and more gentle.

"Is the other girl still here? Lissa?" Olivia asks a nurse. He shakes his head.

"No. She and her mother left after they were reunited. This is a very exclusive hospital." He pats her on the arm. "I'm sure she's fine."

So that's that.

~

After that there's nothing left to do but wait for the other shoe to drop. Olivia wakes up, night after night, frozen in terror and drenched in her own clammy sweat. She's never been someone who needs a lot of sleep, but even so it's not too long before her parents notice the shadows under her eyes and the way she jumps in frightened surprise whenever anyone tries to speak to her.

They think it's post-traumatic stress. Olivia feels like the worst kind of jackass, because she wishes they were right. She know post-traumatic stress is a big awful gross thing that ruins the lives of the people who have it, but it feels so much cleaner and simpler than this secret she's carrying. Trauma would be hers to work through and overcome, but the question of whether she'll be caught out as aiding and abetting a masker, the wilful facilitation of a crime,

that's not in her control. It'll happen, or it won't, and all Olivia can do is wait.

After a while the waiting, the terror, fades and shifts and settles in for the long-term. The worry doesn't go away, but it insinuates itself into the normal routine of emotions that Olivia has every day, like being bored or tired or lonely. She's always waiting, until she hardly notices the wait at all.

The main thing that's left of her initial fear is a sense of things being unfinished between her and Hannah. Olivia can't forget her, can't put the whole experience into the past, because it doesn't feel over yet. And if nobody ever finds out what Olivia did, then it never will be.

For all that her parents talk about the importance of closure, Olivia doesn't mind the thought that things will never feel properly finished between her and Hannah. It makes her feel like there's still some kind of connection between them, a part of each other they'll carry into their separate futures.

As time goes on, it's easier to talk about things, and eventually Olivia feels brave enough to raise the topic with her mother.

"Those security guys, the ones that rescued me... they were really good at their jobs."

"Yes, darling, your father hired the best in the business. We wanted to be as sure as sure can be that we'd get you back safe and sound."

"But..." Olivia frowns. "If they were as expensive as all that, why not just pay the ransom and get me back that way?"

"That's not how things are done," her mother answers stiffly. "You know that."

Knowing and understanding are different things, but Olivia thinks that saying so would just cause trouble. Arguing with her parents never does any good.

"You missed your birthday while you were away," her mother says, like Olivia's been at school camp or on holiday. "We should have a party."

"I don't have any hair," Olivia reminds her. Olivia doesn't care about that, but she knows her mother does.

"We can buy you a good wig. Real hair," her mother assures her.

"I don't want a wig."

"Don't be difficult, sweetheart." The words have an edge of scolding to them, but then her mother's expression softens again. "Oh, my little darling," she says, hugging Olivia close.

"Better to lose your hair than an earlobe or a finger, at least."



Olivia misses Hannah.

~

Her parents send her to a new school, one with stronger security. Olivia thinks this is kind of pointless; she's already been kidnapped. The extra protection is too late.

The kids at this new school are the kind of kids that Olivia's parents wish that she was. They're perfectly groomed and work with quiet diligence and are horribly, horribly cruel to her and the others among them who don't fit in. They make up nicknames for the misfits, and mock their bodies and voices and families.

One of them trips Olivia as she's going down a flight of stairs one day, and she skins her elbows and chin so badly that she needs three stitches. The blood all over her school uniform makes her think of gunfire, and she idles over thoughts of the private security thugs bursting into the classroom and killing the bullies who torment her.

She doesn't think she'd be all that upset to see them die. She hadn't cried when it happened before, and the maskers had never been horrible to her like these kids are.

Olivia day-dreams of violence but her night dreams are softer and sadder. That's the reason why she finally works up the courage to go looking for interesting books; she thinks maybe giving her imagination more things to do during the day will make it quieter at night, and let her sleep better.

She has to buy a new reader. Her old one, along with all her other schoolbag things, was left behind in the little room.

Hannah was right about there being some stuff worth reading in the legal archives. There's lots of classic novels that someone obviously decided must be harmless simply because they're old. As if history was full of only safe and friendly thoughts and deeds.

Olivia's careful to space the interesting books out between drier texts, to hide her tracks on the system. Even reading the boring books is better than having nothing to do, and her dreams start losing the worst of their dark edges.

Among the sanctioned fairy tales on the school server is a collection of ones that never got properly cleaned up and sanitised for modern readers. These stories are old and wild, full of blood and forests and fur and teeth and magic. Olivia wishes she could read them in privacy, and lives with a constant and pervading anxiousness at the thought that someone, somewhere, is paying attention to what she's accessing on her reader.

One of the stories in the collection is called 'Donkeyskin' and it's a distant relation of 'Cinderella', Olivia thinks. The two have a common ancestor but they grew in very different

directions. 'Donkeyskin' is Olivia's favourite; it's one of the most important and strange things she's ever encountered.

If someone notices that a story like that is available, and that she reads it so much, something terrible might happen. Because Donkeyskin is the story of a little girl, a princess who grows up into a beautiful teenager, so beautiful that her own father -- the King -- decides he must marry her no matter what. Since Olivia's own father is so rich and respected, there are lots of people who'd like nothing better than to destroy him. If one of them is watching the page-click count on her reader in the data cloud, and notices how often she goes back and reads and re-reads Donkeyskin, it would only take one news article full of speculation and innuendo to ruin her father's hard-built reputation as a good and honest man.

While Olivia might not get on all that well with her father, she really does love him, and more importantly he has never done anything like the King in the story. Her father would kill anyone who tried to hurt his children.

That's not even a figure of speech, it's just simple fact. There are gunshots in her nightmares that can bear testament to that.

The King has nothing to do with why Olivia's captivated by the story. It's how the girl escapes that enchants her: the princess stitches a disguise for herself out of fur and feathers and animal hides, helped by all the little woodland creatures she's fed at her windowsill since she was small. They repay her kindness by giving little pieces of themselves, building her a costume as feral and strange as anything in the forest.

The princess leaves behind her home and her father and her name, and because the cloak she's sewn has tall, odd ears sticking up from the top, she calls herself Donkeyskin.

Donkeyskin carries three dresses from her princess life in her satchel, in case she ever needs to sell the jewels on them to buy food. She doesn't have anything to worry about, though, because no sooner has she made her way to the next kingdom over than she finds work as a scullery maid in the castle kitchens.

Nobody's kind to Donkeyskin. They kick over her bucket as she scrubs the floors, because they didn't notice her there. She has to live off scraps from the kitchen plates, because nobody remembers to save food for her. Nobody's kind, but nobody's nasty either. They just hardly see her, even in plain sight. The ugliness of her Donkeyskin disguise makes her invisible.

It makes Olivia think about the information updates everyone gets sent all the time, about how you're not allowed to wear this or that geometric makeup design on your face because it scrambles the facial recognition software in public cameras. There are hairstyles that are illegal for the same reasons, and of course there's maskers as well.

Olivia thinks Donkeyskin's way is smarter than any of those, because Donkeyskin knew that the way to hide wasn't to do anything except to just be ugly, to be too gross for anyone to want to pay attention. Not weird enough to be memorable, not strange enough to be noticed by anybody. Just a part of the general noisy, crowded background of the world.

The story has a typical ending, of course. It's related to Cinderella after all. There are three royal balls and the princess puts aside her Donkeyskin costume and wears her three dresses, and the prince falls in love with her, and then she leaves behind a shoe at the third of the balls by mistake when she runs away (because she has to run away; staying anywhere for too long without her disguise is too hard for her) and then the prince demands that every woman in the land has to try on the lost shoe to see if it fits. And Donkeyskin (who has fallen in love with the prince; she didn't mean to but she couldn't help it) goes along, and everyone scoffs and laughs that the weird ugly scullery maid wants to try, and the shoe fits and the prince loves her just the same in rags or in ballgowns, and everyone is happy forever etc etc.

Olivia doesn't really care about that part. She's most interested in the beginning, when Donkeyskin runs away and starts anew. It's the best and bravest thing Olivia can imagine.

She tries to get braver in her own life. Feeling brave would be feeling something.

~

People in her class at school say that Sam, the boy who works at the souvlaki shop near the train station, is a grey market dealer. He can get just about anything: drugs, passwords, swipecards, signal-blocking fabric. So long as you've got enough money to pay him, he can set you up.

Olivia thinks she should probably feel afraid, or at least nervous, at the prospect of doing something so blatantly illegal. But she isn't. She doesn't feel much of anything. She hasn't since she was rescued.

The only times she's felt real since that night have been the times when she's lost in words, and none of the books she can get on her reader make her feel real enough. They're too nice, too safe. They don't have any kind of challenge in them.

Olivia wants a book that makes her feel the way that Hannah's smirks made her feel, dangerous and dared and ready for the adventure coming. A promise and a threat all at once.

Back before the kidnapping, it'd be no big deal for her to tell her parents that she was going out after school and then getting the train home, instead of getting picked up by a driver like she always is these days, but now her parents have gone super-paranoid about everything. It isn't like it's one of the scary train lines where bad stuff happens, or like she's planning to be out all that late.

The best plan she can think of to stop them from worrying is to make up a half-truth. She tells them that she won't need the driver that afternoon; the school provides transport for kids in after-school clubs to get home from campus. This is all true, and if she doesn't actually tell them that she isn't in a club and has no plans to join one, well, it's not her fault that they interpreted her general statement of fact to be specifics about her afternoon, is it?

Olivia doesn't feel guilty for the lie. She's pretty sure she wouldn't feel guilty for it even if she was still feeling things properly.

To give the lie at least a faint patina of truth, she hangs around the school grounds for a while after classes end, before heading off towards the café where this Sam guy people talk about works.

The neighbourhoods around her school and her home are all nice ones, of course. They're clean and expensive and almost completely rebuilt. Her house is in an estate, where there isn't much garden between the houses but all of the houses are big and tall. Her school's in a more urban area, the grounds a little blot of green among the endless stretch of high-rises.

To be honest, Olivia's looking forward to her train ride home almost as much as she's looking forward to buying a book. The route the tracks take, between the station near the souvlaki place and the station near her house, goes through one of the last pockets of ruin in the area. Block after block of flattened rubble, nothing but empty space and broken streetlights.

She heard her father talking about it once, about how the permits are in place and that building will start soon. She wants to see the empty space at least once before it's gone.

But that'll come later. First, she steps into the little café, and looks around for the person who can give her words.

Sam is small and slightly-built, not as tall as her (though that's not uncommon; she's the tallest kid in her class at school and Sam doesn't seem to be any older than her and her schoolmates). His features remind her of the marble statues which decorate the outskirts of her parents' ballroom. Not only because his face is even-set and beautiful, but because there is something remote and still about him. She wonders if the lushness of his lip would yield to the touch of her fingertips, or if his olive skin would be smooth and implacable as stone.

There's a leather band on his right wrist, black and unadorned, the kind that people wear when they want to hide ports.

"Can you get books?" she asks as soon as they're done exchanging names.

"Of course," he answers straight away, his tone flat and matter-of-fact. If someone at school talked to her like that she'd think they were being kind of rude and sort of an asshole, but she can see that Sam's twisting his hand and wrist a little bit at his side as he's talking to her.

Olivia's pretty sure that when people fidget like that it means that they're nervous, so she doesn't feel annoyed at him.

"Sorry, I phrased that stupidly," she concedes. "Can I buy a book, please?"

He nods, and disappears into the kitchen area out the back of the little café.

Feeling kind of at a loss – is she meant to wait for him? Should she follow? – Olivia sits down on the edge of one of the booth seats and looks around at the café. Everything is brightly coloured and cheerful-looking, but kind of worn down, like it's been a long time since anything was replaced or refreshed. She wonders how easy or difficult it is, working somewhere like here instead of going to school.

One of the girls from her school, from an older grade than the one Olivia's in, steps into the café and joins some out-of-uniform kids in the next booth over from where Olivia sits.

"The station's all closed down," the girl tells her friends. "Some loser jumped in front of the train and made a huge gory mess. It's gonna be hours before stuff's cleaned up and moving again."

"Ugh, what a drag," one of her friends answers.

Olivia feels faintly ill. It's not the death, not exactly – her much more immediate brush with dead bodies is still a recent memory, after all – but the idea of somebody being so close by to so many other people and nobody knowing that this person wanted to die, thought being dead was better than being alive. That the train driver would always remember that horrible, hideous second when they realised what was happening.

It makes her feel like she wants to cry. It's the first real feeling she's had in months, and it's a lousy one.

Sam comes back into view, approaching where she sits and handing her a small paper bag. She shoves it into her schoolbag and gets out her wallet, handing him the money.

"Thanks," she says.

"Your hands are shaking, and you're pale," he notes.

"Yeah, uh, turns out that the train station's shut down," she tells him. "I guess I'm gonna have to walk home. My parents are going to murder me if they find out."

"My shift ends soon. If you wait, I can walk you home."

Olivia wants to tell him that he doesn't have to, that it's fine, she'll be fine, but she's actually really grateful that he offered and so just nods. "Okay. Thanks."

Sam nods, and goes behind the counter to serve the customers.

The little package in her schoolbag is more exciting than any birthday-morning gift has ever been. The anticipation of opening it makes her giddy, and Olivia can't help but think wryly that this is probably how girls her age are supposed to feel about crushes, rather than about secret books.

"All right, we can go now," Sam says, walking to the door without waiting for her to get her things together and follow.

The air's sharp outside, one of the bad briny winds that promises water contamination with the next rain. Olivia wonders if the souvlaki café puts its prices up when that happens. The canteen at her school puts a 20% levy on everything to make up for the higher cost of the water, but Olivia doesn't know if people who buy food from the café would be able to pay that much extra, even just for a week or two.

Maybe she could offer to calculate some different price plans for them, to find a balance between charging enough without charging too much. Sam might think that's weird for her to suggest, though.

"I give this list to my new customers," Sam tells her, handing over a folded slip of paper as they walk side-by-side down the darkening footpath. "It's fifty books you won't have heard of, but that are sanctioned for download. In case you need something new to read before you make it back to me."

"That's not good business practise on your part, is it?" Olivia asks, tucking the list into the pocket of her coat. "Giving people things to read that they don't pay you for?"

Sam shrugs. "I've never aspired to be an economist."

"I have," admits Olivia. "I had a whole reader full up of economy books. They were the only kind I liked to read, until..." She trails off. Until she'd lost the reader in a little cement room. Until a girl in a red rabbit mask had dumped a stack of paperbacks on the floor next to her and demanded she choose one.

"Thank you," she says, instead of finishing her sentence. "I'll check it out."

"You like it out here," Sam remarks, looking at her and then looking around them. "Even though it's ruins. Your posture is more confident. You look happier. You're not a town mouse. You like it better in the open."

Olivia remembers that story from when she was young. The town mouse and the country mouse are friends, but each hates everything about where the other lives. They try to compromise for the sake of affection, but neither is really happy visiting the other. She always

thought it was a sad story.

“What about you?” she asks Sam. “Are you a town mouse or a country mouse?”

He scuffs at the ground with his foot. “Neither, really. I'm a robot mouse.”

~

She opens the paper bag in her bedroom that night, when there's not much chance of anyone disturbing her and seeing what she's doing. Her pulse is a nervous flutter as she takes the ancient, half-collapsed paperback out of its wrapping.

*Dark Carnival* by Ray Bradbury. The cover is lurid, black and red, grey photos picked out in halftone dots and collaged with no kind of sense or order.

Olivia opens it and begins to read, and doesn't stop until her alarm clock goes off at 6:30am the next morning. She hides the book on the top shelf of her closet, behind her rarely-worn most expensive formal clothes.

The stories in the book are like little slivers cut with a sharp and gleaming knife -- vampire families having happy reunions, scythes reaping fields of souls. Nightmares pinned down with ink, seeping blackly into Olivia's spongy brain and clattering heart.

The one she returns to time and time again, that haunts her through her days, is called 'the Small Assassin'. It's about a mother who thinks her baby's trying to kill her. It cries at night to stop her from getting any rest, so she'll end up sick and tired and catch pneumonia.

When the mother falls down the stairs and dies, her doctor decides she was right all along, and the story ends with the doctor getting his scalpel out of his bag. Getting ready to kill the baby.

The story lingers like a taste in the back of Olivia's throat, like grit in her eye. She thinks it might be the saddest story in the world. The baby didn't ask to be born bad, after all. Nobody can help it, being born however they're born. If a mother won't love it and a doctor won't care for it, what's left? Who takes care of the babies that are born wicked, the stepsisters and queens and black knights of fairy stories, the small murderers of horror fiction? Who makes sure they're fed and warm and safe?

Even the ones born strange need someone who loves them, don't they?

Sometimes she is very, very lonely.

Her mother is disappointed that she doesn't wear her contacts anymore. “Your glasses make you look so plain. Ordinary.”

Her mother talks of disappointments and her father doesn't talk at all, preferring to punish her with silence and a lack of attention. Olivia's always grateful to leave for school in the mornings, and tries to linger away from home as long as she can in the afternoons. At least at school she doesn't have to feel guilty about resenting the teachers that dislike her. When biting rage wells up against her father and mother it always makes her feel like she's failed at something important.

Sometimes her father doesn't speak to her for weeks on end, and then without warning he'll tell her all about his day over the dinner table. He makes it clear through this renewed attention that she has been forgiven for the C in History or the messy handwriting or the torn stockings at an important child's birthday party.

Olivia is so tired of being forgiven.

~

After school the next day she goes to the souvlaki place and walks through to the kitchen at the back. One thing she's learned from knowing people like her father is that is you look like you know where you're going and why you belong there, nobody will stop you or ask questions.

Sam's refilling the salt shakers from a larger container. He looks up as she comes in, then back down at his work. He doesn't seem surprised to see her. Olivia gets the feeling that Sam has known the secret about going where you want even longer than Olivia has.

"I'm reading *the Iliad*. From your list," she says.

"Good," Sam says.

"I'm not far into it. There was a summary on the download site though. The Trojan horse -- that's the big one they all hide inside, right?"

Sam looks up again and nods.

"I'd only heard that term in computer class before. Trojan horse," she admits. Sam gives her a momentary smile, skittish and fleeting.

"Me too," he tells her. "That's why I wanted to read the story. To know why it was called that."

"It's a cool name. For a computer thing, or a real thing. All the names in the book are good," Olivia agrees. "Do you want my help?"

Sam shrugs, but he makes room for her to join in beside him.

"I like the name Erida best," he says. "Of the names in the story. It's a girl's name."



“I’m not up to her yet. But it’s pretty.”

“She’s the goddess of hate. She lets out a scream so fierce and bitter that all the soldiers forget everything they used to know -- their fathers, their families. All they can think about is doing battle. If I ever got to name a girl, I’d name her Erida.”

“If I got to name a girl,” Olivia offers. “I’d call her Arcadia. That’s from a play.”

“It’s not really a girl-name, though. It’s a place-name.”

Olivia shrugs. “I like it.”

“Stoppard, right? The play. It’s about mathematics.”

“Chaos, yes,” she agrees.

“The ending’s sad. I remember that. I didn’t think there were any modern stories with sad endings in the legal archives.”

“No.” Olivia shakes her head. “Not sad. Perfect. Even though you already know that she dies and he goes crazy, that’s not where it ends. It ends with them dancing. Whatever comes next, it stops them in that perfect moment. That’s the secret to ending happy ending. Knowing where to stop.”

Sam gives her a long look, like she’s a puzzle he wants to understand. They finish his work without further conversation.

~

Visiting Sam becomes someone Olivia looks forward to right from the moment she wakes up in the morning. It gets her through boring classes, through bullies shoving and pushing and calling her nasty things.

It’s not the books – though she loves the books and is infinitely grateful for them, and will happily skip buying lunch for the rest of her life in order to afford them – it’s Sam himself. Hannah was the first real friend Olivia ever had, and Sam’s the only person she’s met since who seems like he could perhaps be a contender to be the second.

The room where he lives, upstairs from the café, is always a complete mess, but a comfortable mess. His clothes are all soft and worn and made of fine, smooth textures, so all the piles on the floor in his room are nice to sit down on.

“I don’t like anything rough or itchy or bright,” he explains, frowning as if even the thought of it makes him feel bad.

Olivia, remembering the wool coat left behind in the cell, thinks Sam's attitude is an eminently reasonable one.

Sam's hobby is drawing shapes with many sides, laid out in orthographic projections. The mathematician in her is enchanted by the clean poetry of his lines. The diagrams remind Olivia of honeycombs.

"A three-dimensional shape with twenty sides is an icosahedron," Sam explains, pointing imperiously at one of the pictures which decorate his walls. His pictures help him with his words, because the desire to explain them to Olivia is strong enough that he makes the effort. "It has thirty edges and twelve vertices. Twenty triangles all the same size in five rows of four can be folded up to make an icosahedron."

She likes to watch Sam draw his projections. His movements are so precise, his concentration intense. It's like watching a tailor at work. The creation of a whole from small, exact pieces, placed together with talent and skill.

But even more than she likes that, she likes to fight about poetry with him. Maybe that's cliché -- being a girly girl, talking about pretty words -- but Olivia doesn't care.

Sometimes when they're both lounging on the futon in his room, or sitting on the sidewalk early in the morning before she goes to school, Olivia will let Sam play with her messy, uneven hair. In those moments she asks him to recite parts of plays and epics, or to tell her about what the structures of stories mean.

"The great Greek plays are tragedies," Sam says, his fingertips smoothing back a loose lock of hair behind her ear. She's resting her head against his shoulder, her reader full of textbooks abandoned on her lap. His t-shirt is soft under her cheek. Olivia wishes that the moment could last forever and ever.

"The tragedy has to come from a terrible error the hero makes. That's what Aristotle says. The word is *hamartia*, which is usually translated as 'tragic flaw'. But that isn't what it means. It just means one mistake. One mistake that ruins everything.

"Tragedy gives the audience *catharsis* -- release, relief. We're healed through the experience of watching characters go through suffering and pain."

Olivia frowns. "That's not a very good theory. Not for applying across a whole medium like that. Why do we have to find healing in a story about somebody being broken? Can't we find healing in a story about somebody, you know, *healing*?"

"Howard Barker -- he was a British playwright -- said that tragedy equips you against lies, but after a musical you're anybody's fool."

Olivia smacks Sam's chest, making a noise of outrage. "You can't get away with calling me a fool just by attributing the words to someone else, jerk. And I still say I'm right. Tragedies never feel complete to me. They're stories that don't have a third act."

"Just because you don't like the ending doesn't mean it's not an ending," Sam replies, flat-toned but in good humour. It's an old argument, one they enjoy too much to ever agree about.

"Yes it does," Olivia fires back, sitting up properly so she can look Sam in the eye. "Sad endings being treated as automatically profound is so sophomoric -"

"To be fair, you *are* a sophomore."

She ignores the interruption. "And it's just *wrong*. Things start out all right, then they go bad, and then they're supposed to get *better*. That's how stories are *meant to go*. Otherwise you're ending *Star Wars* with *The Empire Strikes Back*."

"In tragedy's defence, a lot of people would be perfectly happy if *Star Wars* did exactly that," Sam jokes, deadpan. "And tragedies are exactly right, for what they are."

"But what they are is *wrong*."

Sam gives a shrug. "They can't help that."

~

One afternoon there's a whole glut of customers ordering souvlaki at once. Olivia helps where she's able to in the kitchen, and even with the extra pair of hands it's still a very hectic hour or so for all of them.

By the end of it she feels exhausted and exhilarated, but Sam's just a complete wiped out wreck. He sits down on the kitchen floor, leaning against the side of the fridge and closing his eyes, his face relaxing as he's soothed by the hum of the motor.

It's almost closing time, and Olivia thinks the other people who work behind the counter can probably manage the rest of the shift without their help.

"C'mon, let me help you upstairs," she says, reaching down to help him up. Sam shies away from her touch, climbing to his feet on his own and shuffling towards the narrow flight of stairs.

Olivia's worried by how strung-out he seems. It's as if dealing with that many people has used up every reserve of energy he had. Sam kicks off his shoes and lies down on top of his thin coverlet, his hand making that same little nervous-fidgeting flapping movement that he did the first time she came around.

“Are you okay?”

He glances down to see what she’s looking at, and gives a weird, nasty-sounding laugh at the sight of his own hands and arms.

“My mother always used to tell me ‘quiet hands, Sam’,” he says, making his voice stern and sharp on the last three words. “I tried, as much as any five-year-old can. She’d tape my hands and wrists to the arms of chairs, trying to teach me how to keep still, but it...” He closes his eyes, as if even the memory is painful enough that he has to brace against its hurt. “I didn’t learn the lesson. Within my first week of starting preschool, the teachers hand noticed my hands. That tipped them off to look for the rest. And here we are.”

Olivia can’t breathe. She can’t move, can’t speak. Her mouth opens anyway. “You can’t mean...”

“It’s a form letter. The escort officer brought it when he came to pick me up. One page, folded into thirds. It looks *soordinary*.” There’s a shell-shocked wonderment in Sam’s words, as if he still can’t believe the details even after all this time. “Dear madam, your son has evidenced a failure to thrive. He is being relocated in order to allow for a more appropriate resource allocation to take place. As compensation you are entitled to government-supported prenatal and neonatal care for your next pregnancy, please call the following numbers for further information on this incentives scheme. We wish you better luck in the future.”

And there it is. *Failure to...*

“You’re a thrive,” Olivia whispers.

“It’s not catching, don’t worry.”

“Fuck you.” She kicks against the side of his bed. “As if I’d be like that about it.”

“You’d be surprised. People are...” Sam pauses, closing his eyes as he searches for the right word. “Unpredictable.”

“I should have realised. God, I’m an idiot. I didn’t even think about why a kid no older than me was working instead of going to school, or how you had grey market connections, or where your family was or anything. I’m sorry.”

“What’re you sorry about? It’s good that you didn’t think of it. Isn’t that supposed to be the ultimate goal for a thrive, to pass undetected? We can even earn integration certificates if we pass tests. I haven’t tried to take the tests. I thought it was better to just keep going as I was. Not to rock the boat.”

“Fuck.” Olivia doesn’t know what else to say.

“Hmm?” Sam looks confused by the venom in her reaction. It just makes her feel sadder, more upset.

“It’s really fucked up, Sam. You’re a *kid*. I couldn’t manage if I was shoved out on my own and had to get a job and everything.”

He gives her a crooked smile. “You’re an entirely different circumstance. You’ve already proved you’re worth the investment just by being normal, so it’s all right for them to put in the effort of raising you. I wouldn’t be a good return prospect on the nurture.”

Olivia didn’t think it was a literal thing, when people talked about being shocked as feeling as if their head was spinning. But it really is just like vertigo. Her feet are bloodless and her head is dizzy. How can this be happening in the world she knows, to someone she cares about?

“I didn’t...” She has to swallow twice before she can talk. “I didn’t know that thrives happened in this part of the city.” At school and on TV, she’d always heard that the defects and disorders that thrives had were caused by stuff like radiation leaks or chemicals in the soil, leftover remnants from the Wars. Things like that weren’t supposed to still be around in the city. Not in the part Olivia lives in, where there were trains and plumbing and schools and everything.

Thrives were one of those things that happened in a blurry, distant land called *somewhere else*. They were something for politicians to make up scare campaigns about and for her parents to discuss over dinner while Olivia pushed her food around her plate and ignored them. Thrives weren’t... they weren’t *Sam*.

“I’m just lucky that what’s wrong with me doesn’t stop me from being able to work,” Sam remarks, his voice not quite achieving the nonchalant tone he’s obviously going for.

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Olivia snaps in reply before she even knows she’s going to speak. Anger is like a bullet from a gun, tearing through her so fast that she’s ripped apart before she knows the shot’s gone off.

Even after Hannah, after the kidnapping, Olivia’s world was so *little*, so safe. She never... she never thought...

She doesn’t know how to think. The rage inside her, the sheer injustice of Sam lying here alone and miserable, of what that means about every other thrive she’s ever heard about, that they weren’t monsters or less than human or anything like that, they were just *kids*, just others like Sam, just *people*...

She wants to cry. At least crying would be a reaction. She feels like she’s going to explode with the force of what she feels.

Sam's gaze has drifted over to one of the towering stacks of books along the edges of his room, to a decrepit-looking hardcover marked *Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*.

"It's comparatively gentle. In Sparta, babies that didn't measure up were left on hillsides, or thrown off cliffs. We had a guaranteed place in the shelters to sleep, until we were ten. The older ones are kind to the younger ones – children that can eat without too much help almost never starve. A lot of cultures have been far harsher."

Olivia wants to say that this is the coldest of cold comforts she's ever heard of, but she thinks Sam likely knows that already. Instead she tries to steady her breathing, to push down the anger boiling through her, and asks "Do you still not want to be touched, or can I get in?"

"No, it's okay. I'm okay now." He shifts over, to make what room he can on the narrow mattress.

Olivia climbs in next to him and curls herself against his side, hugging her arm across his chest. She wishes she could travel through time, be with him through every moment of hunger or cold or loneliness. But she can't. He had to go through all of it without her, without anyone. All she can do is be here now.

"There's nothing wrong with you," she says again, her voice quieter now but no less fierce. Sam strokes her hair, as if she the one that deserves to be comforted.

~

A few weeks later, when the weather turns too hot to cope with, Olivia gets the idea that they might be able to sneak into her school's indoor pool at night and swim through the worst of the evening warmth. It's humid but rarely breaks into rain, staying at a horribly uncomfortable in-between of *almost* breaking instead, and after a couple of weeks of that Sam is ready to agree to anything that might offer relief, even a plan that makes Olivia's eyes light up in a way he says is "never a comforting sign".

He's never swum before, so to start with she says down the shallow end with him, where they can stand with their feet on the bottom of the pool and still have their heads and shoulders above the surface. Being in the cold, clean water after the sticky and smog-filled afternoon outside makes Olivia so happy that she feels like singing.

She wants to stay down the shallow end and be a good friend. She does. But the allure of the depths is too strong, the thought of ducking her head under and pushing off from the wall and gliding all the way to the other end under the power of a few kicks. Olivia doesn't swim much when he class comes to the pool, because she feels gangly and self-conscious and clumsy, but now there's only Sam here, so she doesn't feel afraid.

She does a few laps, then comes back to him in the shallows. "Do you want to try? I'll help,"

she offers. Sam makes a face.

“We’ve only been in the water five minutes,” he says. “Expecting me to do laps already is a little faster than I’d like to go.”

“Pfft.” Olivia makes a noise of dismissal and splashes the water at him with her hands. “When I was learning how to swim, my father threw me straight in the deep end.”

“Yes, but your father’s an asshole.”

The words make Olivia pause, uncertain about whether it’s okay for her to smile at them. Nobody’s said that to her since Hannah.

Olivia still misses Hannah. Having a new friend in Sam doesn’t replace the feelings she had about her old one. There’s room in her heart for both.

She’d once said to Hannah that it’d be nice to see the ocean with her someday. She still imagines that, sometimes, the two of them together off on an adventure. Maybe Sam can be there too, all three of them living wild on an abandoned island with clean beaches.

No place like that exists in the real world, of course, but that doesn’t stop her dreaming.

If they’re going to run away to the ocean, though, then first Olivia has to teach Sam to swim.

“Come on,” she says. “Try to copy what I do.”

~

The next book that Olivia loves, another ratty paperback she buys from Sam, is called *It* and is by somebody named Stephen King. The horror and fear of the story, the unhappy children and the terrible, bloodthirsty clown, are a huge and unexpected comfort to Olivia’s hungry heart. The idea of frightening things hiding in the dark is like a security blanket for her. Better a nightmare than nobody.

Sam has three ports in his wrist. Olivia has almost never seen anybody with a port before, apart from in movies and shows. And Hannah. Hannah had five.

The ports in movies and shows are mostly prosthetics, stuck on with spirit gum and peeled off when the actors are finished playing. If there are any actors in the shows and movies with real ports, the ports are hidden with bracelets or watchbands, and then paparazzi photographers sneak around and try to get a picture to sell to the entertainment sites for lots and lots of money. Nothing sells as well as shame and secrets. No rich person wants the world to remember how poor they used to be. To have a port is to be marked forever.

“Which is complete nonsense,” Sam points out when she muses aloud on the subject. “Sixty-

five percent of the population is ported, and a full hundred percent use port-interfaced technology in their everyday lives, whether we make use of that aspect of it or not.”

She tells Sam about Hannah, about the whole horrible thrilling weird experience that altered something inside Olivia forever, made her who she is now.

“I worry about what Hannah had to do, to get away. Who the people she called were, and how much they cost her. It feels like it was my fault that she had to do that, because my father hired the men.”

“I’m not going to insult your intelligence by explaining Stockholm Syndrome to you,” he replies in a dry voice, giving her a pointed look. “But even accounting for that, feeling guilty because you got rescued from being kidnapped is pretty outrageous.”

Olivia sighs. “Shut up.”

“She probably didn’t call anyone, anyway. I bet if you’d asked to see the phone logs, it would have been a dead number.”

“No, it was definitely someone, because she told them her name was Lissa, and then that’s what the lady at the hospital called her.”

“There would have been a phrase or word she used, a trigger that connected the call to a monitoring station. That’s how spies do it, isn’t it? And government agencies. The machinery picks up the trigger and starts listening in.”

“Oh.” Olivia thinks hard, trying to remember Hannah’s hoarse, rapid words. “She called someone ‘little red riding hood’. That might have been it. So that clicked the connection on, and then she just pretended to be talking while someone listened, and had to trust that they’d understand and help her?”

“Yeah.” Sam nods. “I hear about things like that sometimes, from my suppliers. I never use them. Reliability like that – knowing for almost certain that someone will come pick you up on nothing more than a hospital name muttered down the phone ten minutes before the needed rescue – that comes at very, very high prices, from what I hear. It would have to. I don’t want anything to do with that.”

Olivia’s stomach feels leaden, cold and heavy. She wishes she knew what happened to Hannah. If she wound up safe and okay. But it looks like she’ll never know for sure, and this new piece of information – the first she’s had since it all happened – is nothing but bad news.

Late that night, instead of staying up with a book like usual, Olivia lies in bed and screws up as much courage as she can find. This is so dumb. What’s she even going to say? So, so dumb.



She punches a random number into her phone and hopes she isn't about to wake up someone. There are way more numbers than there are phones, right? So this has a good chance of working.

Before anyone can answer, she takes a breath and blurts "Little red riding hood! Uh, I hope that's still the right words. I guess it probably isn't, since Ha.. Lissa used it in front of people. But, um, if you're listening, don't make her pay a lot or anything, okay? It was my fault. She got caught in it. So if there's a way for you to give the bill to me instead, if you can find me, do that please. And... and if you talk to her tell her I'm sorry, and that I... tell her..."

Olivia can't think of anything to say, and the phone is just silent empty air beside her ear. She ends the call, and wants to cry.



# **ORIGINS AND OVERTURES**

## **Book One Wolf House Series**

By

**Mary Borsellino**

Omnium Gatherum  
Los Angeles CA

## Origins and Overtures

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Second Edition

To Clea, Audrey, and Grace, who were there when it started.

# ORIGINS AND OVERTURES

## BETTE

Somehow, after summer, spring shows up again. In Rose and Tommy's front garden the roses bloom a second time, lush and heavy on their branches, and out behind Bette's house sour little oranges fall. Bette and Rose gobble all the mulberries they can reach with half-hearted climbing and their hands are stained dark with sticky too-sweet fruit pulp. For the first time, Tommy doesn't pick squirming silkworms off the mulberry leaves to keep comfortably in an ice-cream box until they're ready to spin their small sleeping bags and grow into white-winged moths.

Bette assumes he's grown out of it, though she doesn't want to ask and know for certain. It seems sad that such a predictable routine can just stop and not exist ever again.

They're sixteen but Bette feels like she's a million and like she's a kid all at once, and it's completely absurd that she and Rose are juniors and that in less than a year they'll be seniors, because in Bette's head they're still a pair of five-year-olds in plastic sandals who're scraping their elbows when they fall off their bikes. To be fair, Bette still has scraped elbows most of the time, but still.

Tommy's a sophomore, even though he and Rose are twins. When they were eight he got really sick and missed so much school that they made him do third grade again. Rose pitched a whole lot of fits to get them to keep her back, too, but the teachers and her parents and everyone said she was too smart. Which is total bullshit, because she counts it as a victory if she gets a D in Chemistry. Her other marks are pretty okay, except for gym, but it's the principle of the thing.

Bette has heard her rant on the subject on many occasions.

Tommy's health has never been all that great, even though it's half his life ago now that he got sick. Sometimes Rose and Bette remember to open the window in the basement if they've been smoking and Tommy's coming down to watch movies, and if they forget he makes a show of keeping his inhaler ready, which makes Bette feel like the shittiest friend ever.

Bette lives around the corner from Tommy and Rose, same as she has since forever. When Rose finally got permission to turn the basement into an art studio last year, they thought having movie nights during the school week would get easier, because Bette wouldn't have to climb the oak that reaches up to the second level of the house out the back anymore, but Rose's mom planted a whole bunch of new rose bushes along the side where the basement windows are, and Bette swears kind of loudly when she gets stabbed by thorns. So from a getting-grounded perspective, it's not any safer, and Bette's always getting injured one way or another so it's not like falling out of a tree would be some major disaster out of the ordinary. These days she goes with whichever method of breaking and entering appeals more at the time.

Tonight's Thursday and they've got that gross old couch Rose and Tommy's dad won't let Rose and Tommy's mom throw out folded down into a bed. Bette and Tommy are lying on it and eating handfuls out of this giant box of raisins Tommy stole from the cafeteria when he had detention there. Rose is down on the floor in front of them, futzing around with her markers and a copy of last year's yearbook. She's turning a photo of the soccer team into a collection of creatures with kettles and teacups and sugar bowls for heads.

"Did you know Audrey Hepburn was a ballerina when World War Two happened?" Rose asks, watching the screen of the tiny TV. Bette knows that Rose keeps meaning to save up for a better one, but her money always ends up going on art stuff or comics or horror magazines. "She used to do

fundraising for the resistance in basements, and nobody could applaud her because the Nazis would hear."

"You are so gay for Audrey Hepburn," Bette says around a mouthful of raisins. "This is at least the third time we've seen *Breakfast at Tiffany's* this year. I think it's only fair we watch *Frankenstein* next, or whatever Tommy's favorite is this week."

"Rec. The Spanish zombie one," Tommy answers at the same time that Rose says "No, no, there's a theme, see, it's movies that made a significant impact on sunglasses fashion. We've got this one, then *The Lost Boys*, then *Terminator*."

Bette snorts. "You're so full of shit. Hey, that looks awesome." She leans over the edge of the fold-out, looking at the teacup-people. "Do me next."

"kay." Rose leafs through the pages until she finds one with Bette on it. "What do you want to be? Wait, stupid question." She starts sketching stitched-up scars across Bette's olive-skinned arms and legs.

The Bette in the photo has shoulder-length white-blonde hair, with an inch of dark brown regrowth at the root of the paleness. The school kept getting nasty because the uniform regulations have this whole big thing about hair not being obviously dyed or unkempt. So Bette chopped most of it off and put black through it, and now it curls around her face like a flapper's and the school is getting crappy at her for the cut instead of the color. Turns out the uniform regulations say girls have to have their hair a certain minimum length as well.

Rose sometimes tells her that it looks gorgeous, but when she tries to say that Bette always just rolls her eyes and makes a face, because Bette wants to be a badass punk and badass punks aren't meant to be gorgeous. She even pierced her nose with a thumbtack and put a ring through it, which is either the coolest thing she's ever done or the grossest, depending on how squeamish she's feeling on a given day.

"I want to get a tattoo just like that," Bette says, nodding at the lacework of sewn lines now decorating her arm in the photo. "That's amazing."

Rose shudders. Bette knows how much Rose hates pain. Rose even hates having to tug a brush through the knots in her hair because it hurts when she pulls, so mostly she doesn't bother and lets it knot.

Bette grabs another fistful of raisins and walks on her knees to the backrest at the head of the pullout, which she then sits on, wriggling her bare toes against the rumpled sheet covering the mattress. Her toenails are painted black, as always, and there's sticky residue of a lost Band-Aid bracketing an old scab on the inside of one shin.

"I want *Frankenstein* patchwork all over my arms, just like that," she repeats, gesturing to the currently ink-bare skin from her shoulders to wrists. "I wish people still gave a shit about *Frankenstein*." Her longsuffering sigh hopefully makes it plain that the lack of interest exhibited by the general population is a personal affront against her. "But there's nothing scary anymore about sewing a dead person's hand on your arm, or putting a new heart in a chest, or new eyes or lungs or anything. That Australian scientist lady invented those spray-on skin graft things and won tons of awards. Oscar Wilde was right when he said science is the record of dead religions. *Frankenstein's* not scary anymore because he came true."

Tommy rolls his eyes. "You can't quote Oscar Wilde to prove your point. The guy made a career out of saying things that sounded good and were totally meaningless once you thought too hard about them."

Rose swaps the DVDs over. "I really dig *The Lost Boys*," she says, ignoring the argument going on

behind her. "If I wore skirts and dresses I'd absolutely get one just like the floaty, silver-threaded one that the girl in this movie has."

"See, now, vampires," Bette says, interrupting her argument with Tommy to gesture at Kiefer Sutherland on the DVD menu screen. "They're still scary, because blood's scary or dirty or whatever now. AIDS turned being queer into this giant freaky thing where you were in danger because the people you slept with might have this deadly infection in their blood, and if you got it then you're not properly alive anymore."

"You sound like a psych 101 student from 1987," retorts Rose, reopening the yearbook and beginning work on a picture of herself. "Anyway, I don't get it. Frankenstein's not scary because now we're all Frankenstein, but Dracula still is because only queer people turned into him?" She darkens her gray-hazel eyes to black in the photo, and neatens her straggly hair into soft black waves. "Should I dye my hair darker, you think? Anyway, vampires aren't scary, they're sexy, duh. This one —" Rose gestures to the TV."— is basically an undead John Hughes movie."

With a few strokes of her pen she adds tiny sharp fangs peeping over the plump skin of her lower lip in the photo.

"Neck-sucking is sexier than transplants, it's true," Tommy agrees. Bette throws raisins at them both.

"What're we doing tomorrow night? There's a new club opening downtown, but we've got a Chem exam on Monday that we should at least try to avoid fucking up on."

Rose squints at her self-portrait critically. "The vampire embellishments look pretty cool, but underneath I can still see boring old me staring up."

The Rose in the photo is dressed in the gray slacks, white shirt, black-and-white tie and red blazer of the boys' winter uniform. Bette knows that Rose hates wearing red; it makes her fair skin look ruddy. Now Rose colors over it with her black marker. "That's a small improvement, at least."

According to Rose, Bette looks great in red, because according to Rose, Bette looks great in anything Rose has ever seen her wear. Bette's still in most of her uniform now, the red polo and black skirt of the girls' summer outfit, her white knee-socks under the foldout somewhere. Rose and Tommy usually change as soon as they get home, and are both in jeans and cruddy old band T-shirts now — Blondie for Rose, Misfits for Tommy.

Tommy wears glasses, and Rose probably should as well, but she's managed to bluff her way through eye tests so far. Bette's got excellent eyesight and probably won't need glasses until she's super-old, which is probably for the best. She gets beat up enough at school as it is.

"Let's go to the new club," Tommy answers. "I told Michelle I'd see her there."

Rose and Bette learned long ago not to bother keeping track of whether or not Tommy and Michelle are a couple at a given moment, so they don't press for details. Bette shrugs. "Okay. New club it is. The Chem stuff will all just be acids and bases anyway. Boring." Bette is revoltingly good at Chemistry, which she's perfectly aware is not fair at all. She's just as slack at studying for it as Rose is.

She just *gets* it, that's all. It's one of the only things she can rely on to always make total sense to her.

"You'd need the full-on Jekyll and Hyde to keep you interested, right?" Rose teases. Bette nods.

"Yeah. But, see, science has ruined that one too, because altering your personality with drugs is normal now."

Tommy smacks Bette with a cushion. "Shut up, metaphor girl, I just want to see some monsters. Is that so much to ask?"

The next day, Bette gets a detention in Math for sleeping, but the detention's in the library so it's no big drama. She knows the fucking alphabet, so she can shelve books fine, and finds the monotony of it relaxing.

Rose and Tommy are eating cornflakes in the kitchen when Bette gets to their place. Tommy's shirt is wrinkled and Rose has got a long purple bruise blooming like camouflage along the line of one cheekbone.

"They might not've jumped us if you'd been there," Rose grouses. "Safety in numbers."

Bette makes a face of disagreement and turns on the coffee percolator. "Nah. They'd've taken us all on. Who was it this time?"

"Jerrod and Bill and those football douches. I can't believe they still hit girls. They're such classy dudes."

"Did you guys use all the milk?" Bette grumbles. "Damn. Black coffee makes me crazy."

"You're crazy anyway," Rose answers mildly.

"And you're a fucking sexist. I don't want any different treatment just because I'm female," snarls Bette. "I can handle myself fine. Your mom's gonna lose it when she sees your face."

"I'll put concealer on it."

"Oh, like you own concealer." Bette gulps her coffee, ignoring the burn in her throat. "How you doing, Tommy?"

Tommy shrugs. "Fine, I guess." He turns to Rose. "I borrowed your Batman."

"The new issue?" Rose asks. Tommy nods. "Okay. Lemme know what it's like. I haven't had a chance to read it yet. Who's playing tonight? Is anyone playing tonight? I hate it when it's just a DJ. They turn it up too loud and it's boring and shitty."

Bette giggles. "You're such a stereotype. Batman comics in the basement and you hate going anywhere fun."

"No, no, I hate it when it sucks. Seeing bands is fine," Rose protests, shaking her head. "I need a cigarette. Come with me?"

Tommy sighs pointedly. "I guess I'll go up to my room. Alone. Shunned. Abandoned."

Bette pats him on the shoulder. "Buck up, little camper. You'll be able to laugh over our graves when we die before you."

"But that's still so far away." Tommy sighs again. "Come get me before you go?"

"Of course, dork," Rose promises. Tommy walks to the door through to the entryway and staircases, then pauses and digs a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket.

"Ms. Rush told me to give you this." He hands it to Rose. "Have fun murdering your lungs."

The basement smells a little funky after being shut up all day, but Rose is used to the smell and Bette loves having an excuse to whine and bitch. They have matching lighters, cheap black plastic ones that Rose has drawn tiny winged skeletons on with silvery paint. Rose lets her cigarette droop indolently between her lips when she's not inhaling, but Bette likes the feel of her own held secure by the knuckles of her outstretched fingers. It makes her feel worldly and effortlessly elegant, instead of the awkward way she usually feels, which is more like she's ill-fitted inside her own skin.

"What's the flier?" she asks Rose, blowing out a thin stream of smoke.

"Huh?"

"The paper that your brother gave you ten seconds ago. Jesus, Rose, what's your deal? You're even vaguer than usual."

Rose opens the paper as she answers. "I dunno. General ennui, I guess. I'm bored. So who's playing tonight?"



The paper is one of the photocopied ads for school musical tryouts, same as the ones that've been stuck in the halls all week. Below the date and time for auditions Ms. Rush has written 'Rose — give it a try!'

"A new band. I haven't heard anything about them yet. Then Remember the Stars."

"A band you don't know about? I'm shocked, and a little alarmed." Rose grins crookedly. Bette punches her on the shoulder.

"I said 'yet', bitch. And just because you're a shut-in freak doesn't mean there's anything weird about how many bands I see. Is that one of those dorkass things about the musical?"

"Yeah." Rose shoves the paper into the pocket of her slacks. "It might be okay. Maybe I'll try out."

"You hate being the centre of attention. Being onstage generally necessitates that." Bette taps her cigarette into the chipped mug Rose uses as an ashtray. "You know what we should do? We should start a band. You sing, and Tommy can drum, and I'll do bass. We'll find someone to be guitar and we'll be set."

"I don't know if Tommy's ever held a pair of drumsticks, so I'm at least a little bit concerned that you haven't thought this through."

"Please, it's drumming, how hard can it be?"

Rose rolls her eyes. "You know you're a cartoon character, right?"

"Yeah, but you're the one who's friends with me, so joke's on you." Bette plants a gloss-sticky smooch on Rose's cheek. "Let's go breathe on your brother and make sure he gets to his skinny hipster play-date."

# JAY

As these things go, Jay is having a really good night. The band in the corner looks conservative and boring in their expensive dark suits, same as everyone else here, but they're playing jazz and it's actually good for a change. The usual quotient of assholes has been rude to him, the kitchen staff snapping and harried and harsh because they're overworked, the guests out on the ballroom floor alternating between ordering him around and acting like he's invisible.

Daughters and sons sometimes get dragged to these things with their parents, and sometimes they give Jay small skewed smiles as they take portions of finger-food off his serving tray, as if to have a moment of connection and shared boredom with him. As if he has anything in common with them.

Tonight he's had that moment with two of the guests, early in the evening. With a pair of skinny, pretty sisters, who hung out on the balcony of the ballroom with him for a few minutes in their pale, petal-like party dresses. They offered him some pills but Jay doesn't like chemicals; he prefers pot but none of them could risk going back in smelling like smoke. Later the elder of the two sisters, the blonde one, found him again and they went to the cloakroom and among the coats and wraps that smelled of Chanel and Yves St Laurent and Ralph Lauren and other rich dull perfumes named for rich dull people she said quietly "I'm Jenna," and he said "I'm Jay," and they kissed for a while. The taffeta of her dress rustled like crumpling paper when he touched it, and she had a tiny rebellious tattoo of a fairy on one shoulder.

Jenna gave him her card as they went back to the party, clothes carefully straightened and cheeks still flushed. It had her name and number, email and screen-name listed, and a picture of a fairy in one corner.

"Drop me a line," she said, and went to find her sister, and Jay went to the kitchen to get another serving tray.

They'd left hours ago, though, the sisters, and now Jay's mostly just waiting for the night to be over so he can go home and get some sleep. It's been a really good night, but it's had its best and he's getting a headache. He wishes he'd taken the pills when they were offered.

Glancing around to make sure he won't be caught at it, Jay escapes back out to the balcony for a breath of air. The park the next block over is a lightless blotch, and most of the office buildings are dark now. The hotel ballroom is on the tenth floor, just high enough for Jay to consider what he'd think about in the airborne seconds on the way down.

"Don't jump," a voice behind Jay suggests. Jay damps down irritation at having his moment of quiet interrupted, and turns.

The vampire is taller than Jay, and if he was human Jay would think he was about twenty-three or twenty-four. If he's a guest at this party he's probably much older than that, because vampires with influence and power are almost always old vampires. That much, at least, Jay hasn't forgotten.

"Climbing over the handrail would be too much trouble," Jay replies, leaning his back against said handrail. "Is there something you need my help with?"

"You're the food, are you?" The vampire gestures to the serving tray which Jay has put down on one of the small wrought-iron tables scattered along the balcony's length, a fraction too late after the words. Jay snorts.

"Only if you buy me dinner and a movie first," he says dryly. The vampire tilts his head a little in surprise, giving Jay a second and more searching look.

"You're welcome to try the appetizer if you want, though," Jay goes on, picking the plate up and holding it out. "It's quail wrapped in bacon. I've been told it just tastes like dark chicken meat."

"You haven't tried it yourself?" The vampire makes no move to pick up any of the food. Jay would have been very surprised if he had.

"Not allowed," Jay explains. "I'm Jason. Jay." He puts the tray down and holds out a hand. The vampire takes it and shakes. Vampire skin is cool and soft, and Jay had forgotten how lovely it is to touch.

"Blake," the vampire offers in return.

All vampires are beautiful, and Blake's no exception. His hair is a deep brown and curls at the nape of his neck, and makes the dark of his eyes look less uncanny. Fair-haired vampires always stand out as strange more obviously, because of those dark, dark red irises. He's tall and what a certain type of English teacher might call 'imperially slim', almost as thin as Jenna and her sister, but he died just old enough that his body had time to grow into its shape and so he wears it elegantly, not with the almost clumsy coltish charm of the girls.

His suit is charcoal and simple enough that Jay guesses it must be very expensive, and his shirt is a warm bone color which gives a little life to the whiteness of Blake's throat and face. His eyebrows and nose are straight, his teeth slightly crooked when he smiles along with his handshake. His canines are just a fraction longer than a human's, and taper to sharp points.

"You smell like a girl's perfume."

Jay laughs. He can't help it. "You really suck at pick-up lines."

Blake's smile gets wider, and Jay can't help glancing at his teeth again, either. He's got poor impulse control at the best of times, and while it may not be the best of times, it's still a pretty good night.

"I can't tell if your hair is like that because you've been kissing someone, or because it's meant to look like that," Blake goes on, sounding genuinely perplexed. "There's an awful lot of... stuff in it." He steps in closer to Jay, into Jay's personal space, on the pretense of getting a better look at Jay's hair. "There's some carpet lint here, you know. Cloakroom?"

"Cloakroom," Jay agrees, mouth dry. Blake smells really, really good, like expensive shampoo and laundered clothing and warm dark.

"Pity." Vampires breathe when they speak, because their voice boxes don't suddenly change design when they stop being human, and Blake's breath ghosts on Jay's cheek with the word. "I rather fancied the mental image of your tryst taking place out here on the balcony, under the stars."

Jay forces himself to break the intensity of Blake's eye contact and looks up. "Under the cloud cover and smog, you mean. It's a little too public with the party going on inside, anyway. Anybody could come out and see."

Blake's thumb presses lightly into the dip below Jay's lower lip, tilting his face back down so they're looking at each other again. Typically, vampire lips are pale, barely darker than the skin around them, but Blake's are flushed and full and almost red, and his eyes catch the light like a cat's.

"What about a private room? This is a hotel, after all. There are balconies with no interruptions on many of the suites."

Jay feels drunk and giddy, almost dizzy, lightheaded. He forces himself to blink, and the tiny movement takes supreme effort. The giddy feeling fades, a little. His heartbeat feels fast and heavy in his wrists and throat.

"I have to go," Jay makes himself say, stepping away from Blake before he can change his mind. If he's getting eaten by a vampire tonight then that's seriously shitty luck, but Jay's not going to fall swooning into the arms of death like a Hammer Horror starlet.

He tells the head waiter that he feels sick. He's not sure if the lie is convincing, but he doesn't

really care. If the worst thing that happens tonight is that they dock his pay, he'll call that a victory. He changes out of the mandatory outfit the wait staff is forced to wear and back into his own clothes, jeans and a fraying T-shirt from some underground band. Jay thinks the shirt might've belonged to Michelle originally, but he stole it long ago. Jay knows better than to think that he can throw a vampire like Blake off a hunt this easily, but he's. Well. He's not dying in an ugly uniform for a job he doesn't like, at least. That's something.

# BETTE

The new club is made out of a modified cinema. The original movie theatre went bust when TV came along, and it lay empty and decrepit until it got bought in the seventies and turned into a club. Then the club went bust, too, and it went back to showing movies until it got sold again and closed down for renovations eight months ago.

The sign above the front entrance has "Entartung" painted on it in bold black script, with thinner letters underneath reading "Long Live Degenerate Art". Bette can see that the projection screen from the old theatre is still up on the wall, a blank white rectangle against the newly-papered high black walls.

They get in free because Tommy knows the guy on the door, a college-aged Samoan dude who gives Tommy a smile that is way, way too much information for Bette and Rose. Seriously, Tommy and his friends could be a really slutty mafia if they wanted to be, they've got connections in every industry that counts: they get free tickets at all the late-night horror movies, they know pretty much every single waiter and waitress in the greater metropolitan area, they can usually get into clubs without paying the cover.

The security dude draws thick black Xs on the backs of their hands, the standard sign for "we're underage, don't give us alcohol". There's always a mark of that sort on Bette's hand; she's not away from live music for long enough for the old ones to get scrubbed off completely before a new one takes its place.

"I know your parents are, like, progressive and shit, but they did explain to you that you don't have to share your special magical intimate privacy with every single person you think is cute, right?" Bette teases as they head inside. The place is still mostly empty, but everyone who's there seems to be having fun, so it'll probably fill up as the evening progresses.

Tommy shoots her a puzzled look. "Huh?"

Bette shakes her head. "Never mind." She'd probably sleep with a heap of people too, if she knew how to be chill about it like Tommy, but mostly she thinks guys are jerks and so it's a better use of her time to fight with them than to think about the best ways to get them interested in sex, and they don't typically want to have anything to do with her after she's broken their nose or cracked their teeth anyway. Bette would rather just hang out with Rose and go see bands and stuff like that. Sex is pretty overrated.

Tommy wanders off to where Michelle is chatting to one of the band techs by the stage. Michelle and Tommy are both skinny-hipped and deadpan and monosyllabic. Michelle's dad is black and her mom's white, and her skin is on the darker side of in-between. She wears her hair braided back in cornrows, the severe style making her wide-lashed eyes look even more striking. Tommy's got one of his hands on her shoulder, stroking the skin of the side of her neck with his thumb.

"Sex is so completely overrated and lame."

Rose pats Bette on the shoulder. "I'm sure the guy on the door would help you out if you asked."

"What? No, no, I'm... sex is lame. That's all I meant."

Rose shrugs. "Wouldn't know."

Bette can feel her eyes going wide. "Seriously? Okay, I guess the special privacy talk sank in for one of you, after all. Seriously?"

"Can we not?" Rose looks embarrassed. "My virginity is not a topic of public discussion!"

The opening act is putting their stuff together onstage, two lanky dudes fiddling with the microphones and drums, and a tall girl wearing an oversized red hoodie which is so big on her that

only a few inches of black hemline show of her short dress. She has the hood pulled low on her face and is biting her nails as she talks to a middle-aged, neatly-dressed guy with a thinning salt-and-pepper ponytail.

"That must be the owner," Bette says, nodding toward him. Rose follows the direction of her gaze. The guy leans in and pecks a kiss on the tall girl's forehead, patting her shoulder like he's encouraging or comforting her. "I guess that's his kid. How awesome would that be, to have a dad who owned a club? She doesn't look any older than us and she's opening for Remember the Stars."

"She looks nervous." Rose sounds sympathetic. The girl is still mostly obscured by her hoodie, so they can't see her expression, but her posture is most certainly not that of someone feeling at ease. One of the lanky guys gives her the thumbs up and sits down behind the drum kit. The other picks up a guitar bearing remnants of old band stickers.

The girl nods, unzipping her jacket as she climbs the stairs, discarding the hoodie behind her as she steps into the stage area.

"We are The Cretins And Whores," she says, not bothering to approach her microphone. Even without help, her voice carries through the club's high-ceilinged space easily; bold, a little deeper than expected, and carrying traces of a European accent.

It's the perfect voice for her painted red lips, her white, sharp-chinned face, and her loose coal-black hair, her short satin dress and her heavy boots and ox-blood bass. "Thank you for listening."

"I'm in love. I'm going to marry that woman," Rose tells Bette with total seriousness. Bette rolls her eyes, just a little.

"Are there any brunette girls on the planet that you're not a total queermo for?"

Rose pretends to ponder the question seriously for a long beat. "You?" She grins, and grabs Bette's hand. "Come on, come with me. I want to go meet her after they finish."

"Okay, okay, god, don't pull my arm out of its socket, you violent little psychopath," Bette complains as she's dragged along.

The band are okay, not great, though Bette doubts Rose would notice if they were the worst band on earth with the way she's staring starry-eyed at the bassist. The bassist is easily the best player in the band, but she seems more interested in having fun than being good, bopping her head and ginning and, after the first song, winking at Rose.

"Don't have a heart attack," Bette warns, laughing, as Rose pretends to swoon.

They play five songs, all essentially forgettable but the last, which is when Rose's bassist steps to center stage, and the band launches into a raunchy, grinding version of "Anything Goes", the girl's smoky voice growling out the lyrics like she's daring the half-interested crowd to try to stop her from doing whatever the hell she wants.

"I could never sing like that," Rose says, awed, as the song ends and the band thank the audience for listening. Bette punches her on the arm.

"Whatever. Your voice is great."

The bassist is winding cables into a haphazard coil when Bette and Rose approach her. Bette elbows Rose forward, making a small noise in the back of her throat which she hopes effectively conveys "talk to her, seriously, I promise she won't set fire to your hair or rip your throat out or break your legs or anything scary". Rose throws a nervous, slightly cranky glance over one shoulder at Bette, and then turns back to the girl.

"You're great," she manages to say, voice squeaking a little with nerves. Bette grins. So does the girl.

"Well so are you, for saying so. Thank you. I'm Gretchen."

"Rose, and this is Bette."

Bette gives a wave, staying a step and a half behind Rose. "Howdy."

"I wasn't sure about being the first ones up here on the new stage, but it didn't go so badly," Gretchen says, coming down the stairs to the main floor level where Bette and Rose are. She retrieves her hoodie on the way, knotting the sleeves of the jacket around her waist to keep it handy. The impromptu belt pulls her dress up shorter, revealing more of her white, soft-looking thighs.

"Are you guys new? I haven't seen you play before," Bette offers, knowing that keeping a sane and socially acceptable conversation going with a stranger isn't Rose's favorite thing to do, even when said stranger is cute.

Gretchen nods, pushing her long hair off her shoulders so it falls darkly down her back almost to her waist. "Yes. Assembled just this afternoon, which is why we weren't very good. Aaron and Joey are Ewen's sons. It was their idea to do this, after they heard that there was only one band lined up for the night. I guess there are perks to being the children of the owner."

"We saw you with him before the show. We assumed that it was you who was his kid," Rose admits. There's a faint and utterly charming blush creeping up her neck and cheeks. Gretchen touches her arm lightly as she answers.

"No. Ewen is the son of my grandfather."

"Your uncle, then?"

Gretchen mustn't have heard Rose's words very well — the volume of the crowd is picking up to a pretty steady din around them now — because it takes her a second to answer. "Yes, my uncle, of course. That is a beautiful design." She's gesturing to the scrap of paper tucked into the clear plastic front of Bette's shoulder bag. It's a picture of a bird, a sparrow done all in blues and made out of a patchwork of squares in different shades, stitched together with visible lines. Like a ragdoll, or a Frankenstein monster. Bette's had it in the their pocket since forever.

"Oh, yeah, Rose drew that. I'm going to get it as a tattoo as soon as I'm old enough," Bette explains.

"You're a very talented artist," Gretchen appraises. Rose wrinkles her nose.

"I'm not that great yet. I want to be, one day."

The conversation lulls, Gretchen and Rose just staring at each other with slightly goofy smiles on their faces, and Bette's between thinking it's adorable and thinking that it makes her want to vomit.

"Rose was wondering if she could have your phone number," Bette prompts, because what are best friends for if it's not being totally mortifying all the time?

"Oh!" Gretchen pulls a tiny, sleek little cellphone out of a seemingly impossible pocket in her clingy dress. "Right. Yeah." She presses a few buttons, obviously looking through the stored list of numbers. "Sorry. I always forget my own number because I go through phones so quickly. I lose them all the time. Do you have your phone, or a pen and paper?"

Rose never charges her phone. Bette gives her shit about it, and Tommy seems baffled that anyone can survive without a keypad in their hands, especially someone so closely related to him. But her habits stay exactly as they are, absent-minded and infuriating and quintessentially Rose.

"Oh, I, um," Rose stammers now. Bette takes pity, and comes to her aid.

"Here, put it in mine," she says, handing the phone over. "Take mine too, if you want. I'm usually near Rosie outside of school hours."

"Thank you." Gretchen busies herself with the process of swapping the numbers.

"Do you go to school?" Rose asks. Gretchen shakes her head, still looking down at the phones.

"No. I write a little. My family has money, so. You know," she says, as if Bette and Rose could

have any idea what that kind of life would possibly be like. Bette can't even imagine what it would be to exist without worrying about money and bills and how to earn enough to stay alive.

"Gretch," one of the boys from the band says, nodding his head toward the backstage area. "Come on, Dad says he wants us cleared out so Remember the Stars can set up. Come get your bass."

"It was great to meet you," Gretchen says to Rose and Bette, touching Rose on the arm again and then repeating the gesture to Bette. "I'll call. Or you can call me. I forget to get things done, sometimes."

When she's gone, Rose squeezes Bette's hand in her own. "Oh my god! Did that really happen?"

Bette laughs. She can't help it. Rose gets crushed easily, but Bette's never seen her actually follow through to getting a number before.

"Yeah, it really happened, and now the two of you are going to get married and have a million adopted babies and be sickeningly cute together."

Rose giggles, blush still firmly in place on her usually pallid cheeks. "I'll settle for a date, to start with," she says.

Remember the Stars are, as always, good. They're better than good, and Bette doesn't say that about many of the bands she sees. Bette sees kind of a lot of bands, because she goes to see the bands she likes as often as she can, and they're usually playing with two or three other bands, and if she likes one of those other bands she'll add them to her 'see often' list, and it just branches and branches and branches off like that.

If more math involved concrete examples of this sort, Bette would probably be passing it without the usual pulling-teeth sensation that it takes to get through her homework. Who even thought of that as a simile anyway, 'pulling teeth'? It's fairly horrifying, as images go. Bette's never had teeth pulled, but she remembers when Rose had to get a root canal and then that didn't work and they had to just yank the whole molar out. It had been totally revolting, a little rotten tooth in a Ziploc bag, and Rose's eyes had both gone bruised-black like she'd broken her nose or something. Actually, it was all pretty excellent and cool, but still. That didn't mean it hadn't been totally revolting.

Bette's shitty at math, which is funny, because she rules at chemistry. Chemistry is like math, if math had any kind of practical application whatsoever in the real world. Which, okay, it does, but not all that often. The branching good-bands tree in Bette's head is the first time she can think of in the recent past when knowing how to count past four has been useful at all.

Remember the Stars are one of the best local bands. They're too good to just be local, but Bette's given up trying to find logic in the randomness of which acts hit it big and which ones stay at the level of playing tiny clubs.

The lead singer, Lily Green, flashes the still-side-stage Tommy and Michelle a giant bright grin as she steps up to her microphone. Lily's hot, in a too-cool-for-you way that Tommy and Tommy's loser friends all think is, like, icy and sophisticated and whatever but is actually kind of pretentious. That's what Bette thinks, anyway, but Tommy says she's just being a bitch because Lily is who Bette wants to be.

It's true enough that Lily's short spiky hair, dyed bright red at the front and black at the back, is excellently cool, and that she's got three rings through one dark eyebrow and thick black eyeliner and mascara and her lips are pale pink and her skin is just a shade or two darker than Bette's own olive complexion, and her clothes are always effortlessly stylish in a funky alternative way and, okay, maybe Bette has a tiny bit of envy going on, but that's only because Bette knows in her gut that she would make an awesome rock star if she ever got the opportunity to prove it.

Lily's got the charisma and the voice, but it's the musicians who make Remember the Stars a cut



above the other bands Bette regularly goes to shows for. The drummer, Will Cooper, is steady and reliable and solid, but then sometimes he gets a smirky little grin on his face and does some incredibly fancy and flashy riff on his kit that sounds like it belongs on a classic metal album. He's tall, especially beside Lily (who's short, but not quite as short as Bette, which is another thing Bette envies her for), with light brown hair and the kind of peach-colored skin Rose would probably have if Rose ever left her basement voluntarily.

Anna, the bassist, is possibly technically hotter than Lily, but she doesn't do the flashy, show-off, frontwoman stuff that gets Lily noticed by every set of hormones in the room. Anna's got blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail high on the back of her head, and deep red lipstick, and glossy red nails, and a little red dress that shows off her long, long legs. She likes to be barefoot onstage, and her toenails are red too. The guitarist, Russ, is the oldest member of the band — Bette thinks she heard Lily tell Tommy once that Russ is twenty-eight. He's darker-complected than Will but has similar features; Bette's not sure if they're related or if it's just coincidence. Tonight Russ is wearing a Nirvana T-shirt, which looks faded enough that he might actually have bought it while Kurt Cobain was still alive. Bette wonders if Russ has ever thought about the fact that at least half the kids who come to his shows weren't even born when "Nevermind" was released.

Their music is rocky with a little more pop in it than Bette would usually listen to, but Lily's smarmy charm carries them through the cheesier lyrics and the more obvious melodies. Mostly, Bette likes them because they're fun. It's impossible to associate Remember the Stars with anything more serious than nights out with friends and giggling and dancing around and having a good time, and Bette appreciates that. There's too much depressing shit in the world as it is; she doesn't need to spend her time listening to stuff that'll make her feel even worse about the world.

The other great thing about Remember the Stars is that their fans — with the exception of Tommy's little poser crew who like to spend their time looking disaffected off to the side of the stage — like to have big noisy happy dance pits at the band's shows. Bette loves nothing else about life nearly so much as she loves throwing herself into a throng of people who will throw themselves at her right back, all of them jumping and pushing and laughing and letting all their energy and aggression out in a way that feels a lot more creative and satisfying than the fights Bette gets into at school. Contrary to what most of the people at her school think, she likes dancing a lot more than she likes punching asshole jock losers.

# JAY

Jay walks a block and a half from the hotel to his bus stop, which is one of the brick-walled shelter sort with a seat and a trash can and half-faded tagging sprayed on the timetable. Jay's heartbeat stutters (if he's being honest, the truth is that it hasn't gone back to normal since he walked away on the balcony) as he approaches the bus stop. Blake is already there, leaning elegantly against the wall. He's got an honest-to-God top hat on now, the same subtle dark grey as his suit, and soft-looking light grey gloves on his hands. He straightens as Jay approaches, and nods hello.

Jay is an expert in the art of blanking people. It's one of the core skills required to be truly cool; how will people know that you're better than them if you don't pointedly, icily ignore them? So he knows the power of his dull, deliberately unseeing gaze. He can make prom queens crumble and develop spontaneous eating disorders from the barest glance.

Blake just stares right back, demanding eye contact, and smiles a little. Eventually Jay gets bored of the contest, and breaks the moment by looking away.

"What." Jay keeps his voice so flat that the word isn't even really a question. "You're going to follow me around until I go somewhere private enough that you can kill me, is that it?"

"My calendar has no appointments for tonight, apart from the party we're already done with. Stalking someone as delightful as yourself sounds gloriously entertaining."

"Delightful," Jay repeats scornfully. "You can't think of a better word?"

"Monotone, maybe," Blake concedes. "A little inflection won't be the death of you."

"I think you're generating quite enough inflection for the both of us."

Blake's eyes narrow and Jay smirks. If he's about to get murdered by a bloodthirsty creature of the night, at least he's going down getting in a few good jabs.

His phone buzzes in his pocket and he pulls it out, ignoring the way Blake's still watching him unwaveringly. The message is from Michelle: *u done w/ work yet?*

*y, he texts back, anything going on?*

"Why don't you just telephone each other? Or don't those things come with that feature anymore?"

Jay rolls his eyes at Blake. "You're hilarious. Couldn't you at least pretend to be classy and mysterious, just for a little while?" It's just Jay's luck to get eaten by the lamest vampire ever.

"Only if you'll wear a white nightgown and pretend to be a blushing virgin," Blake counters. Jay sighs, his phone buzzing with Michelle's next message.

*we r @ coffeshop nr natalies. usual people. u missd remembr the stars. meet us?*

It vibrates again before he hits reply.

*lily green hit on tommy.*

That makes Jay laugh out loud, then shake his head in response to Blake's quizzical expression. "A friend of mine. Someone in a band we like was hitting on him. Everyone hits on him. He's got magic pheromones or something crazy like that."

"What about you? Do you hit on him?" Blake asks. Jay shrugs.

"Yeah. Sometimes. Oh, what, you're going to judge me for being slutty? You're planning to kill me, what do you care about who I am?"

"You know, Jason, most people are significantly less blasé about their impending deaths than you seem to be."

"I'm fifteen. That's longer than I thought I'd get," Jay tells him before turning back to the phone's message display.

*can't, he writes back to Michelle. got plans.*

*k. c u @ school.*

Jay looks down at the message for a few long seconds, letting himself have a moment of regret that he's never going to have a chance to hang with his friends again. Then he shoves his phone in his pocket and says, "fuck it."

"Something wrong?"

"Maybe I'm not as blasé about dying as I thought I was. I know you don't care, but I was doing pretty okay here. I've got a scholarship to my school. I bet there are a bunch of dumb kids that the teachers would love for you to get rid of instead of me."

"Bargaining is horribly tacky," Blake replies in a lightly scolding tone. "And my dear boy, it was you who introduced the idea of my killing you into the conversation. There are far too few truly interesting people in this world for me to waste them on so dull an end as dinner."

Jay blinks, surprised for the first time in a long time. "Really?"

"Or maybe I'm just saying that to give you a false sense of security," Blake says, holding his gloved palms up as if weighing his options. "Perhaps I take especial pleasure in dashing hopes."

"As well as the especial pleasure you take in the sound of your own voice, you mean?"

Blake laughs, his head tipping back enough to expose a length of his own pale throat above the crisp line of his collar. "Quite."

"So if you're not going to bite me, what's with the stalker routine?"

Blake smiles. Jay can't help but shiver at the sight of the sharp, sharp points of Blake's incisors.

"I don't remember saying anything about not biting you."

Suddenly Jay's shoulder blades are slammed against the brick side of the bus shelter, Blake's hands on his shoulders pushing him back hard enough to hurt. The back of Jay's head bounces against the wall as well, stunning him for a split second and making him grunt in surprise and pain. The sound dies in his throat, strangled into a gurgle, as Blake's fangs break the soft skin below Jay's jaw.

Jay's knees buckle but he doesn't fall. One of Blake's arms is curved around Jay's side to his back, a palm splayed across his spine and keeping his body held close. Jay tries to struggle, to raise his own hands and push, but his arms and legs feel leaden and his head swims, throbbing with the pulse of his heart. All he can see with his head tipped back like this is a streetlight and some power lines, and they're swimming in and out of focus. The sound of Blake drinking, delicate wet slurps, seems to fill Jay's brain up and shove everything else out.

It hurts more than anything Jay can remember but it feels stupid that he should be trying to remember anything other than this moment, it feels stupid that he ever cared about school or music or friends or anything that isn't the harsh wet-penny smell of his blood staining into his shirt and the way Blake's jaw moves against Jay's neck with each swallow.

Blake pulls away, moving his mouth down nearer to the slope of Jay's shoulder, and bites again, even deeper than the first time. Jay's eyes roll back behind his lids, lashes fluttering.

After a long time — or maybe not that long, because Jay's still alive, there's still blood in him, and he whimpers in protest as Blake pulls away — Jay is carefully sat down on the bus shelter bench. He tries to open his eyes, to say something, but everything's starting to go gray and still.

"Blast," he hears Blake says, somewhere very far away. "I truly didn't intend... I didn't know you'd be so sweet. I'm sorry, Jay."

Jay wants to tell him that it doesn't matter, that it's just one of those shitty things that happen in life, but the gray around him is getting darker and, as he feels Blake's arms lift him again and carry him away from the shelter, Jay's eyes close completely and he's gone.

# BETTE

As usual the gym stinks, with an extra layer of vaguely alcoholic mint and lemon over the top of the sweat and airlessness and long-damp fabric scent that's always there.

"It smells like some janitor went a little obsessive-compulsive in here," Rose observes, waving her hand back and forth in front of her face.

"I heard they found a bunch of dead dogs in here on the weekend," says Bette. "Torn apart, like some giant thing was going nuts and ripping into them, you know? It was a blood bath. That's why it's all scrubbed down now."

Rose scuffs her sole against the sprung wood floor as she walks, making the varnish squeak. Nobody else has arrived yet. "Oh, sure, that's so totally plausible," she scoffs. "Where'd you hear that one, the elementary school playground?"

Bette had heard it from Mrs. Johanson who lived in the next house over from Bette and her mom, a nice enough old lady who lived alone and treated Bette like she was still twelve years old. Bette had got home from her shift at the pizza place and there was a police car parked out the front of Mrs. Johanson's.

When the cops left a little while later, Bette's mom had gone over 'to see if she's all right', which was a total crock; it was really because Bette's mom was nosy and loved to stick her face into anybody's business that she could. Bette had gone along too, because Bette was a naturally inquisitive and compassionate person who wasn't going to trust her mother to pass all the gossip along properly.

Mrs. Johanson was crying when she answered the door, and she looked small and frail and old, older than she ever had before, but she made them come in and sit down in the kitchen like nothing was wrong. She made Bette's mom a cup of tea with sugar and gave Bette a glass of milk and a cookie, which was seriously just ridiculous because Bette was practically an adult and had a nose ring. But the cookie was home-made chocolate chip, which was pretty okay. And then Mrs. Johanson told them why the police had been there.

They buried the bloodied collar and tags that the police had returned out under the trees along the back fence, where the afternoon sunlight lingered. It was nice there, and warm. Bette kind of hoped that, if ghosts were real, the ghost of Mrs. Johanson's dog liked it there.

"You gonna try out?" Rose asks, sitting on the rickety bench that they usually sat on when they deliberately got 'out' in dodgeball. As far as Bette and Rose's high school experience went, that bench was the core feature of the gym.

"Nah." Bette points at her own neck. "This voice was built strictly for hardcore and screamo."

"You don't think it's lame I'm trying out, do you?" Rose asks.

"Of course I do. Everything you do is lame," Bette answers easily. "You couldn't be cool if you died and they ground your body up and put you in the Icie Kola machine at the gas station store."

Rose makes a face. "You're fucking gross."

"Language, Rosemary," Mrs. Rush says, pushing the gym doors wide until they click steady in the 'open' position.

"Sorry, Mrs. Rush."

"It's good to see you here. I'm glad you're trying out," the teacher says warmly, walking over to where they're hanging out. "Are you trying out too, Elizabeth?"

"Bette," Bette corrects automatically. "Nah, not me. Just here for immoral support."

"You can handle the CD player, then." Mrs. Rush points at the ancient boom box still over by the gym doors. "Let's get everything ready before the others arrive."

# JAY

The first surprise is that Jay wakes up at all, and the second surprise is that he wakes up comfortable. The linen sheets on the hotel bed are a high thread count and smooth and white, save for a little smear on the pillow under his neck. The windows are open, letting beams of heavy, gold afternoon light in. There's a big-screen TV on the wall opposite the bed, and a selection of tastefully bland framed prints, which is what tips him off that it's a hotel room.

He climbs out of bed carefully and slowly, head and neck both aching hideously. There's a dressing taped to his neck, the gauze an even darker red than the stain on the pillowcase, but when Jay stumbles to the bathroom and peels the bandage away the skin below is unbroken. Bruised a blackish blue, and marked with scar-shiny punctures in the two places where Blake bit, but not bleeding or torn or even scabbed anymore.

Jay looks... well, he looks like a vampire sucked out a bunch of his blood, actually. His skin is shades paler than usual and his eyes look feverish, glittering and shadowed. He's naked, which — stupidly — makes him blush. Or it would make him blush, if he wasn't impersonating chalk. It makes Jay feel embarrassed to think of Blake seeing how scrawny he is, skinny and bony and teenaged under his clothes.

After Jay's had a drink of water and tried to tame his hair, he goes looking around the hotel room for said clothes. His shoes and jeans are folded on a shelf in the closet, and the shirt Blake was wearing is freshly pressed and waiting on a hanger. There's no sign of Jay's T-shirt but there's a folded sheet of paper beside his phone and wallet on the topmost shelf.

*Jason —*

*I apologize again for the condition I put you in. While losing control is inexcusable on my part, you should nevertheless take it as a compliment. If you still object to being described as delightful, I will instead begin to use the term delicious.*

*Your shirt was a ruin so you may keep mine. It has been washed, as have your jeans. I will never understand the aversion teenagers have to laundry; you perplex and fascinate me in your strangeness.*

*The concierge has been handsomely tipped and all room costs are paid in full. There is orange juice and a selection of sports drinks in the refrigerator, which will help with your headache. I recommend you try to include as much red meat in your diet as possible for the next few days. I have been told blueberries are also a help with the cravings, and have personally found tea a reliable source of comfort and sustenance.*

*It was a pleasure to meet you.*

Blake

There are five new messages on his phone, three from Michelle and two from Tommy, all asking where he is and if he'll meet them after school at Michelle's even though he's not in class. The clock on his phone display says it's one-oh-nine in the afternoon.

Jay drinks an orange juice and watches twenty minutes of the first Lord of the Rings on the pay-movies channel, just because it's the most expensive thing on the list and his headache is making him feel cranky and petty. Blake's shirt is soft and a little too big, and makes Jay look strange and dangerous, standing barefoot in a five-star hotel room and thinking about blood.

# BETTE

More people turn up than Bette would've expected, if she'd actually thought about whether or not there were a lot of people at her school who wanted to be in a musical. Turns out there are, anyway.

There's Jenna Chamberlain, that catty blonde senior who treats everyone like shit and will probably end up some vapid popstar actress scientologist millionaire with a sex tape on the Internet before her five-year class reunion.

There's Michelle Winters, Tommy's sorta-girlfriend, or whatever cool people call it when you regularly hook up. Michelle's voice is nicer than Jenna's, but she just stands there and sings and doesn't make eye contact with anybody, so Bette ruefully assumes that Jenna's got a better chance out of the two.

After Michelle, there are a few other kids from Tommy's grade, guys and girls Bette vaguely recognizes but doesn't know the names of.

A guy Bette thinks she might have Math with tries out and is surprisingly good, forceful and energetic and kind of crazy as he throws himself into singing. When he's done, Rose calls 'hey, Jamie, over here!' and the guy, Jamie, goes over and sits next to her on the bench. Bette wonders how come she's never met this Jamie guy if he and Rose are friends, but when she glares at them Rose gives her this hurt look like Bette's the one being weird.

Rose's audition is great. Her voice isn't as pretty as Michelle or Jenna's — probably because Michelle and Jenna don't smoke, Bette thinks — but it's more interesting, and nobody watching would ever suspect that Rose gets stage fright just from being around all her cousins and grandparents at Christmas.

Rose glances over to where Bette sits with the CD player as soon as the song ends. Bette gives her the thumbs up and Rose grins, grateful, slinking away from the center of attention and back to the bench.

"I'll post the cast list outside the Drama staff room on in a few days," Mrs. Rush says after everyone's had a turn. They're all filing out of the gym when Bette sees Jenna lean in close to Rose's ear and say "You sounded like an oinking little pig up here, Rose. I felt so embarrassed for you. Stupid fat bitches shouldn't be seen or heard if they can help it."

So Bette's got no choice to pull on Jenna's shiny blonde hair as hard as she can, and Jenna squeals in pain and sounds way more like a pig than Rose ever could, so Bette's giggling as she darts away out of sight and waits for Rose to catch up with her.

At the end of recess two of Jenna's stupid jock boyfriends grab Bette and shove her in a locker, and by the time she gets out she's missed most of Chemistry. That pisses her off, and so does the detention she gets for being late to class, but Bette doesn't want to give Jenna any reason to do anything worse and so she doesn't tell anyone what happened.

After detention, she walks home across the highway overpass, watching the rush-hour traffic roar past down below. She thinks about climbing over to the other side of the railing, out where it isn't safe and there's nothing between her and death but the wind. But it's warm and still sunny, even though it's getting late, so Bette can't make herself think about death seriously enough to bother climbing the rail.

She goes around to Rose and Tommy's instead. Tommy's out, and so Rose and Bette smoke a lot and drink a little bit of a bottle of vodka between the two of them, not bothering with glasses, and watch *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Suspiria*.

# JAY

By the time Jay gets to Michelle's, the bruises are nothing but a faint purple-blue smudge, and he's feeling better. It still surprises and amazes him how resilient his body always is; he could probably walk away from anything if he stayed alive long enough to start recovering.

"Who is she?" Michelle asks as soon as the three of them are all in the kitchen. Michelle's house is crazy huge because her parents are art dealers, and her kitchen's full of brushed stainless steel appliances and black marble countertops. There's always amazing food in the fridge, too, because they've got a housekeeper who went to culinary school. Today there's a plate of fresh sushi waiting for Michelle and her friends, so she and Tommy and Jay stand around a countertop and snack happily as they talk.

"He," Jay corrects. "Just a guy. You don't know him."

"Should've known." Michelle rolls her eyes. "Tom here's got custody of the heterosexuality at the moment, after all. You two are like that Greek myth about the three women who have one eye they pass back and forth between them. You've only got one straight between you."

She stands up on her tiptoes and gives Tommy a lingering kiss, like she's trying to make it clear that she's quite pleased that he's into girls lately. Jay doesn't love it when they go through phases like this — even though he knows it isn't the case, it always makes him feel like a third wheel.

"I'm at least ninety-four percent hetero, all the time," Tommy informs her. "Your theory's crap."

"You're ninety-four percent and Jay's about six percent. So you see? You've got one full het to share between you."

Jay eats another avocado seaweed roll. "Please tell me you're flunking Math. There's no justice in the world if you can get away with logic like that."

Michelle shrugs. "There isn't any justice in the world anyway." She grins. "Might as well make that work in my favor."

They hang out until evening. Jay's not thrilled at the prospect of heading home to his still, silent little apartment in the box-like complex of student accommodation. He's the only high schooler amongst a whole lot of college students, but somehow he ends up feeling like an immature kid all the time instead of the old-for-his-age feeling such a situation should, by all rights, inspire.

He heads for the mall instead, where most of the stores are still open for after-work shoppers. There's nobody Jay knows hanging around the food court or the arcade, though, so he doesn't really have a good excuse to stick around.

On his way to the exit, he passes the pet store, and at the pet store is Blake, watching the animals in the window display.

Jay didn't think he'd ever see Blake again. Certainly not so soon, and absolutely not outside a suburban pet store dressed in expensive jeans and a dark red shirt.

Jay hesitates for a half-second, then gives up his pretense at indecision and goes over to stand beside Blake.

"I sincerely hope you're not buying a puppy or kitten as a midnight snack, because trust me, that's far tackier than any bargaining could ever hope to be."

Blake's smile is small, but it looks genuine. "I didn't take you for an animal rights campaigner."

"I'm surprised you bothered to make any assumptions about me at all, considering we've only met once."

"Indeed, but you were serving quail wrapped in bacon at the time, if I recall correctly. Hardly the fare of a staunch defender of God's creatures."

"That's a fair point," Jay concedes. "I do feel that there's a difference between bacon and puppies, though. I'm going to think less of you if you eat a puppy."

Another smile quirks Blake's mouth for a moment before smoothing. "What a distressing threat. But you needn't worry. I give you my word that it hadn't even occurred to me to, as you so charmingly put it, eat a puppy."

There's enough amusement glimmering in Blake's dark eyes to prompt a searching look from Jay. "...because you're buying a kitten, right?"

Blake's laugh is sharp and musical. "Quite."

"You're seriously buying a kitten, as a pet? I wouldn't have thought most coffins had room for a litter tray."

"I'd like to think you already know me well enough to know better than that." Blake schools his face into a look of hurt and disappointment. "Honestly, a coffin? How gauche."

"Feather beds all the way, then?"

"On the contrary. Innerspring mattresses are one of the small pleasures of modern luxury. Ah, yes, hello." These last words are directed at the pet store assistant approaching them, bland customer-service smile firmly in place on her face.

"Can I help you guys with anything?"

"I'd like to buy that tabby, please." Blake points to the tiny, gray-striped cat in the corner of the case, who is currently attacking a toy mouse with playful, vicious determination.

"Great! I'll bring the forms out. Do you want to take her now?"

Blake nods. "Yes. I'll buy a carrier as well, and all the usual accouterments."

"Yeah, she's a lively one. Best to get a carrier," the shop girl agrees. Jay can practically see her melting under the heat of Blake's charm. He wonders if she'll wake up tomorrow with a dark hickey and fuzzy memories of the night before, and is surprised at himself for the flicker of jealousy the idea stirs in him. By the time he's come back to himself, the girl's gone to the back of the store to fetch the forms, and Blake is watching the romping kittens.

"So why the cat? Honestly."

Blake doesn't look away from the litter as he answers. "A gift to a dear friend. He's always had an abundance of horses and dogs and songbirds, and I suspect he misses their company. Companions in need of conversation can tire the best of us."

Jay wants to say that he doubts that Blake ever gets sick of the sound of his own voice, but thinks better of it. "So why a kitten, not a puppy, if this friend is used to dogs?"

"A personal preference. Timothy's home and my home are one in the same, and I've always been fond of animals who require the minimum of attention and can entertain themselves."

"So you're a cat person. Cat vampire, whatever. I'm learning all kinds of new stuff about you today," Jay says, only half-teasing.

"They can't live without meat, you know. Dogs are far closer to humans in that respect — they can thrive on almost any diet if need be, vegetarian and omnivore alike. A cat, however, relies on its predatory nature to sustain it. Without its hunt and kill, it will waste away and die."

Jay blinks, then blinks again. "Did I smoke a bunch of crack I can't remember doing, or did you seriously just try to make a metaphor for vampirism out of a tiny fuzzy kitten that's currently asleep in its food bowl? Because I think you might want to do a bit more work on that one."

"They're sleek and elegant bringers of death," Blake insists.

"Do vampires chase balls of string? Enjoy cans of tuna as a special treat? Leap out from under chairs to attack unsuspecting ankles?" asks Jay, doing his best to keep a straight face but losing the



battle. "It's okay, dude. I promise I won't think you any less intimidating just because you're buying the tiniest, least intimidating pet I've ever seen in my life."

Blake sighs. "Nobody ever talked to me like this in Europe, you know."

"Yeah, but I bet I have cooler hair than some Romanian peasant or whatever."

Now it's Blake's turn to bite back a smirk. "I only spent time in Germany and then Italy, in fact. In the last century, anyway. But they did indeed use much less hair gel, and whatever other... concoctions are required to create such a remarkably trendy style."

"Like I said. Cooler."

"Come back with me." Blake's jovial tone remains, but the offer is obviously meant sincerely. "You can help the cat get settled."

"Are you sure you don't want to offer me some candy while you're at it? I don't make a habit of being lured into vampire dens by the promise of kittens."

"Almost everyone will be out, this early in the evening."

"Because," Jay specifies, "They're biting people and drinking their blood."

"Yes," Blake agrees, sounding like he's torn between being annoyed and entertained. "Because they're doing that. Timothy and Alexander will be there, but probably nobody else. I suspect you'll like them both."

"Hm." Jay makes a face, as if he's having a really hard time weighing up the pros and cons. There's no reason to let Blake know that Jay's brain has apparently decided to have a crush on a vampire. "All right. But I'm buying some juice and cookies on the way — I woke up with a deadly hangover today."

~

The townhouse is one of the old, huge, stately brownstones that have been there since forever, refined serenity blending into the architecture around it with a sort of care-worn dignity.

Jay remembers how many locks were on the vampire houses he knew, a lifetime ago, and so he's unsurprised to see Blake enter a long and complex code of numbers into a steel keypad beside the handle on the front door. The lock releases with an electronic beep and Blake opens the door, gesturing to indicate that Jay may step inside first.

The entry space has a towering ceiling, stretching up and open two stories above the ground level around the coiled central staircase and hanging chandeliers. The flooring underneath Jay's feet is a marquetry pattern of vines and roses, shades of brown and red-brown, rich against the paler brown of the wood of the rest of the floor.

Blake steps beside him, glancing around. "Nobody home, just as I predicted. Most of the group maintain quarters on this level. We're heading up." He nods to the staircase and begins to climb, the handle of the cat carrier still held lightly from one palm. Jay follows, steadying himself against the distinctive ivy-vine handrails that curl and twist along with the steps.

As they pass the second level of the house and continue up, Jay glances at the mostly-darkened rooms. He can hear the gentle hum of a computer server somewhere out of sight.

"Here we are. Pinnacle of the temple," Blake says as they reach the top of the stairs, which opens out onto a landing bordered by built-in shelving from floor to ceiling, hundreds and hundreds of books interrupted intermittently by dark wood doors.

"Alexander, Timothy and I share the rooms up here. We're the owners," Blake explains. "Here, come on."

He opens one of the doors, leading Jay into a large and well-lit drawing room. There are more

bookshelves in here, too, along one of the walls, and the others are papered in ivory and taupe striped silk. A window seat looks out over the neighborhood, which looks so dark compared to the warm glow of the recessed lighting inside the room. The floor around the window seat is strewn with colorful pillows in every shade and print Jay can imagine. There are two armchairs upholstered in green brocade, and a glossy black and gilt day bed piled with still more books and a richly-textured, plum-colored throw rug.

In the centre of the polished wood floor a vampire is sitting in front of a large square of black velvet, the cloth laid out with cogs and springs and clockwork. The vampire is wearing a black pinstripe suit and a pale blue shirt, his blue tie unknotted and lying unbound through his unfastened collar. His feet are bare and his hair is a little longer than Blake's, darker and straight, and his features and complexion are Chinese. The expression on his features is coldly haughty and, like Blake, like almost every other vampire Jay has ever known or heard of, he is strikingly lovely to look at.

"Alexander, this is Jason. Jason, this is Alexander. He's often distracted by shiny objects," Blake explains.

Alexander nods, then looks down at the cogs arranged before him again. "I came across an old musical box. It's not working —"

"Well, yes, it's in very small pieces on the floor; few musical boxes do in such a state."

" — but I think I can fix it if I try," Alexander concludes, blithely ignoring Blake's interruption. Jay decides that yes, Blake was right — he likes Alexander already.

Off to one side of the carefully spread cloth is a haphazard heap of papers, frail letters opened many times and the water-pale colors of old photographs. The topmost paper, a carefully clipped and gently yellowing newspaper article, has a smeared red-brown thumb print across its paragraphs. There's a damp hand-towel beside the little heap, spotted with a few streaks and splotches of the same gory shade.

It's easy enough for Jay to reconstruct how the scene would have played out: Alexander, returning with his prize and sitting down with it on the floor. His hand reaching into the little black-lacquered case to pull out the contents and toss them aside. The noticed thumb print left behind, and the necessity of the hand towel to clean off any other blood traces on his hands. It wouldn't do to get the cogs dirty, after all.

Jay looks away. The keeper of these memories is almost without a doubt dead now, perhaps not even cold yet, and without them alive to give the mementos meaning and context, the things are nothing but that, things. Might as well throw them aside like garbage.

Jay decided a long time ago that he wasn't going to bother with feeling sad about dead people, or trying to respect or honor the things they cared about. The dead don't care one way or another, after all.

"Everything all right?" Alexander asks coolly, one eyebrow cocked. Jay nods, quirking his own eyebrow in return.

"Sure."

"Hm." The sound is noncommittal, like Alexander isn't sure yet that he's got the full measure of Jay, but he returns his focus to the mechanics spread in front of him. "Blake, if you're planning to let a kitten loose in here while I'm working, I hope you understand that things will end very badly for it and for you."

Blake's smile is teasing. "I'm tempted to call you on that bluff."

"Then you'd quickly discover that it's not a bluff." Alexander's voice is bored and mildly irritated, but Jay can see the ghost of a smile on his mouth.

"Kitten?" a new voice calls from another room. "Did I hear that right?"

Like Alexander and Blake, this third vampire is young and lovely. He looks as if he's in the last years of his teens, as if he's only a little older than Jay. Like all vampires, his irises are the darkest shade of red, black in all lights but the most direct. His hair is a light, curling brown, brushing uncombed against the collar of his mustard-colored linen shirt. His jeans are frayed at their hems and his green canvas sneakers look to be on the verge of total collapse, and these are the first signs of wear Jay has seen on any vampire's clothes. He feels surprised at himself that he's never noticed that before, the way vampires hide their sometimes ancient ages by dressing in brand new clothing, making what is timeless and unchanging look simply freshly made by association.

"This is Jay," Blake says as the vampire crouches in front of the carrier beside Jay's shin and reaches his fingertips through the wire grille to stroke the kitten. The kitten mewls at the attention, then bites at the vampire's fingers. "Jay, this is Timothy."

"Is that safe for her?" Jay asks.

"Yeah," the vampire — Timothy — answers, "our blood doesn't hurt animals. Is she yours?"

"She's yours, actually," Blake says. Timothy looks up in surprise, then launches himself at Blake in an enthusiastic hug. Blake staggers a step under the force of the spring, grunting in surprise, and Jay can't help but laugh a little under his breath. Seeing ever-superior Blake subjected to the small indignities of being pounced on is too much fun not to laugh at. Jay's eye catches Alexander's and Jay sees that he's not the only one enjoying the sight of unflappable Blake being flapped.

"You are my favorite," Timothy declares, still clinging to Blake. Alexander objects with a pointed clearing of his throat, and Timothy waves a hand in his general direction. "You're also my favorite. But right now Blake gets extra bonus points for the kitten."

Jay looks away, letting his gaze fall on the bookcases, on a shelf full to bursting with tattered paperbacks. When vampires form groups, the bonds are deep and strong. Jay feels uncomfortable around close families of any sort, and this one especially so.

"I think it will be best if we confine her to this level," Blake suggests, prying Timothy's hug off himself and offering over the bag full of purchases from the pet store. "You know how Mikhail and Carrillo will be about it."

Timothy gives an agreeable nod. "Sure."

"For tonight, I think she can stay in your room," adds Alexander in a pointed voice, still tinkering with the mechanism elements on his cloth. "Perhaps you could help Timothy get her settled, Jay?"

"This way, c'mon," Timothy says, picking up the cat carrier and tilting his head toward the door, gesturing for Jay to follow.

Jay likes his first impressions of Timothy, perhaps even more than Alexander's bitchy cool. He turns to Blake, wordlessly asking permission with a raised eyebrow. Blake nods, obviously rather pleased at how easily Jay is coping with meeting a household's worth of eccentric vampires.

"I'll come collect you after I've had a conversation with Alexander," Blake says. Timothy makes a soft snorting sound that, if he were human, would have been under his breath.

"Classy," he says, leading Jay into a sparsely decorated bedroom with heavy blackout curtains drawn back from a wide, tall window. There's a double-bed dressed with simple black cotton sheets, and in a recessed shelf built into one wall is a sleek stereo system. A thin laptop sits closed on the dark wood bedside table. Otherwise the room is bare, save for a series of framed handbills hanging on the wall, photocopied fliers from punk shows — mostly screamo, riot grrrl, and queercore from what Jay can see — dating from the last twenty years or so.

"What're you going to call her?" Jay asks, crouching beside Timothy as he opens the carrier door.

The kitten mewls, blinking at them with sleepy blue-grey eyes. Timothy gently lifts her and puts her on the bedspread. She pounces on his hand as he moves away, and he laughs.

"I don't know. I'm terrible at naming things," Timothy says, letting the fingers of his other hand creep up behind the kitten in a slow ambush. "I'll probably just name her after a song or a band or something."

Jay looks at the handbills on the wall again. "What, like Bikini Kill or something?" he jokes in a deadpan voice. Timothy grins delightedly.

"Yes! That's perfect. Hi, Bikini Kill. Hi," he says softly to the kitten, stroking under her chin. Her purr is like the tiny whirr of a motor.

"I was being sarcastic," Jay says.

"I know. I do live with Alexander," Timothy says drolly. "Sarcasm is not lost of me. But it's still the perfect name for a teeny tiny baby little kitten, yes it is." He kisses the newly-named Bikini Kill's head gently.

"Blake gave me this whole spiel about cats being elegant predators, not teeny tiny baby little kittens," says Jay, leaning against the wall with his arms folded. The view out this window is just as impressive as the one in the other room. Jay doesn't even want to think about how much a house this beautiful and well-situated must be worth. Vampires are greedy sensualists by their very nature, but the level of luxury is still remarkable.

"Blake says a lot of things. It's best to just stop paying attention to the individual words and try to get the general idea of his point," Timothy suggests. "Hey, you can put on music if you like. The stereo has an mp3 library with a couple of albums that aren't out yet in it. We do mixing in the studio downstairs sometimes, and so I get to hear all the rough cuts in advance." He grins, climbing off the bed and hitting a couple of buttons on the minimalist controls of the stereo. "Alexander's got a ton of ancient jazz and blues recordings on here, too, if that's more your thing. He's copying all his vinyl into digital format to preserve it. It's his other big project, when he's not taking things apart and putting them back together to see how they tick."

A surprisingly melodic song starts to play over the speakers as Timothy goes back to the bed and Bikini Kill. "You're the first person Blake's left alive in a long time, you know. More than a decade, I think."

"Oh," Jay replies, because it's not like there are many other things that're suitable responses to a statement like that. There's a knock on the door, saving Jay from having to think of something else to say.

"Speak of the devil," Timothy says with a smile. "Come in. Blake, this is Bikini Kill."

Blake comes to stand beside Jay, reaching up to rest one bare palm against the back of Jay's neck lightly. Jay shivers at the touch.

"I was just saying," Timothy goes on. "How I'm glad you didn't kill Jay."

Blake gives Jay an unreadable look for a long moment. "I believe I am, too," he says to Timothy.

# BETTE

"I want to do another set of themed movies this weekend," Rose announces on the way to school. Tommy's texting Michelle as he walks and yet somehow keeping pace and not crashing into things, which surprises Bette more than a little, as she had no idea he was capable of such coordination.

"Can we do epistolary horror?" Bette asks Rose. "You know, horror movies based on first-person accounts, like diaries and shit. *Dracula's* one, and we could watch *Cloverfield* and that Spanish one Tommy likes, the zombie one, and *Fra* —"

"If you say *Frankenstein*, I'm gonna light your hair on fire, dude, I'm not even kidding," Rose threatens in a mumble around the filter of a new cigarette, clicking the flint of her lighter a couple of times before the flame takes hold.

"It's exactly part of the theme! That's a way stronger argument than your 'important moments of the history of sunglasses' crap," Bette retorts, stealing the cigarette out of Rose's mouth and taking a drag before handing it back. She doesn't get paid from her part-time job for another week and a half, and she's barely done any shifts lately anyway, so her attempts to cultivate a serious nicotine and tobacco addiction are temporarily on hold.

"Those are going to kill you," Tommy says flatly, like the words will have an effect if he just says them over and over often enough. Bette shrugs.

"Everyone's gotta die of something. But no, seriously, we gotta watch *Frankenstein* if we're doing epistolary horror. I'm reading Mary Shelley's diaries, her real ones, and they're cool. I want some freakin' *Frankenstein*, ok?"

"What if we do vampire vegetarians?" Rose suggests as they shortcut through the mall's parking lot toward the train station. "Like, good vampires versus bad vampires. We can watch the first *Blade* movie, and *Twilight*, and *Interview with the Vampire* — for the first section with the rats — and a couple of *Buffy* episodes, and —"

"Killing animals as your food source is not vegetarianism," interrupts Bette. "It's, like, the exact opposite of vegetarian. I don't go around consuming the blood of deer with my lentils and tofu, I'm just saying."

"You totally do," says Rose. "You have blood lattes every day, don't even lie. Oh, shit, now I really want a latte."

Bette makes a gagging noise in her throat. "Only you get cravings when you're talking about gore. That's so gross."

"Seriously, I need a coffee now or I'm gonna die. Let's go to the food court and get the late train."

Bette shrugs. "Okay."

"I'm out." Tommy shakes his head, still looking down at his phone. "Michelle's waiting for me and Jay's got his phone off again, the asshole."

"See you at recess, then," Rose says, waving as they split off from Tommy's route to the station and head into the air-conditioned din of the mall instead. There are already a ton of early-morning shoppers around, browsing the stores as an excuse to escape the unseasonable warmth outside for a few hours. The coffee shop is already open and half-full, and Bette has to admit it smells pretty appetizing.

Rose gets a crazy double-white-chocolate-mocha-coconut Frappuccino with triple coffee and whipped cream, and for a second Bette's torn between lamenting that it doesn't have a cherry on top (it's totally the kind of drink that needs a cherry on top, and they should be wearing poodle skirts and sweaters. Or, well, pedal pushers and a work shirt in Rose's case, probably. Bette used to want a pair of

saddle shoes so bad when she was a kid) or getting in Rose's face and giving her a lecture about eating and drinking unhealthy crap all the time.

"This really looks like it should have a cherry on top," Rose muses, dipping her spoon into the cream.

"You know, if you cut down on this stuff, those bitches at school wouldn't be able to give you so much shit anymore. Like, call you fat and stuff."

Rose's eyes narrow. "What the fuck?"

Bette's hands flail and she talks fast, trying to explain. "I just mean. You know. If you lost a little weight they'd lay off and you'd stop feeling miserable."

"Jesus! Some fucking feminist you are!" Rose stands up, taking the stupid drink that started this stupid conversation in the first place. "Victim-blaming is bullshit. Fuck you."

"Rose, don't be —" Bette starts, but Rose has already stormed off in a huff. Bette sighs, curling up in the armchair, and sips her tea. It's too hot and burns her tongue, but she doesn't care. Time ticks over past when the school day starts, but Bette doesn't give a shit. She hasn't ditched much this year; one day won't hurt.

She gets a text from Tommy a half-hour later — she knows it's from Tommy before she checks, because Tommy's the only person who texts her with any regularity. Everyone else uses their telephone to make telephone calls, weirdly enough, but Tommy and his friends are all fiends for the written word. Which is actually kind of ironic, since none of them spells well.

*dont b a dbag. say sorry. she made me dtch w hr. shes cryng.*

Bette rolls her eyes. Rose is always such a drama queen. It's not like Bette said anything really offensive about her shitty drink, god.

*FINE*, she texts back, then tries calling Rose's phone. The call goes to voicemail, like always, because Rose never charges her phone. Bette dials their home number instead.

"H'lo?" Tommy answers.

"It's me. Is she there?"

"I can't believe I have to play go-between in a chick fight between you two. Since when do you act like teenage girls?"

"Um," Bette says, not sure what the most tactful way is to point out to Tommy that, in fact, she and Rose ARE teenage girls.

"That was a rhetorical question; you know as well as I do that neither of you ever act like it. Not normally, anyway. Now I'm in some crazy twilight zone where you're telling Rosie she's fat, like you're both ordinary shallow jerks."

"I didn't say she was fat," Bette protests. "I said —"

"I don't care," Tommy cuts her off. "Fix it. This phone's a cordless that doesn't get reception in the basement. Hang on while I get her."

Bette taps her fingers against the inside of her ankle, crossed over her knee, as she waits for Rose to pick up the phone. "I'm sorry," she says before Rose can say anything, once the scuffled sounds of the handset being picked up have come down the line. "I'm a bitch who doesn't know anything and I'm sorry, let me make it up to you?"

Rose sniffs pathetically. "Do you really think I'm fat?"

"No. I was just in a totally shitty mood and I said shitty things and I didn't mean them and I'm super, super sorry. Can I come over later?"

"I guess. I gotta go wash my face. I'm all snotty and puffy now."

"I'm sorry," Bette says again, but Rose has hung up. Bette swears at her phone and gets a dirty look

from the barista, so she leaves the coffee place and heads for the DVD store. Her conversation with Tommy gave her an idea for an apology-present.

Sure enough, they have box sets of the original *Twilight Zone* TV series for sale in the 'cult' section, which Bette thinks is sort of lame because by 'cult' what they really mean is 'nerdy' and if they stick all the good shit in 'nerdy' it means that there's only crap left under 'sci-fi' and horror' and stuff.

She pries the security tab off the inside of the box and slips the set into her bag when nobody's noticing, then gets out of there before anyone can start paying attention. Shoplifting was way easier when Bette had looked boring and normal, before her nose ring and ripped clothes and all. Now people get suspicious of her, as if she's some kind of criminal just for looking different. It's pretty fascist and way wrong anyway, because now that it's harder to steal stuff Bette hardly ever does it anymore.

She walks back home and changes out of her school clothes, then heads around to Rose and Tommy's, climbing in through the basement window. They're watching the original *Dawn of the Dead*, which means Bette seriously fucked up because that's Rose's cheer-up movie for when she's feeling really, really lousy.

Rose grins at Bette though, a loose dopey smile that tells Bette that Rose has had a heap to drink. Shit, shit, shit. Bette doesn't like drunk-Rose that much. Drunk-Rose reminds Bette too much of how Bette's mom was for the year after Bette's dad died. And it's only like eleven in the morning on a week day, what kind of lame person gets drunk then?

"I got you an apology present," Bette says, handing over the box set and forcing herself to smile.

"Oh, awesome. I've wanted this for ages," Rose says happily, waving her hand at the empty spot on the couch beside her. "Come sit down. Tommy, is there any vodka left?"

Tommy gives Bette a brief look. "No," he tells Rose. Tommy hates it when Rose gets super-drunk as much as Bette does.

Bette sits on the couch between them, leaning her cheek against Rose's shoulder and slipping an arm around her waist. The alcohol smell is easy to ignore and Bette likes the way Rose feels against her, warm and solid and soft.

# JAY

The hangover is even worse this time. All it takes is the walk from Blake's bed to the ensuite's sink to leave Jay clutching at the edges of the marble basin, his back clammy with sickly sweat. The fabric of his shirt clings uncomfortably to his skin. Jay slowly unbuttons the shirt and eases it off his shoulders and holy shit, he aches. His neck and shoulders and arms feel like they've been hit repeatedly with small, highly localized trucks.

He looks up to check the extent of his bruising in the mirror, then starts in surprise as he sees the reflection of Blake standing in the doorway.

"Fuck! I take back all the bitchy cracks I made when you were comparing yourself to Bikini Kill last night. You really are a goddamn cat, moving around silently like that. Or maybe a ninja."

Blake grins, unmoving. "Your heart-rate goes up when you're startled."

Jay grimaces, turning on the tap. "You have a one-track mind. And you show up in mirrors."

"I don't think the two facts are related." Blake steps in close behind Jay, reaching over to shut the water off. "Let me. I'll help."

Blake guides Jay toward the shower, which is more than large enough to accommodate both of them. All the proportions in Blake's house verge on the ridiculous; extravagance for extravagance's sake.

"I took more than I meant to again, when I drank from you last night. You're right; I'm often single-minded in situations such as this." Blake sheds his own clothing and busies himself with finding the perfect temperature for the water as Jay undresses with the minimum of movement possible.

"I didn't stop you," Jay points out pragmatically, breathing through a wash of dizziness as he raises his head. "So long as you don't tell me how many of the people you've been, uh, single-minded about ended up dead in a landfill after you got away from yourself, it's fine."

Blake tilts his head to one side, inspecting Jay with a bemused expression as the warmth of the water begins to fog the room. Blake's palm is cool and welcoming when he reaches up to touch Jay's cheek lightly, like new sheets on a sick bed, smooth and soft on Jay's flushed skin.

"You're a curious boy, Jay."

Jay doesn't know how to answer that, so he lets Blake guide him under the spray of the shower. The water soothes the worst of the soreness across his neck and shoulders and Jay sighs happily, content to stand there with his eyes shut as Blake works shampoo through Jay's hair. It smells subtly pleasant and unobtrusive, like Blake's cologne. Under the shower those scents recede, though, because now it's like Jay can tell between artificial smells and the smell of Blake, and ignore the ugly chemical ones completely, concentrating instead on the sharp, alluring smell of Blake's skin, so close to Jay as Blake massages Jay's temples with gentle fingertips.

He opens his mouth to speak, and opens his eyes to look at Blake, and what Jay means to say is 'I'm dizzy' or maybe 'that feels nice' or maybe even something completely awkward and stupid like 'I like the way you smell.'

But what comes out in a whisper is "I feel so thirsty."

As soon as the words are in the air Jay realizes how wrenchingly, overwhelmingly true they are. He's thirsty like he's never been thirsty before, not even that time he and Michelle and Tommy went to a club and took ecstasy and drank so much water they puked. That was just ordinary thirst turned up crazy, but this is a whole different thing. Jay feels like he might start crying if he doesn't stop feeling like this soon. He feels so empty. So hollow.



"I'm not surprised," Blake replies, pushing wet hair away from Jay's eyes and giving him another of those long, closed-off looks, like Jay's a Magic Eye picture or something like that.

The thought makes Jay giggle and sway woozily. He reaches out one hand to rest against the tiled wall of the shower but misjudges the distance and loses his balance. Blake steadies him, catching Jay in a close half-hug to keep him standing. Blake reaches his free hand, the one not holding Jay, up to move his own hair away from his own throat. Blake's touch is always so careful that it's only now that Jay notices the cruel, predatory points on the nail of each finger.

Jay rests his forehead against Blake's shoulder. The water is still warm and constant on their skin. "I don't want to become a vampire," Jay manages to murmur but oh, it's a lie, he doesn't care, he doesn't care about anything except not being hollow anymore, not feeling this dark lost place inside him yawn wider and wider.

"You won't," Blake assures him, something rueful in the tone. "That's not what makes a vampire. It will help you feel better."

And then Blake presses his fingers to his neck and tears the skin, that chill pale perfect skin, and the blood wells up and runs in rivulets, mingling with the water still falling, falling on the pair of them, and the blood dilutes as it travels down over the curve of Blake's shoulder, paling to pink in the steady drum of water. Jay's so mesmerized by the sight that he stares at it, transfixed, until Blake gives the back of his head a little push and guides his mouth down to the wound.

Then Jay's swallowing, gulping, sobbing, clinging to Blake as close as he can because the blood is metallic and cold and terrible in his mouth, sliding down his throat, and it's not just the hollow thirsty parts of him that are filling up, it's all of him, every small sad space in his dreams and every hairline crack in his heart and all of it, all of it, like nothing will ever be wrong ever again if he can just stay like this and never have to move away from this moment and the feel of Blake against him, surrounding him, holding him as he shakes apart.

After, Blake wraps him in a white Egyptian cotton robe that begins to pink from the drops of bloodied water almost immediately, but when Jay mentions this Blake waves a hand and dismisses the concern.

Blake leads Jay back to the bed and Jay goes willingly, happy to let Blake curl against him and hold him as he breathes. He still feels dizzy and sick and sore, but the sweet, humming feeling under his skin, like he's finally alive and safe, hasn't gone either.

"Does it always feel like that?" Jay asks softly, almost ashamed, glad that Blake's spooned behind him and there's no eye contact to go along with the question.

"Not always," Blake answers, after a pause so long Jay wasn't sure if he was going to answer at all. "Some, yes."

"Some people, you mean."

"Yes," Blake confirms.

Jay is really, really glad he doesn't have to look at Blake while they're having this conversation. It's naked and intimate in a way even sharing the shower wasn't.

"Is my blood... does it feel like that? For you?" Jay asks. He thinks he might be blushing. He wonders if Blake can tell.

Blake is quiet for another long pause.

"Yes," he answers.

"You didn't... you've never reacted like I did. I know you say you keep taking more than you mean to, but I figure that's just a really lame excuse for you being greedy. You didn't go into a ridiculous emotional seizure like me."

Blake laughs softly against the nape of Jay's neck, holding him tighter. "I'm a lot older than you. I'm more used to how it feels."

Jay snickers, quiet and wicked. "Yeah, you're a cradle robber. You should change your name to Humbert Humbert. Blake Blake."

"Better a cradle robber than a grave robber, which is what you are," Blake retorts. Jay makes a strangled, outraged sound.

"That is so foul. You're disgusting." Jay rolls over to his other side, so they're lying face to face. For a second his courage falters, but he figures it's pretty stupid to get nervous after everything that's already happened, so he leans in and plants a quick, wet kiss on Blake's mouth.

"I like you. Let's date," Jay says, curling in closer and letting himself drift into sleep without waiting for Blake's reply.

# BETTE

Ever since they first started school, Rose has been laboring under the misapprehension that class bells are optional. That's Bette's latest theory, anyway. They've tried alarm clocks and a big glass of water before bed and less blankets and more blankets and every other possible thing they can think of, but Rose is still never, ever ready for school when Better gets to her and Tommy's house in the morning.

Tommy's alone in the kitchen, eating a piece of cinnamon toast with one hand and working a blender with the other.

"She's awake, at least?" Bette asks hopefully, flopping down in one of the chairs around the table and stealing the last mouthful of someone's abandoned coffee.

"I'll be up in a second!" Rose hollers from the basement. "Tommy, is my book bag up there?"

"Yeah," Tommy yells back. "Is Mom's camera still down there? Can you bring it up?"

Tommy pours the DayGlo pink contents of the blender into a glass. "Raspberry and honey smoothie. Want some?"

The unfilled cavities in Bette's teeth scream at the thought. "No, god. How do you not die of sweet overdose?"

Tommy shrugs and joins her at the table. "Never been a problem."

"What d'you want the camera for? I thought you bought some amazing shit-hot webcam thing after Christmas. I don't know why you bothered, 'cause you and your friends are all too cool for conveying emotions through facial muscles."

Tommy raises one eyebrow and pushes his glasses up his nose. His phone makes a muffled message chime from his pocket, and he pulls it out as he replies to Bette.

"I wanna see if those condom wrappers are still there in the garden next to the train station this morning. They were there yesterday and I thought it would make a neat picture for the yearbook. The search for connection and intimacy in suburbia and how fleeting and anonymous and sad it is."

"Or how modern teenagers have nothing better to do than photograph grody old condoms, and how sad that is," Bette offers. "That's disgusting."

Tommy shrugs again, still looking down at his phone. "Michelle says the parts for the play got put up."

"They're up?" Rose comes up the stairs, tie hanging unknotted around her collar and her hair its habitual bed-hair shape. "Did I get anything? Am I a pirate? I wanna be a pirate."

"She doesn't say," Tommy answers. "She's Tigerlily, though. That's the Indian Princess, right?"

"Cool." Rose pours herself a glass of juice. "Do I have time to make toast, Bette?"

"Not if you wanna avoid detention."

Rose grimaces. "Damn. Okay, let's go."

Tommy's phone bleeps again as they leave the house, and he laughs out loud at the message. "Holy shit! Rosie, you're Peter Pan."

Rose's eyes go wide and she takes the cigarette she was lighting back out of her mouth. "For real? Someone really dropped the ball on that one."

Bette punches her hard on the arm. "Shut the fuck up. There are enough douchebags in the world to pull you down without you doing it yourself. You'll be great."

Rose makes a face. "Whatever. It's just a school play."

They stop near the train station so Tommy can take pictures of the litter on the nature strip.

"You know that film developing costs like a million dollars these days, right?" Bette asks, digging

around in her bag for her sunglasses. She loves the warm weather but hates how bright the sunshine in the morning gets. Her sunglasses are this amazing pair of mirrored aviators she stole from a gas station. They make her look like a total asshole and she loves them.

"I'll just do it in the dark room at school. Yearbook, remember?"

"You're seriously going to... you can't submit a picture of a bunch of condom trash to the yearbook, Tommy."

He looks up from the viewfinder and gives her a puzzled glance. "Why not?"

"Schools have this whole... thing. I don't know." Bette frowns. "You just can't."

Rose makes a noise of agreement. "Yeah, they like to pretend that we don't know anything about gnarly shit, like drugs and death and sex and stuff. I mean, we've still got the daylight rule in effect. That shit is messed up."

The daylight rule is the dumbest rule Bette has ever known about, and Bette tends to think that almost all rules are dumb just on principle. The daylight rule says that daylight must be visible between male and female students at all times. No making out, no hugging. Not even any standing too close.

"If the whole school went gay, do you think the teachers would try to daylight rule them?" Bette muses aloud as they start walking again.

"Queen Victoria didn't believe in dykes, you know," Rose says, like it's the obvious response to Bette's question. "She didn't see how they'd be able to have sex. So it wasn't illegal to be a gay girl then. Just guys had problems with the law."

"Jack the Ripper was in Victorian London, right?" Tommy asks. Rose nods.

"Yeah. That guy was seriously, seriously fucked up. He cut those women's eyes and uteruses out."

"Can we not talk about sick shit all the time?" Bette snaps, feeling grossed out. She's got a pretty strong stomach, most of the time — she loves horror movies about gory stuff, anyway — but for some reason the Jack the Ripper story always sends shivers of disgust and fear through her. Those women had been prostitutes, selling their bodies just to stay alive and fed. Bette feels like there's something horrifying and sad about someone taking those lives and then violating their bodies as well, like they didn't even get to keep one or the other as their own.

When they get to school they check the Peter Pan list and sure enough Rose's name is there on the top line beside the title role. Jenna Chamberlain got Wendy, which kinda takes the shine off Rose's victory since she'll have to hang around with Queen Bitch.

"I'm sure I got Tigerlily because everyone else who tried out is white," Michelle remarks, joining them beside the list. "Which is funny, in a shitty way."

"I can't believe I got Peter Pan. Jenna Chamberlain's gonna cut my head off with an axe when she finds out."

"She can try," Bette growls. She knows that she deserves what she gets from bullies, at least some of the time, because she's a little shit, but it's not fair the way they pick on Rose just for being weird and awkward.

The school bell rings, and Rose pats Bette on the shoulder. "There, see? We got here just fine after all, didn't we?"

# JAY

Jay says goodbyes to Blake and Timothy and Alexander and goes back to his own apartment when he wakes again. The room is airless and overwarm from having all the windows closed. He shoves the panes open and listens to the traffic outside, resting his exhausted forehead against the glass. He'll need to take a load of laundry to the machines in the basement soon, which means he needs to find a bunch of quarters. The kitchenette in the corner needs replenishment, but Jay loathes grocery shopping and, given the choice, would rather go hungry for a few days in the name of procrastinating the task.

He opens and turns on his laptop, hoping that he remembered to pay the internet bill the last time it showed up. He's pretty shitty at bills in general. All in all, Jay's living-alone skills aren't any better than any other teenage boy's, except that unlike most other kids his age he actually has to rely on them to get through the day.

The internet loads up without error, though, which is a welcome surprise. Jay hunts around in his dirty laundry until he finds the card he got at the dinner party, and types in the address printed on it.

Jenna's profile page is a variety of shades of hot pink, with that twitchy animation effect on the background to look like it's sparkling, and a photo of her wearing a whole hell of a lot of eyeliner and lipstick even pinker and glossier than the rest of the page. She looks cute in the picture, like she's really enjoying herself and loves looking so pretty and hot.

Jay sends her a message, blowing on the dusty lens of the webcam built into the upper edge of his laptop screen while he waits to see if she's around to reply. She is, and does, and soon she's there in a window in his browser, sitting at her computer in a Hello Kitty camisole with most of her makeup off and her hair plaited into a thick braid behind her right ear.

"Hey, you," she says, smiling and giving her own webcam a little wave. Jay's internet connection takes a second to buffer the movement and so it looks slow and jerky, like she's a puppet being made to dance.

"Hi." He waves back. "How're you?"

She makes a face. "My dad's getting on me and Ashley's case about something, as usual. I think it's grades this time. Like he actually gives a shit how we do in school. He only cares where we're going at all because the lady who runs his company went there too and he thinks it'll give him suck-up points."

"That sucks," Jay agrees. Jenna shrugs one shoulder, which makes the fabric of her camisole shift and shimmer. Her shoulders are very thin, the ghosts of bones visible in the angular shape of her skin. Around her neck is a thin gold chain with a small locket hanging from it. The locket glitters with tiny, star-like diamonds, set around a miniature watch face. The second hand of the watch is unmoving, leaving the time frozen at ten minutes to two.

"Whatever, it's parents. I did a shoe ad that should be out in a couple of months. For a magazine. I got to keep the shoes, too. They're super-cute. So that was okay. They dressed me up like Marie Antoinette and made me sit in this giant mountain of, like, toy bunny rabbits. The sneakers are cool. They're blue and patent leather, but cut like — let me get 'em, I'll show you."

Jenna gets up — her boy-leg shorts match her camisole, and her legs are as slim and smooth as her arms and throat and face — and rummages around in a white chest of draws visible near the side of the image frame. After a second she comes back, holding up one of the shoes for Jay to see.

"Super-cute," he agrees. She drops the shoe on the floor and raises her eyebrows.

"Are you mocking me? Because I can crush you like a bug, you know."

Jay smiles. "No mocking, I swear. I mean that sincerely. Those are the absolute definition of a super-cute shoe. Look 'super-cute' up online and they'll be the first hit."

Jenna gives a long sigh through her nostrils and shakes her head. "You're a bitch, Jason."

"I guess like attracts like," Jay counters, leaving his voice in the flat tone it naturally tends to. Jenna grins wolfishly.

"Yeah, that's me. Maybe that's what I should put down on my career day forms. I want to be a professional bitch when I leave school."

"Well, you already are a model," Jay points out. Jenna shakes her head dismissively.

"You'd be surprised. Lots of girls I meet at shoots are all —" Jenna makes her voice sound hollow and perky and more than a little manic. "Rainbows! Candy! And unicorns! And oh, isn't this fun! It's completely nauseating. Like, it's a fucking job, guys, get over it. We don't have sugar daddies and per diem allowances yet, quit acting like you're a socialite already."

"You're very deep. Layered, even," Jay replies. Jenna flips him off, then gives him what is obviously her best and well-practiced scowl.

"Jerk." She drops the glare as quickly as she assumed it. "So what about you? What's your idea of fun, when you're not enjoying my goodies in hotel cloakrooms?"

"Well, right now I'm trying to think of how to tell you that hearing you refer to your 'goodies' has temporarily murdered what heterosexuality I used to have," Jay answers in monotone. Jenna flips him off again. "I don't know, I do normal stuff. I hang out with Michelle and Tommy, I see bands, I meet people. I'm not all complicated and mysterious like you."

Jenna gives another giant sigh, eyes narrowing and her voice coming out snappish. "Christ, you sound like my dad. Who the fuck cares if I'm shallow? I —"

"Hey, hey, it was just teasing, I —" Jay assures her. "Seriously. I think you're cool. I'm the one who messaged you, remember?"

Jenna shakes her head. "I'm just sick of hearing it, that's all. I'm seventeen and I'm hot and I model shoes and I'm rich. I don't have some secret rebellion in my heart and I'm not going to wake up tomorrow all book-wormy and save-the-environment. I like soda and pizza and romantic comedies, and if you've got a problem with any of that then I will destroy you piece by piece, because people like me might be the butt of a thousand jokes but in the end we're the ones who rule the world, okay? We're the ones who set the trends that people scrabble to imitate or to rebel against. So don't give me shit for who I am, because who I am is the goddamn queen of the world, got it?"

Jay thinks he might just be in love. "Marry me?"

Jenna laughs a little, her shoulders relaxing from their confrontational posture. "You couldn't afford me, not on what you make serving canapés. Oh! That reminds me. Olivia Martram said she saw you and some guy making out at a bus shelter after the party was over. Is she for real?"

"Yeah," Jay nods, relieved that it had looked like making out. Blake's probably had a lot of practice in making people see what he wants them to see.

"Because, like, she's a total bitch and sometimes she makes stuff up just to piss me off," Jenna goes on. "So I wasn't sure if it was true or not. I think she thinks that I'm, like, crushing on you or something, which ha, no, I don't do crushes or dating or anything pathetic and high school like that. So I think she thought I'd be jealous if you got with someone else after we got together in that cloakroom. Which I'm not, for the record. Jealous, I mean."

"You're destroying my ego," Jay retorts flatly. "Can't you be at least a little jealous?"

Jenna's smile is sharp as a shark's. "Destroying egos is what I do best, young one."

Jay is almost sure that he's in love.

# BETTE

Tommy and Michelle go off to be young and in love and totally gross together after school, so Bette and Rose grab a stack of comics and books and head for the parklands just over the overpass from their neighborhood. They've been going there since they were kids, when their parents would let them out without an adult so long as they stuck together and didn't go too far away.

The trees are gnarled and scrubby, scarred with old love-hearts and initials from the other visitors who spend time in the thick green shade. The earth is soft to lie on but usually at least a little damp, so Rose and Bette bring old towels to lie on while they read. The light that comes through the overhang of tenaciously lively leaves overhead — in past years, they'd begun to yellow and even fall by now — is dappled and soft. It's a comfortable, sleepy sort of afternoon around them, and the traffic under the overpass sounds a long, long way away.

In theory, Rose is re-reading *Plastic Jesus* by Poppy Z. Brite yet again, but she keeps getting distracted by her sketchbook and pen, and then that makes Bette distracted from her own reading — a battered copy of *Princess Ai*, the manga about Courtney Love being an angel from outer space, which Bette has read a million times — by Rose's drawings, because Bette loves few things in her life as much as she loves to watch Rose draw.

Today Rose is drawing faces, sharp-eyed girls and floppy-haired boys, the lines falling in a way that makes the sketches look vaguely like they're from the 1960s. Bette doesn't know exactly how Rose makes the pictures look like that, only that it looks amazing.

A fat droplet of water splats down onto the paper, then another. Thunder rumbles, and Bette and Rose both realize at the same second that the gentle dappled light has turned dim and yellow-gray.

"Whoops!" Bette says with a grin, scooping their stuff up in the towels and making a run back towards the road. She can hear Rose running behind her, but as they reach the place where the trees begin to thin and there's more trash than grass on the pebbled ground, there's a scuffle and a muffled yelp behind Bette, and then a hissing noise that makes Bette's face and hands go cold in an instant bolt of primal dread.

She drops the towels and turns, because even though her brain's going RUN, RUN, RUN, she can't leave Rose in the clutches of whatever's got her.

The thing is, Bette is actually pretty good in a crisis. She stumbles through ordinary life kind of badly, sometimes, skipping too much school and not getting enough sleep and disappointing her mom all the time, but when really seriously bad shit happens she copes well. Sometimes she thinks it's because of how she had to look after herself so much of the time while her dad was really ill and her mom was too distracted by that to really be a mom. When things are down to emergency power, Bette knows how to keep the systems running.

So when she turns to face the thing that's grabbed Rose, and her eyes take in the white-haired teenage boy with blood all around his mouth, dressed in ripped and filthy clothes, it only takes her a second to go 'okay, that's a vampire' before she's grabbing Rose's arms and pulling her away from the creature. She'll let herself freak out later, after they've survived, but there isn't time for surprise now.

The rain's started to fall in earnest on them as Rose screams, and at first Bette thinks it's just from fear but then she sees the straight razor in the vampire's pale dirt-caked hand and the thin red line welling up on Rose's throat.

"Keep your hand on it!" Bette says to Rose. Rose's eyes are wide and her skin is shock-white but she nods, clapping a palm over the cut. The vampire snarls at Bette and lashes out at her neck with the razor, which close-up Bette can see is spotted with black and brown stains of old blood along its steel

blade and ivory handle.

Acting on reflex, Bette raises her arms to shield her face and neck, and when the razor cuts into her palm the only thing she lets herself think is that at least the cut isn't too deep; it won't stop her being able to play musical instruments.

In the few seconds the whole fight has taken, other vampires have appeared around them, some white-haired and some with more natural shades, all feral-eyed and terrifying and stinking of garbage and dried gore.

Two have grabbed Rose again, wrenching her out of Bette's grip, and another has pounced on Bette's back and she stumbles, falling to her knees as she feels the snap of teeth closing on her neck.

Then there's more noise, all around, thin high screams that sound more like they come from reptiles than from anything that was ever human. The vampire on Bette's back shoves her down into the ground and turns, skeleton-thin body in a fighting stance.

Bette rolls onto her back and looks up, clutching at the cut on her palm with her other hand and trying not to hyperventilate. A short, compact figure dressed in ripped black and grey camouflage shorts with fishnet stockings underneath, heavy boots, and a black hoodie punches the vampire with a sturdy uppercut, sending it stumbling, then stabs it with what looks like a miniature cattle prod. The gore-stink turns to a burnt-rotten-meat stink as the vampire shudders and falls face-down onto the grass beside Bette. It doesn't move again.

Bette doesn't even get a chance to get over her 'whoa, holy shit!' moment before Lily Green's turning and yelling "Will! First aid over here!" and running after another vampire.

"Did I just get attacked by a vampire? An honest-to-shit vampire?" Bette splutters as Will Cooper crouches beside her and takes hold of her wrist.

"Try to stay calm," he tells her, easing her arm down and exposing the slice on the underside of her palm. "It's okay. The blood will stop soon. No, don't look at your hand. It looks like a lot but it's not, seriously. You're going to be fine. You need a couple of stitches but it's nothing serious."

Bette feels woozy, but she's pretty sure that's got more to do with the world going bugfuck nuts than it does blood loss. As he talks, Will pulls her to her feet and leads her through the trees to a parked car, its doors open.

"Here, you sit here and wait, and we'll go get you stitched up soon. Keep pressure on your arm with your other — yeah, like that."

"Rose is still back there, she —"

"Lily and Anna'll bring her back with them," Will assures her. Bette never would have pegged him for being so good at staying chill in a crisis.

Then again, it's not like she's spent a lot of time wondering which local bands are secretly vampire hunters, either.

Bette sits and tries to breathe, and she feels like she's going to cry but instead she just swallows and shivers and lets Will wrap a bandage around the slice in her skin. She doesn't realize that she's closed her eyes until she hears more people approaching and has to open them again to look.

Rose is unmoving, an arm draped over each of Lily and Anna's shoulders as the two of them walk to the car and carry her between them.

"She just fainted, honey, it's okay," Anna says, and in any other circumstances Bette would rankle at the condescending note in her tone. As it is, she just nods dumbly as they move to climb into the car with her.

"Got them all," Lily is saying to Will. "Ten Scrabblers. I haven't seen them in this neighborhood before. If Russ hadn't suggested we widen the sweep —"



"But he did," Will placates quietly. "Don't borrow trouble."

Lily snorts, but climbs into the front seat of the car without saying anything else.

As they drive off, Bette's hand is stinging like fire and her throat is a second hot ache, duller and blunter and bigger than her hand and just as painful. Rose is in the middle seat, propped up by Bette and Anna on either side of her, her head lolling back against the headrest, eyes white-slitted and unfluttering. Half the middle seat's unclipped seatbelt lies loose on Rose's thigh, where Anna let it fall like it just being there will do Rose some good in a crash.

The razor cut on Rose's throat is shallow, a pink line beading with darker red, only one corner of the cut deep enough to really bleed. The blood there is little more than a trickle, smeared by the fight and swept into a few miniscule brush-strokes of gore by the fall of Rose's loose hair against it.

Bette stares at the blood and wonder what it will taste like on her tongue, if it will seem warm, if it will flow faster if she sucks...

"We've got a bite!" Bette hears Anna say sharply, as hands try to force her head up from where she was bending towards Rose's neck. Bette bares her teeth and hisses, and Lily's hand strikes hard against her cheek, knocking her back against the door as the car speeds on.

Bette blinks in surprise at Lily, who's leaning into the back through the space between the driver and passenger seats in the front.

"Don't do that," Lily says, her voice firm but not angry.

"I was just —" Bette starts, and then she looks at Rose again. "I was about to drink her blood. Fuck."

"It's all right," Will says, cutting her off before she can become hysteric, his eyes still on the road as he drives. "You're not turning into one of them. You've been infected by a parasite that gets stronger if it's fed blood, but you aren't a vampire. Try to breathe and stay calm, we'll be there soon."

"You didn't say you were bitten." Anna sounds accusatory. Bette pulls the collar of her T-shirt aside obligingly.

"I didn't think it broke the skin. Sorry for having bigger fucking things on my mind," mutters Bette, trying to slow her breathing down but mostly failing at the attempt because she just had to be stopped from drinking Rose's blood and so she's now feeling rather freaked out as a result.

"It's shallow. You'll be okay in a week," decides Anna, inspecting the marks. "We'll give you something to help with the cravings when we get back to the warehouse. Sit still and don't bite anything for ten minutes, okay?"

"Okay." Bette makes herself nod. "Is this, like, a common thing? Are all the bands around here secretly monster killers?"

Anna's voice is matter-of-fact and resigned. "No. There's only us."

Nobody says anything after that until they arrive at a nondescript warehouse out in one of the industrial suburbs. The windows are boarded over and there's a scatter of graffiti on the worn brick walls, and it looks like a perfectly ordinary, slightly run-down storage space from the outside.

Bette shakes Rose's shoulder as the others climb out of the car and head for the tall double doors. "C'mon, sleepy, I'm not going through all this trauma on my own, wake up."

Rose blinks, eyes scrunching closed for a few seconds before she gives up and opens them. "Bette? What happened?"

"I got bitten by a vampire. Remember the Stars saved us. We're at, like, their secret vampire hunting lair or whatever now. Come on."

Rose gives her a long, groggy, disbelieving look, then reaches up to touch her own throat, looking down at the blood smear her fingers come away coated with.

"Did I get bitten, too?"

Bette shakes her head. "One of them had a razor, and you got cut a little bit. You fainted, you sissy."

"Oh." Rose frowns at the blood on her fingers, looking thoughtful. "Tommy said that was gonna happen if I kept skipping meals all the time."

Bette stares at her for a few seconds, then punches her hard on the shoulder. "You jerk! Is this because of that stupid thing with your stupid coffee drink? We nearly got eaten by vampires because you're crash dieting. I am seriously going to smack you."

"Ow." Rose rubs her shoulder, glaring. "Bitch."

"Fuckhead."

"Care to join us, ladies?" Lily asks, standing in the open doorframe of the warehouse. "Or are you going to sit out here and pull each other's pigtails all evening?"

The inside of the warehouse is clean and spare and shadowed, set up into loosely defined areas — a semicircle of mismatched arm chairs and sofas around a low table make up a living room section, with an ancient-looking television against the wall. There's a kitchen area with a fridge and an oven in another corner, around a large industrial sink, with a long table scattered with herbs and bottles and other stuff along the wall nearby. There're two more long tables, one set up like a makeshift desk for notes and reference books and the other piled high with stray electronic parts, and then a dojo-style sparring area with mats on the floor and a couple of battered-looking punching bags suspended from the bare rafters high above.

Rose sits down in one of the armchairs, near where Will and Russ are sitting. Russ is dressing a scrape on Will's forearm, the first aid kit open on the cushion beside him. Lily sits down too, and motions for Bette to join them. There's no sign of Anna.

"She's gone for a jog. Work off the extra energy," Lily explains before Bette can ask. "She always gets wound up after a fight. Me, I could sleep for a week."

Will turns his wrist over to check his watch, which makes Russ cluck his tongue in frustration and turn it back the other way so he can finish putting on the dressing. "You don't have time for a week," Will tells Lily. "But you could get two hours or so before we're due at the club."

"Excellent." Lily grins. "You'd think sitting at a desk doing data entry all day wouldn't be exhausting, and yet."

"I'll do her neck and then your hand, okay?" Russ says to Bette, nodding at the small cut still bleeding a little on Rose's throat. "Will said you'd probably need stitches?"

Bette nods helplessly, willing to let other people decide all that stuff for the time being. "Yeah, I guess."

"She's bitten, too," Lily tells him. "Do we have any good tea left?"

"A little. I'll put the kettle on after. Will you be okay with waiting?"

This question, too, is directed at Bette, and she wants to say no, no way. She feels thirstier than she has ever felt in her entire damn life. But she just nods again. "I guess," she repeats. "Yeah."

"What're your names?" Will asks them.

"Bette," says Bette.

"Rose. I think you know my brother Tommy. He hangs out with Jason and Michelle?" Rose says. She still sounds pretty spacey, and Bette almost feels bad for punching her. Not really, though, because skipping meals is totally stupid and Bette's still kind of mad at Rose for that.

"Yeah, yeah, I know Tommy," Lily says, mouth quirking wickedly. "Nice kid."

Russ gives a cough which sounds suspiciously like the word 'jailbait' and Bette, despite everything,

can't help giggling. Rose smiles too.

"The fact you've been bitten means Will is probably going to try to poke and prod you as much as you'll let him," Lily warns Bette. "If he touches you in your bathing suit area, don't be afraid to stick him with a switchblade, all right?"

Will punches her in the shoulder, the gesture a perfect match for Bette's reprimand against Rose in the car. "Shut up, Lil, you're such a creep."

Lily gives him a giant cheesy smile and smacks a noisy kiss on his cheek before getting up. "You know you love it. I'm going to go sleep. Bette, Rose, it was good to meet you, glad you're not dead, see you around." She pulls her shirt off before she's left the room, treating them all to the sight of her golden-brown, intermittently scarred back, and the soft dent her waistband makes in the curve of her hips.

Russ rolls his eyes, moving from beside Will to over where Rose is sitting, swabbing at her cut carefully with a cotton ball dipped in antiseptic. Bette forces herself not to stare at the blot of blood on the white.

Will clears his throat. "She's right. There are some tests I'd like to do on you. Did you know that psychologists call feral children the 'forbidden experiment?' Because it would be unethical and inhumane to deliberately create the conditions you need for that kind of subject, but when one comes along because of circumstances beyond your control... it's a wonderful opportunity to learn. You're sort of the vampire equivalent right now. I would never, ever want someone to be bitten just so I could run tests, but —"

"But since I was bitten, it's the perfect chance for tests. I got it," Bette finishes his sentence with a nod. "What are they?"

"I've been working on making a mix of plant and herbal ingredients, fruits mostly, that help hold off the cravings. That way, the infection doesn't get any stronger, but you don't walk around feeling like you're dying, either. Otherwise we'll just suggest you eat a small portion of black pudding each day, reducing the amount throughout the week until —"

Bette makes a grabby-hands gesture with her fingers, curling them greedily. "No way. I'm a vegetarian. Black pudding is a scab disguised as food. Gimme your experiments, please. I will so totally be your test rabbit for this. Your own personal feral child."

"I warn you, some of the mixes have been pretty foul-tasting. Last time Russ had to try one, he told me it was more disgusting than those don't-bite-your-nails varnishes."

Bette shakes her head, glad to be back on topics she already knows her feelings on. "I don't even care. It's better than blood. I feel sick at myself for wanting that."

"Okay, great." Will smiles. "I'm working off the fact that we know vampires are capable of ingesting tea and red wine, and possibly other liquids we haven't got photographic evidence for."

"Tannins," Bette says promptly, then ducks her head. "Sorry. Science geek."

"You are? That's excellent. You can help me solve the mystery, as well as being my lab monkey." Will's smile turns into a grin. He has an awkward, reserved charm that's as different to Lily's brassy charisma as a person can be. "So, tannins, right. I've tried mixes with cranberries, chokeberries, every kind of tea you can think of, black currants, red wines, white wines, sour cherries... I've wondered for a while what particular properties make something useful as a blood substitute for vampires."

"Maybe it's not tannins... maybe proanthocyanidin? That strengthens blood vessels." Bette wonders out loud. "And helps protect skin from sun damage. Sounds like something vampires would try to include in their diets. Have you tried apples?"

Will nods. "That's what I was thinking. But I haven't tried apples yet, because the results don't

seem to show any trends, any sign that it actually is proanthocyanidin. Or, if it is, that's not the only element we need, if we want to make something that removes the need for blood completely."

Bette has a light-bulb-over-her-head moment. "I read this article online a while back about allicin. You know, in garlic? And it was saying that allicin activates perivascular sensory nerve endings. Relaxed blood vessels means better blood flow. We can try stuff around that idea, maybe? And garlic's in so many vampire myths... maybe there's a reason for that, one that'll help us."

"Fantastic. That's a brilliant idea."

"What about holy water?" Rose asks, head tilted to one side as Russ tapes butterfly bandages over the cut to keep it closed. "That's in a lot of stories too. Does it work?"

Will makes a face. "Anna wipes her weapons down with it before hunts. I don't believe it works at all, but she says she notices a difference. She uses a mixture of Sikh amrit, Buddhist dutsi, and Islamic zamzam, as well as Christian holy water. She says vampires draw life from blood, why can't we from water? Some hunters I've heard of even clean bites with it."

"I prefer to use things that actually work, personally," Russ puts in dryly.

"I feel like it's a disservice to all the people who've been killed by these monsters to treat the whole thing like it's some mystical magical game," Will goes on. "Rather than a real danger in need of real weapons and medicines."

"Got it." Bette nods. "This isn't a game."

# JAY

It takes longer for Jenna to answer Jay's second chat request, a few hours after they finish their first conversation, and he's about to shut his computer and go find something else to do when his speakers sound the reply tone. He switches on his webcam and settles back in his slightly squeaky second-hand swivel chair, waving hello at her.

She's dressed in the same outfit she was wearing at the party, and Jay can't help but remember the sounds the fabric made as he touched it while they kissed. He's starting to think that he's incapable of having any friendships whatsoever that aren't at least partially colored by his endless and exasperating hormones.

Jenna looks grumpy as she waves back, raising her other hand to her mouth and taking a bite of a carrot stick with a frown.

"Wow, you look cheerful."

"I hate carrot sticks," she answers, sighing. "We're going to another stupid party tonight because Mom wants to impress another stupid client. But it's at the Marina, which means the menu's going to be full of shellfish, which is total bullshit because it's not like it's any harder or easier for caterers to get seafood dishes for events on the waterfront, is it? You don't only get steak sandwiches when you're near cow farms or whatever. It's not even the right kind of water! And anyway, I'm allergic to shellfish, so." She brandishes the carrot at the screen. "I gotta eat before we go."

"So you chose a food you have a particular hatred for. You're even smarter than you look."

Jenna rolls her eyes and pops the last of the carrot stick into her mouth. "You're such an asshole."

"I hear you got the lead in the school musical. Congrats."

Jenna shrugs, but Jay thinks she might be trying to hold a smile in. "It's not really the lead. That stupid bitch sister of your friend Tommy got Peter Pan. I'm just Wendy. That's going to look pretty pathetic in all my unauthorized biographies, isn't it? That I could only get second place in the school play?"

"I'm not sure it's exactly like that," Jay says, but since he sort of sees her point he doesn't push the issue. "Tommy's sister is okay. I don't really know her, but I don't think she's a bitch. Just kind of weird."

Jenna makes a face. "More like a psycho freak. Her and that Bette girl are totally going to grow up to be serial killers, I bet you a thousand bucks."

"Sounds like they're the ones who're gonna get the unauthorized autobiographies, then," Jay suggests. "Why are you intending to have those written about you, again?"

Jenna shrugs. "I dunno, the usual. I'll do movies and have a perfume and whatever. Singing's the one I really want to do. I want to have tons of albums and crazy stalker fans and shit." She grins, baring her teeth and hooking her manicured fingers into hands in a pantomime imitation of a crazy stalker fan.

"And people say that the young don't aspire to anything anymore," says Jay. "Good luck with that. Am I allowed to sell my story to the tabloids?"

"Sure. I'll let you know when I've been out of the news for a couple of days. You can boost my profile and make some cash at the same time. Everyone wins," Jenna says airily, like she's only half-joking. In that moment she reminds Jay quite a lot of Blake, of the careless way he treats the business of managing a secret empire.

Apparently Jay has a romantic weakness for evil masterminds.

"Jeeennnnnnnnnn!" A loud, petulant voice calls from somewhere behind Jenna. She turns away

from the camera and yells "What?" in reply.

"We have to go! Mom says hurry up!"

Jenna turns back to Jay and gives a rueful smile. "Looks like our secret rendezvous is being cut short. I'll talk to you again soon, okay?"

"Have a good time," Jay replies.

"That'd be more likely if you were gonna be there," Jenna mutters. "See you round."

The window with her webcam feed in it closes itself, and Jay shuts his laptop screen.

# BETTE

There's no way that Bette's going to manage to sleep again, ever, and so she's still awake when Rose texts her a little after three in the morning and asks if she's got any peroxide left.

Bette packs all her hair-dye stuff into the Batman backpack she used to use in elementary school and cycles around to Rose and Tommy's. Maybe now that she knows that vampires are real and the world needs saving and stuff she'll get better at saving up her money and she'll get an excellent pink Vespa with shiny chrome bits and drink tiny bitter coffees and read big ancient books about famous monsters and her skin will clear up and she'll be stylish and mysterious and enigmatic and totally punk rock. Vampire hunting is completely and utterly punk rock.

Rose is wearing a Veruca Salt shirt that looks seconds away from total collapse, the red eyes of the octopus on the front long chipped away to nothing, and a pair of tartan boxer shorts. Her skin is scrubbed pink and her hair's an even knottier tangle than usual.

"I wanna go blonde. Blonde as I can go," Rose says by way of greeting as Bette clambers down through the window and onto Rose's desk. Rose has this awful tarantula paperweight made of glass with a real spider inside that used to belong to her great-great-uncle or someone like that, and Bette hates it so much, because she always thinks it's real for a second when she sees it.

"Your paperweight is gross. Why can't you like sparkles and rainbows and unicorns and shit like a normal girl?" Bette snipes as she jumps down from the desk to the floor and waits for the fuck! spider! shock to wear off.

Rose deflates a little, frowning. "I've never dyed my hair before. Aren't you surprised?"

"I figured you probably didn't want the peroxide for drinking," Bette points out reasonably. "Your hair's nice, anyway. Why mess with it?"

Rose pushes a hand back through it, guiding the snarls away from her forehead. "I kept... it's too dark when it's wet. I feel like... it... it looks like there's still blood in it."

"Oh." Bette blinks. "Uh. Um, okay. Right. Want to do this in the bathroom down here, or upstairs? Does Tommy know?"

Rose's eyes go laughably wide. "No, no! Don't tell him. I don't want to risk him asking why."

"He's gonna notice if you bleach your fucking hair, you know," Bette says. "And wait, you're not telling him?"

"I'm not gonna tell my brother that I nearly got killed by a creature of the night!" Rose looks aghast at the idea.

"It's not protecting him if you don't," Bette says, trying to keep her voice soft and sympathetic so she doesn't sound like she's giving a lecture. "He lives here same as us, and there might not be a bunch of super badass monster killers around next time he's out walking late, you know."

Rose shudders visibly at the implications of the thought, then gestures in the direction of the bathroom door. "Come on, let's do this. Those guys were pretty cool, weren't they? Lily and Will and everyone."

"Yeah," Bette agrees, following Rose into the tiny basement bathroom. "I wonder if they'll train me if I ask them. You know, for self-defense."

Rose starts dragging a comb through the worst of the knots, wincing and swearing under her breath at the pain.

"Lather it up with conditioner," Bette advises. "It'll untangle easier."

"I don't use conditioner."

"Seriously?" Bette snorts a laugh. "You are the worst girl ever, you know."

Rose ignores the comment, swearing again before scrunching her face up thoughtfully and saying "I don't think I've got time to learn self-defense stuff. Not until the musical's done, anyway. I'm trying to get more serious about my art and stuff. I'm gonna do this series of paintings based on quotations, with weird creatures and stuff. Not monsters, exactly. But, like, freakish. You wanna see 'em?"

"After we're done here." Bette uncaps the bottle of solution she's been shaking to mix. "Bend your head over the sink and remember, it's not my fault if this looks awful."

~

An hour of lathering, rinsing, scrubbing and combing later, Bette appraises the result tentatively.

"It looks... not awful, exactly?"

Rose switches off the hair drier. "What?"

"I said, it doesn't look too awful," Bette repeats, spinning around on the desk chair and breathing out a plume of smoke. The dawn chorus of neighborhood birds has started up outside, but there's no morning light visible yet through the basement window.

Rose, sitting on the edge of the fold-out, holds her hand mirror up and turns her head from side to side. Her hair is a shock of coarse champagne shade, almost white in places and a red-gold in others. "I think it looks great."

"It makes your face look kind of hard, though. And you're not hard," Bette says, because that's as close as she can get to explaining that the blonde hair makes Rose look vulnerable and sad and tough, like she's suffering through something that hurts but is determined to survive. And even though that may be true, Bette doesn't want to think about it being true.



# JAY

The next day at school, while they're eating lunch on the bleachers, Tommy turns to Jay and says "You play guitar, right?" and Jay shrugs and says "A little, I guess."

"My sister and her friend wanna start a band. I'm supposed to drum. It's going to be awful. Want to come with me this afternoon?"

Jay shrugs again. "Sure, okay."

It turns out that it's actually really, really fun being in a band. They don't do much in the way of playing music, at least not in their first practice, but it's always cool to hang out with Tommy and it turns out that Rose, Tommy's sister, is pretty cool too. She's a total freak, just like everyone at school is always saying she is, but Jay and Tommy are both kind of freaky in their own ways anyway, so it's not like Jay's all that surprised or turned off by it.

Bette's a bit harder to get along with. She seems like she's angry, but not about anything that anyone can help her fix. Tommy and Rose just ignore it, or maybe they're so used to it that they don't notice anymore. Jay's no stranger to violence in his life, or rudeness — he's worked too long in the food service industry to be unfamiliar with sharp words — but outright anger isn't something he's had much experience with, and even just spending three hours screwing around with instruments in Bette's garage with her and Tommy and Rose leaves Jay feeling high-strung and nervy.

It wasn't that she was particularly rude or bitchy at him directly or anything (and anyway, Jay considers bitchiness to be an art form worthy of respect, not a character flaw), just that there's a palpable sense around her all the time that she's a second or two away from flying off the handle and getting furious at someone for some tiny dumb thing.

But even that isn't enough to counteract how fun it was, teaching Tommy how to play random scraps of songs and laughing when his own fingers skittered well away from where he meant to put them.

Jay's never played music with anyone else before, not outside a classroom context. It's actually more like sex than he expected it to be — he'd always thought statements to that effect were probably just douchey rockstars being douchey rockstars, but it really does have that same joyful, collaborative sense to it. He likes it. Jay can't remember the last time he liked something that was relatively simple and uncomplicated.

After evening falls, Jay makes his way back to the townhouse. Every time he visits, it feels less like a decision and more like an inevitability. Not a compulsion, exactly. He doesn't think they're mind-controlling him into hanging out there or anything. But maybe a bit like an addiction.

There's nobody home on the lowest level, and nobody's in the main room upstairs, either. Jay knocks on Blake's door, knowing that Blake must already be aware that he's there.

"Come in," the reply comes from inside. Blake's lying back against a bank of pillows on the bed, fully dressed but barefoot, a thick novel in his hands. Blake doesn't say anything when Jay joins him on the bed, curls against his side with one cheek resting against the smooth dark silk of Blake's vest. After a few minutes, Jay feels a light touch on his hair, the apparently idle stroking of Blake's fingers through the product-stiff locks. Jay knows it's not idle. Nothing Blake does is idle.

Blake reads and Jay drifts, listening to the slow thump of Blake's heart and the motionless silence of no breathing but his own. It's comfortable, intimate, and Jay feels a little dumb for feeling as safe and content as he does. Lying in a vampire's arms shouldn't feel so much like home, but Jay knows it always will for him.

"I feel like Bikini Kill," Jay says after a long time of quiet, stretching his legs and shifting a little

so Blake's hand rests lower on the nape of his neck.

"I can assure you, Jason, I'm not in the habit of keeping pet humans," Blake teases lightly, closing his book and putting it to one side. His thumb brushes back and forth over the thin skin behind Jay's ear. If Jay could purr, he'd be purring now, but he settles for smiling and opening his eyes a little.

"Not a pet. Just... something warm and living that you like, even if you won't admit it."

"Hm," Blake says as Jay's eyes slip closed again, and Jay smiles because he recognizes the sound. Blake makes that sound when he's amused. "I keep telling you, I chose Bikini Kill for Timothy because cats are elegant predators. You're mistaken if you think I have the time or inclination to open my house up to fuzzy kittens and large-eyed waifs because of some sort of inner softness."

Jay snorts, rolling onto his back and opening his eyes. Blake's fingertips ghost over Jay's cheekbone, the length of his nose, his lips. There's an ink-stain, from a fountain pen, on one pale knuckle.

The nails are bitten to the quick.

"Nervous habit?" Jay asks, raising his eyebrows.

"Oral fixation," replies Blake, covering Jay's eyes with his palm.

"People are more dangerous than cats," Jay reminds him quietly. "I'm no kitten."

"But you have ridiculously big eyes, my dear, and are unarguably waifish." Blake's hand leaves Jay's eyes and moves down to the dip below his Adam's apple, where Jay's skin falls and rises with each inhale and exhale. "Your pulse is speeding up."

"Yes," Jay agrees, and sits up so he can kiss Blake's mouth. Blake's pale cheeks are flushed, just a little. It wouldn't be noticeable on a person, but the usual eerie whiteness of Blake's skin is touched with faint pink. It doesn't make him look human, but it makes him look alive.

"I haven't been out yet this evening," Blake says, and after a second Jay works out what he means. Hunting. Feeding. Right. "Alexander and Timothy went out together as soon as the sun set."

Jay doesn't know if Blake can get enough blood for a whole night by just taking a bit from him, and he doesn't think he's got enough spare at the moment to offer more than a bit. Still, he tilts his head to the side obligingly. Blake runs the tips of his fingers over Jay's skin lightly, but shakes his head.

"No, I was thinking... you would come with me." The intonation isn't that of a question, and Blake doesn't meet Jay's eyes as he says the words. Jay feels his breath catch.

"Oh. Um. Okay," he manages to say. He isn't sure how he feels. For all he's lived through and experienced, this is another part of the vampire world he's never seen for himself. He nods. "Yeah. Let's go."

Jay expects they'll wind up at an upmarket bar somewhere unfamiliar, full of muted conversation and sophisticated opinions, but the club is just the same as any of the ones he and Tommy and Michelle go to when they go out. He should have realized that, really: if Blake's interested in Jay, Blake is probably interested in other people very like Jay. For some reason, that knowledge feels a bit like a disappointment.

They stand together against one wall, where the light isn't especially good and they're made indistinct by the shadows. Blake watches the mingling, dancing, laughing groups of people with an avid hunger on his face. Jay scowls.

"That one, there," Blake says, leaning closer to Jay as he speaks quietly and nods in the direction of a kid Jay vaguely recognizes from school. "I've seen him prowling around on occasion. He likes to steal neighborhood pets and cut them apart with a knife. He's got it tucked into his belt right now, at the back. See? His shirt bunches."

Jay stares at Blake, feeling nauseated. "How come you didn't kill him when you saw him do that?"

Blake shrugs. "I wasn't hungry. Would you like me to kill him now?"

Jay crosses his arms over his chest and fixes his gaze on their feet. "I guess," he mumbles. "Better than if you killed someone who didn't deserve it, isn't it?"

Surprisingly, Blake laughs delightedly, kissing Jay on the cheek. "You are so terribly young, my darling boy. Or perhaps I mean youthfully terrible. Nobody manages instinctive righteousness quite so well as a teenager."

Before Jay can snipe back with a catty reply, Blake is gone, slipping smoothly into the throngs of living people and approaching the boy. Jay looks away, trying to damp down the churning feeling in his stomach.

He goes back to the townhouse alone, not sure what else to do, and plays eight rounds of *Guitar Hero* and five of classic *Street Fighter* against Timothy. Jay is pretty sure that Timothy's letting him win, maybe out of pity, but he's feeling too weird to be especially offended by that.

Alexander watches them for a little while, standing quietly to the side so as not to interrupt the very serious business of video game martial arts. After one of the battles ends, he comes over and rests a hand on Jay's shoulder for a moment.

"He did the same thing to Timothy," Alexander tells Jay. Jay glances over at Timothy for confirmation of the words, but Timothy is studiously ignoring them both, eyes fixed on the screen.

"It's one of his games," Alexander goes on. "Don't think anything more about it." He leaves the room before Jay can reply, and Timothy begins another match.

When Jay gets too exhausted to play any longer, he goes into Blake's room and lies down on the bed. The pillow smells faintly like Blake. Jay closes his eyes, and lets himself drift into sleep.

He doesn't know how much later it is when he wakes up, but Blake is there beside him, reading despite the almost total lack of light. Jay sighs and cuddles in closer to him.

"Did you kill him?"

"Yes."

Jay is quiet for a while. He doesn't care what Blake thinks of that. Eventually, his thoughts are ordered enough that he can voice them.

"I remember him, a couple of months ago at school. It's a weird thing to remember, but I remember that he had this amazing new camera that his dad had brought him back from a business trip. It was way too good for a kid to have, really, and absolutely too good for anyone to bring to school. But there he is, showing it off, bragging about what a hotshot his dad is."

Jay pauses, arching a little into the light touch of Blake's hand against his hair.

"Then as he's walking to class," Jay goes on. "The strap around his wrist, the camera strap, it broke and the camera fell onto the ground. I could see that the lens cracked and the card-slot snapped up along one side. The camera was ruined and the look on his face... it was just one of those shitty disappointments that happen in life, you know? Not a huge deal, not ruining anyone's life, just... a bummer. He didn't have something he'd liked having anymore and that disappointed him. And it's weird but I think about it and I still feel worse for him in that moment than for the one you killed him in, how crazy is that?"

"Hm," Blake says, his soft, amused noise sounding especially fond. "It's extremely teenaged of you. And that's indistinguishable from crazy most of the time, in my experience."

"A cruel universe is less frightening to think about than an uncaring one, for somebody your age. At least cruelty has a kind of malicious meaning to it. Melodrama and theatricality can be great comforts — I'm sure it hasn't escaped your judgmental eye that I like to exist with all the

metaphorical volumes turned up as loudly as they will go. Tragedy wants to be beautiful in ways depression never dreamed of.

A boy breaks his cherished camera: that is depressing and it becomes a story which makes the listener depressed. But a boy plucked from a dance floor by a beautiful monster —"

"Not that you've got an ego or anything," Jay cuts in, grinning in the dark.

"Hush." Blake stops stroking Jay's hair for a moment, then begins again. "A death like that's a tragedy made for the stage or a dime-store novel, isn't it? It has a dark romanticism; the listener thrills. The mundane heartbreaks of an ordinary life, those small disappointments, are devoid of that terrible beauty. People can more easily convince themselves that an inexplicable horror has some kind of greater meaning than they can when it comes to an everyday woe."

Jay thinks and breathes quietly for a while. "Let it never be said that you used five words when you had an opportunity to use fifty," he says finally, deadpan. "Does it scare you? How unhappy all endings are?"

Blake seems to think about this, as if he isn't sure. "I suppose. I've always been more afraid that I'm somehow wrong, and there really is a grand design. The thought of going to Hell is both dull and moralistic. I would be bored to tears by an eternity of being punished for things I thoroughly enjoyed doing. Better a conscious-less abyss."

Jay gives Blake's thigh a chastising pinch. "Quit the quipping for a second, okay? I'm asking a serious question and I want a serious answer, not some low-rent Oscar Wilde impersonation."

"Oscar Wilde couldn't hold a candle to me in his wildest dreams," Blake says loftily, giving Jay's hair a sharp pull in punishment for the pinch. "But since you asked... yes. The thought of a cold and dark universe frightens even creatures as sharp and fearless as vampires, and we cope with it in much the same way as humans: art, love, warm skin. Usually these are enough to stave off the little demons that attend musings on broken cameras."

"You are so incredibly lame," Jay says, voice soft and smiling, and he widens the smile to a grin as Blake tugs his hair a second time in warning.

# BETTE

"Weather like this makes me wish we were in the van," says Anna, tilting her face up toward the sun. With her long blonde hair down loose against the straps of her singlet and her sunglasses perched on her nose she looks as polished and austere as a fashion model. Bette feels grimy and young and stupid, and scowls behind her own sunglasses. Rose, as always, doesn't notice. Bette wishes she could be as at home inside herself as Rose always seems to be.

It's Saturday morning and glorious and warm, and not at all the time of the week Bette expected to get a phone call from Will. She'd dragged herself out of the glorious sleeping-in which Saturdays usually entailed, and after some violent prodding had managed to get Rose to come as well.

Five absolutely disgusting glasses of different herbal blends later, Bette isn't quite as enthusiastic about being a test subject as she was. Still, she doesn't feel like drinking anyone's blood, so that's a plus. Her eyesight feels clearer, if more light-sensitive, and her hearing's strong too. Will said there might be side effects like that, but it's still a neat surprise. Maybe being an almost-victim of the bloodthirsty undead isn't all bad after all. Now they're all sitting on the ground in the concrete-floored loading dock out the back of the warehouse, where a scattering of potted plants are drinking up the sunshine greedily.

"Yeah," Will agrees with Anna. "Pulling into a new town and checking out the venue for the show, dumping our stuff in the motel room... man, I miss all that dumb travel stuff so bad. Time of my life."

"I wondered why you guys stopped touring. You were, like, on the verge," Rose enthuses. "Everyone thought you were gonna blow up huge, and then you went back to playing tiny local places."

"More vampires in town. We couldn't afford the time away from hunting," Russ answers, sounding philosophical.

"So that's it?" Bette's question is incredulous. "What about the dreams you had for yourselves?"

"What's that line in *Lord of the Rings*, about how sometimes to keep something important protected, some people have to give up the things that are important to them? It's like that," says Lily.

Rose snorts.

"My brother and I are named after characters from that. I'm after a hobbit, the one who has a million kids with Sam at the end. Tommy's named after the dude who sings the evil willow tree to sleep when it captures Merry and Pippin."

"That's badass," Lily says. Rose shakes her head. "No, dude, seriously. You're a hobbit! That rocks."

"Whatever," Rose says, but there's a small pleased blush on her cheeks.

"When I was a kid," says Lily. "I was always trying to convince my mom to let me change my name to Lara, like Superman's mother. I was totally obsessed with Superman's origin story. I don't know why. I read every variation and retelling of it I could."

"Origin stories are crap," Rose says decisively. Bette rolls her eyes. She's heard this line of argument more than once from Rose in the past. "They're boring. I don't get why they're retold so often."

"Okay, two reasons," Lily counters, holding her hand up with two fingers extended. "One, origin stories are, arguably — and note that I said arguably, because I don't actually agree with this reason personally, but it's still worth saying — the most important story that you can tell about a character. How they became who they are. I mean, think about it. When you're getting to know someone, what's the thing the two of you are gonna reveal to each other as you get more comfortable with each other?"

You're gonna talk about your childhood, and the experiences that are most important for them to know about you in order for them to get you, aren't you? So that's one reason. Reason two is because the origin story is like, I don't know, the overture in a musical score. It introduces you to the themes that are going to show up later in variations, right? Like, okay, when you're reading a Batman comic, and Batman's at the circus and he sees two acrobats die, and the only survivor is the acrobats' son, and Batman adopts that kid... that story means, like, way more if you know that Batman was the only survivor when his own parents died, doesn't it?"

Rose makes a face. "I guess. Maybe."

"That's why you get actors all saying that they only auditioned for some part because their friend was trying out. Because that's a killer origin story. Origin stories can make or break a myth, Rose."

Bette catches Will's eye and shares a smile with him. It's nice to know that even people in excellent bands are sometimes total weirdo geeks, too.

~

In the afternoon, Bette helps Will record their findings from that morning — the mixtures that didn't work, and the one that seems to have held off the crappy hungry feeling Bette's had ever since she got bitten, the one that notices every scratch and scrape on the skin of the people around her all the time and wants to *taste*.

"If getting bitten doesn't make someone a vampire, what does?" she asks as they work.

"It's a combination of factors," Will replies, packing away ingredients and extracts methodically as he speaks. "When someone's bitten, they're infected with... I'm not sure infected's really the right word, but it's the one I first heard for it and it's the one I've always used. Right now there's something in your body, from that bite, that wants blood. If you don't give it enough — or an alternative, like we're trying to make with these blends — then it'll drive you close to crazy with thirst, and you'll snap and attack someone or, if you don't even have an opportunity to go that, you'll be in a near-psychotic state until the condition passes. That takes about a week.

"If you give the infection, the something, the whatever, just enough blood to keep it calm — just a small amount each day — then, again, it passes in a week. That's what we're doing with you. It's what we try to do with everyone. It's not very common for people to survive an encounter with a vampire, so it took a long, long time before people learned enough about the infection to know how to treat it. We're still learning, as you can obviously see." He gestures to the equipment spread out in front of them. "If you give the infection too much, more than roughly the minimum, it gets stronger. And stronger. You need to keep it weak before it'll start to fade.

"Even having a strong case of it isn't enough to make someone a vampire. Some hunters have recorded details of cases they've seen where a bite victim was drinking several pints a day, and with careful detox they wound up perfectly healthy in the end.

"But if you've got a strong infection — one that's been fed enough blood to make it really tenacious — and you die, it... reanimates you, I guess. We don't know how long that takes, but records indicate it's an hour or two at most. Nothing like the three days most lore suggests.

"We don't know how much blood is enough to make it happen, or how long prior to death it needs to be ingested. It doesn't seem to matter if it's human blood or vampire blood — the two are surprisingly similar on a cellular level."

Bette absorbs the new information. "So if I — and there's no way I'm gonna go this, so don't worry or anything — if I ate a bunch of blood sausage for lunch and then I got hit by a car in the afternoon,

I'd... come back?"

Will nods. "Maybe. Not if you were on the very last day of your infection being present, I think. But the day after you were bitten, probably. That's why it's so important that you have the barest, barest minimum of blood product in your food while you're recovering from the attack. Anything more, and the chance increases that you'll come back a vampire."

Bette shudders. "So I guess we'll have to wait and see if these gross-out smoothies make my condition better or worse, huh?"

Will nods. "Yes. Keep an eye on your metabolism."

"The vampires have fangs, right?" Bette asks. "I mean, I didn't get a good look, but it looked like they had little fangs. But people don't have fangs. What happens?"

"Yep." Will nods. "They have fangs. When people have become vampires, the hunters who checked over the scene later found eye teeth. It appears that your two upper canine incisors fall out as the infection begins to reanimate you. The new ones grow in before you wake up."

"Ugh," Bette says, trying to suppress a shudder. "As if I didn't have enough nightmares about my teeth falling out already. That's gross."

"I agree," Will says, with a slightly sickened-looking smile. "So don't drink any blood, and do your best not to die, either."

# JAY

"More cogs and mechanicals to unpuzzle tonight, then?" Jay asks as he steps into the living room and sees Alexander laying out his cloth and his tools. Alexander nods.

"Yes. Quite a lucky find, really. The girl I took it from wasn't especially remarkable otherwise."

The new trinket, waiting for dissection and reassembly, is a tiny gold locket set with diamonds and a miniature watch. Jay looks at it for a beat, trying to work out why something so random would look so familiar. Then he recognizes it.

"You killed Jenna," Jay says, and his voice sounds hollow and hard in his ears. Alexander doesn't shrug, doesn't nod, doesn't give any kind of response cue that Jay can react to.

Words start tumbling out of Jay, then, as if anything he says will matter.

"She... she was funny. And mean. And she wanted to be a famous singer but her voice was pretty average but she wanted it so much and she didn't give up easily, so maybe she would have got it anyway. She knew exactly how pretty she was and how much she could get away with because of it. She had a little sister. She was allergic to shellfish and hated carrots but ate them anyway. I liked her."

Alexander sighs. "I don't care who she was, Jason."

"I know," Jay snaps. "But I do, so don't be a dick." He grabs the diamond locket up off the velvet cloth. "I'm giving this back to her sister."

"That's worth a lot of money," Alexander reminds him, tone cold.

"It's worth more to Ashley," Jay answers, and lets the door slam behind him as he leaves.

~

He catches the bus to the hospital, grateful for the mayhem and waiting of the emergency department. There's a couple of headache tablets still in the blister pack in his pocket, and Jay pops them out of their foil and into his palm. Holding them in the curl of his hand, he goes up to the reception desk.

"I was told I could get a Ziploc baggie here, to put these in? I'm supposed to split the dose up," he says, giving a friendly smile, holding out his hand with the pills in it. The nurse on duty hands a baggie over, smiling back, and Jay slips the pills into the bag. "Could I get an admissions form, too? Thanks."

The clipboard is shiny red plastic and the ballpoint tied to it is a little chewed at the end. Jay goes back outside into the driveway outside the emergency room and sits at the bus stop. He takes the pills back out of the baggie and tosses them aside, slipping the locket into the plastic pocket carefully. Then he puts down Jenna's name at the top of the admissions sheet and a bunch of details about her — eye color, hair, sex. On the dotted lines where patients are meant to list any existing medical conditions, Jay scrawls "Personal Effects: One Locket", and strikes the pre-printed list of ailments out with a decisive dash of his pen. If something looks deliberate and official enough, it hardly ever gets questioned. He clips the top of the baggie to the board on top of the form, and goes around to the main entrance of the hospital.

The morgue is on the upper basement level and the corridor is bright and cool as Jay steps out of the elevator. Ashley is sitting against the wall beside the coroner's office, down to the left, her face red and damp.

"If you're looking for the Chamberlains, my parents are in there," she says, pointing at the wide double-door which segments the hallway to the right of the elevators. Her voice is dull and slow, and



she doesn't look up at Jay. "I've never seen a dead body before. She looks like a fucking photograph."

"I'm from property collection upstairs," Jay says in the soft, impersonal voice doctors and nurses use with the bereaved. "Can you sign for this?"

Ashley glances at the locket clipped to the re-purposed form, then gives a nod. She scrawls her name across the signature line of the form, not really seeing it, and takes the baggie when Jay hands it to her. Jay straightens, takes the clipboard back, and goes back to the elevators.

As he steps inside and presses the button for the ground level, he looks back at her one last time. She has her head bent forward, red hair a curtain obscuring her face as she clips the necklace around her throat.

Jay leaves the clipboard on the floor by the main doorway, and throws the crumpled signature form in the trash can near the bus stop. It isn't even midnight yet.

# BETTE

On Monday, after detention, Bette goes home, gets changed out of her uniform so that it doesn't stink too bad for Tuesday and she can procrastinate doing laundry for just a little bit longer, and heads around to Rose and Tommy's.

She climbs up the tree and in through Tommy's window, because she's feeling energetic and those thorns down near the basement window have done more than their fair share of damage to her legs recently. Tommy's not in his room, though his schoolbag is so he's probably around somewhere. Tommy carries all kinds of weird non-school stuff in his bag. For a while there Bette and Rose thought he was secretly dealing drugs, but then when they confronted him he explained that no, actually it was just downloaded stuff off the internet — movies and TV shows that weren't easy to get on DVD, or were too expensive, and comics and albums and stuff. Tommy can find pretty much anything on the internet.

He always has his bag with him when he goes out, in case someone's looking for some illicit HBO or something while he's hanging, so if his bag's in his room it probably means he is too.

Bette looks around at the posters on the walls and the junk on everything else, and feels a twist in her stomach that's almost like nostalgia or regret, like she's already missing this dumb teenage-boy room even though she's right there in it. The feeling's probably just because it's been a while since she's been in here, now that they've got Rose's basement to do most of their time-spending in. The tiny bit of unfamiliarity that the room now carries is enough to make Bette realize that someday they're all going to be not-teenagers, adults, with other rooms and other interests. Someday Tommy won't want posters of bands he got out of magazines pinned up on his closet doors and shit like that.

Bette leaves Tommy's room with a final glance behind her and clatters down the stairs. Rose and Tommy's mom is home from her shift at the salon, still smelling like sprays and conditioners and gels and that weird smell that too much blow drying leaves on a person. She's watching TV in the living room with an iced tea beside her, and Bette is willing to put money on the tea being the Long Island kind. Rose and Tommy's mom gets worn out at her job, and likes to chill out when she gets home. Not like Bette's mom, who doesn't seem to know the meaning of the phrase 'chill out'.

"We have a front door right there, you know," Rose and Tommy's mom says, flicking channels with the remote.

"Didn't want to make you get up," Bette replies. Rose and Tommy's mom rolls her eyes.

"You kids, you're gonna be the death of me, I know it more every day. How've you been, kiddo?"

"All right. Rose and Tom downstairs?"

Rose and Tommy's mom nods, taking another sip of her drink. "Rosie's working on a new painting. See if you can get them to decide on what they want for dinner, huh? They just shrug or say 'dunno' when I ask them. I don't know how any of you manage to pass English with vocabularies like that, I swear. All you ever say is 'dunno'."

"But it expresses everything we want to say so eloquently," Bette replies, grinning. "I'll ask 'em."

Down in the basement, Rose is doing planning sketches for a painting, and refuses to let Bette see.

"No, no. This one's not ready to share yet. You know how I get about that. But, oh! I know what you can look at!" Rose pulls a loose sheet out of the cardboard pocket on the inside of the sketchbook cover. "I've been scribbling down lyrics ideas, and so's Tommy. Give it a shot, and then pass it along to Jay after you're done I guess."

Bette nods. "Okay. I'm pretty shitty at poetry, though. Just warning you."

Rose rolls her eyes. "It's not poetry, it's lyrics. Half the most important songs of the last century

had totally dumbass lyrics anyway. It's not make or break for our future careers."

"Yeah, I guess," Bette says, sighing. Rose pokes at her thigh with the tip of one sneaker.

"What's up?"

"It's dumb. Don't worry."

"I am the master at dumb problems. Spill."

Bette shrugs, curling up against the sofa-end of the folded out bed and hugging her knees. "You know how I was reading Mary Shelley's diaries, right? It's got letters she wrote in it too, and there's one she was just a teenager, not much older than us, and she'd just had her first baby a couple of weeks ago, and then it died in its sleep. She wrote to her friend and asked her friend to come stay with her, and the letter ends with 'I am no longer a mother now'. That's just... fuck. That's so fucking sad." She scrubs at her eyes, hoping Rose didn't notice the stinging tears welling up. "It's just so bare and simple and there's so much heartbreak behind it. I don't know how people cope with a world that has tragedy that naked in it. It makes me think of that thing Ernest Hemmingway said, about how he could tell a story in six words: For sale, baby shoes. Never worn."

Rose sits beside her and gathers her in a hug, squeezing as Bette blinks away the threat of tears and then just holding on. "It's okay. Shh. It's okay. There's good stuff in the world, too."

"It's hard to remember that, sometimes," Bette says quietly. She can feel the pulse in Rose's throat against her cheek. The razor-scratch is closed and almost healed but Bette can imagine easily how the skin would split anew under the pressure of her teeth, even though they're just dull human blunt teeth. And then, just underneath that skin, the blood...

Bette pulls back from the hug, the smile she forces onto her face feeling thin and false. "I'm. I'm thinking of going back to the warehouse. Want to come?"

Rose shakes her head. "I want to work on this." She gestures to her sketchbook. "I just had an idea. Do you mind?"

Bette does mind. Right now she minds everything. Everything in the whole world is wrong.

She shakes her head. "No, that's fine."

~

And so Bette, without Rose, watches her first vampire hunt from a rooftop in the Fulton River District. She feels like a character in a superhero comic. She's doing her best not to think about how poorly young women usually fare in superhero comics.

Will has his phone, and a travel-sized first aid kit, and two hand-held Tasers — with some modifications obvious on their small black handles, in the cracking arcs of electricity which whip in wide arcs when he flicks them on to test. He has a pistol, too, a little snub-nosed gang piece which Bette is more than a little awed by.

"I hate it," Will says, shoving it back in his pocket. "I only agreed to carry it because I wanted Lily to have one, and she demanded I get one as well. So don't get all fetishy, okay? It's a gross, messy, violent tool I use for gross, messy, violent jobs."

"You forgot stylish," Bette replies lightly, smiling. Will glares.

"You're such a teenager."

"Yeah, well, you're such a vigilante."

The insult makes Will snort, amused. "Yeah, whatever." He pulls his phone out, punches a few buttons, and holds it to his ear. "Let's do a roach trap, 'kay? No, let Anna, your ankle's still weak after... don't whine, it makes you sound like a brat."

Will snaps the phone shut and gestures to the edge of the roof. "Okay, show time. You're not scared of heights, right?"

"Little late for that," Bette points out. "I'm not, since you're obviously so concerned."

She leans over the cement rail bordering the roof, down at the narrow space of fire escapes and garbage and hubcaps and grime. Lily and Anna come into view from the wider road at one end, the other exit blocked off by the high wall of a canning factory.

Lily blends off into the shadows on one side, too directly below where Bette and Will stand for them to be able to see her at all.

Anna hoists herself up on the lid of a trash can until she can grab at the lowest rung of one of the fire escape ladders, then scrambles up onto the first level of the narrow metal staircase.

"There are different... gangs, I guess. Of vampires," Will tells Bette as they watch his friends below. "We're going after Scrabblers tonight. There are more of them than the rest put together, but luckily they're the easiest to kill and the easiest to spot. They're more like zombies. They don't disguise themselves among people, like most of the other gangs."

"It all sounds like *Vampire: the Masquerade* or something," Bette remarks. She and Rose used to be into all kinds of role-playing games a few years back, before they were old enough to go out to see music very much.

Will snorts. "More like Jets and Sharks." He hits her on the arm, points down, and says "Show time."

Anna's got one arm, bare to the elbow, held out over the air beside the fire escape. Across the pale of her skin, on the outside of her forearm, is a long shallow cut.

The comparison to zombies made Bette expect that the vampires would be slow and shambling, but they lope together in a quick-moving group, fifteen or seventeen moving in a loose clump down the alley toward the smell of blood. They look just like the ones that attacked her and Rose.

Lily steps in behind the group, near the lip of the small space, and shoves over two of the trash cans to block most of the exit off. A bedraggled cat darts out of one and yowls, running off to find a safer and more peaceful place to scavenge.

At the sound of the falling cans, several of the vampires turn and run at Lily. She lets out a whoop, laughing and violent, and meets them halfway in a clash of hooked fingers and brawling punches.

The rest of the gang are gathered below Anna's high spot, snapping and hissing and leaping up in their futile efforts to reach her. She pulls a small weapon out of the back of her waistband, a curved blade set perpendicular in its handle, like a small-scaled scythe, and swings one knee over the fire escape's rusted guardrail.

"She's not —" Bette manages to say, appalled, before Anna does, launching herself down into the thick of the pack below, which promptly closes over her, swallowing her from view. "Oh my god."

Will's eyes are darting back and forth between his two agents, Lily's crude street brawl of deep hacking cuts and the thick of creatures which the still-unseen Anna is reaping her way out of. Bette can't remember ever seeing anything so horrible, or so thrilling.

It takes a long time, but eventually all the vampires are dead. Anna and Lily grab each other and spin around and around, the movement not nearly sedate enough to be mistaken for anything like a hug. Then they begin to stack the corpses in a heap against the wall, heaving what they can lift and dragging what they can't.

One match, thrown by Lily, makes the pile flare up quickly. The smoke is acrid, and makes Bette's eyes water when it rises up to where she stands.

"They burn fast," Will explains.

# JAY

It's not that Jay makes a resolution to himself to cut off all communication with the vampires, it just turns out that way. For two days he goes back to his normal life, or whatever normal is and was for him. Michelle and Tommy don't give him a hard time about how absent he's been from their usual trio, and they click back to the old rhythms without pause.

That's nice. It's... no, it's more than nice. Nice is a colorless word for something Jay now realizes he prizes quite highly. The way Tommy and Michelle never demand anything from him but that he live according to his own terms is, above all else, reassuring. For all that Jay might like to pretend that he's a tough, independent kind of guy, older than his years, the truth is that he's still a human underneath that, and sometimes humans need the comfort of security, of friends who will forgive them for their failings.

Jay shakes his head and smiles to himself as he changes out of his school uniform and into his pajamas. It's late, well past even the late sunset of the elongated summer, and he's been at the mall all afternoon with Michelle and some of her other friends, hanging out in the food court and the arcade. Tommy spent the afternoon with his sister and Bette, but he and Jay exchanged phone messages the whole time, planning to get together soon for another band practice.

It's all dumb, small, ordinary stuff. School and friends and band. Jenna would probably think it was ultra-lame that Jay's retreated into all this in response to her death. He misses her a lot, and even more than he misses her he misses the potential of all the things that might have happened, her weird day-dreams about the glossy, shallow future she wanted, and perhaps more stolen kisses in another cloakroom at another party, and even just future conversations they might of had and never will now. He's mourning all of those things, as well as his friend. And Jay has always hated mourning.

His computer has sat, untouched, since the last time they talked on the webcam. He should probably clean out his inbox of the usual spam that accumulates, at least. He's on the mailing list for way too many bands, and so there's always alerts about secret shows and music videos looking for extras and a bunch of other normal, boring, human stuff that he could start going along to again, if he wants.

There's an email from Timothy, and that's all it takes to rip the fragile peace of the last two days into flimsy shreds. Jay feels almost angry at the contact, of having the short monotony of calm disrupted, even as his heart kicks up to a faster beat in excitement and he opens the message. He doesn't want to be so excited and happy and energized by the contact, but it's not like he gets a choice about what he wants to care most about in the world. If he could choose, he might choose the normal stuff, and that would be such a calm, dull life.

*how come your phone's on voicemail? you're not responding to any of my texts either. :( alexander wants to find a way to show you that he feels bad for upsetting you but you have to tell him HOW you want him to show you. i said he should buy you a FERRARI hehe that would be awesome wouldn't it? we could go on a midnight road trip across the country that would rule so hard.*

*please don't shun us it will never happen again, blake says your whole school is going to be under official protection now. nobody will hurt any of the students or they'll have to answer to us. that's something, right?*

*please write back.*

The letter's already a day old. Timothy hasn't written again.

Jay sighs and scrubs his face with his hands. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know what to say. He clicks 'reply' and puts his fingers to the keys, letting impulse guide him in his response.

*Timothy — I'm not avoiding you, I promise. I've just been busy with school and all that stuff. We'll hang soon, okay? Jay*

Jay feels like a total jerk for every word, because they're jerk words and he does like Timothy, he likes all three of them, likes them in ways that are utterly unlike his feelings for Tommy and Michelle but just as true, just as strong. Timothy deserves better than a short dumb letter like that.

Still, it's all Jay can offer until he sorts himself out inside his head, so he clicks send' and shuts the computer, climbing into bed and waiting a long, long time for sleep to come.

He's woken by his phone. It's a message from Blake, and just says *talk to me*. Jay ignores it. He gets another one on his way to school, and another as the bell rings for homeroom. Both are the same text as the first. So is the fourth message that comes twenty minutes later, and the one twenty minutes after that.

Jay doesn't know if Blake's set up a program on his computer to send the repeated messages, or if the guy is just really persistent and has a crazily long attention span. Either is possible. By lunch break Jay gives up, and switches his phone off. It's not like Tommy or Michelle needs to message him while they're all sitting together eating, after all.

After school Jay goes and does four really boring hours of waiter work at a corporate function. At least at dinner parties people wear interesting clothes. A whole lot of middle-managers in suits carrying clipboards and pens does not make for a fascinating afternoon.

Work finally done, he catches the bus back to his apartment. He doesn't turn his phone back on, knowing that the pestering, repetitive messages must have reached critical mass in his poor battered electronic inbox. He'll leave off dealing with Blake until after he's got some sleep.

Blake's waiting by the door to Jay's apartment. Jay doesn't say hello, opting instead to greet this visit with one coolly cocked eyebrow.

"You're out early. It's barely dark yet."

"Timothy is demonstrating a heretofore undiscovered talent for extreme moping. It's a great motivator for quick exits," Blake replies. Jay sighs, feeling guilty.

"I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I just needed a I just want to do ordinary things for a little while. Like, buy some clothes or hang out in a food court and watch people, or put on a DVD and lie around on the couch," Jay says helplessly. "I know that shit probably all sounds completely tedious and stupid to you, but it's what I'm used to. Sometimes I like to remind myself of my predictable, boring life."

Blake gives Jay an appraising look. "A boy like you doesn't come to be out of a predictable sort of life. I don't believe it for a moment."

Jay shakes his head. "It doesn't matter what you believe. The fact remains that I need a normal night tonight I want to spend it with you," he says, realizing it's the truth. He misses having Blake near him. "But I need to feel like a person. Doing person things. Do you understand?"

Jay knows this is a hopeless request, but that doesn't stop him wanting it. He hates the idea that to love Blake he'll have to give up all the rest.

"All right," Blake says, smiling a smile that doesn't look particularly comforting. "A night out in the throng of humanity it is, then. The first order of business you suggested was clothes, wasn't it?"

"That doesn't mean you take me to get measured for a hand-made bespoke suit from a master tailor, either," Jay warns. Blake sighs theatrically.

"Compromise is the mark of maturity, you know. All right, all right. No measurements tonight, you have my word."

Jay does compromise a little in the end, just enough to let Blake buy him three well-cut white shirts off the rack at a high-end menswear store. Jay takes heart in the fact that it's not like he'll be the

only student at school wearing couture as part of the uniform. He's always thought spending that much money on a few bits of clothes is stupid, but it's not his credit card doing the spending, and Blake seems pleased that Jay is letting him take control.

"You've just spent more than two months' rent of my apartment on shirts," Jay points out, as they walk through the evening crowds, under the colorful lamplight of traffic signs and store windows. He likes this time of day, when sunset isn't so long ago that the dark has properly set in, the warm winds of summer stirring litter up into little dances in the gutters.

"You wouldn't have to pay rent at all if you moved into the townhouse," remarks Blake in an arch voice. Jay knows better than to think it's just an offhand remark. He shakes his head.

"Let's see if we can manage a night out before we make any longer-term plans, ok?" he says. "Come on, I want a Frappuccino."

They sit in the coffee shop, and agree that the emotionless jazz-lite being piped over the speaker system is absolutely horrible, and argue about whether the simple pop of the early Beatles is as musically significant as their later, more experimental work (Jay thinks it is; Blake disagrees), and discuss what directions music styles might take in the next few years.

It's really nice.

That is, until a heavily pregnant woman with soft red hair and a scattering of peach-colored freckles on her face walks past, and Blake gets this look on his face that Jay knows far too well.

Jay scowls down into his drink, stirring the icy liquid with his straw and scowling. "Could you not?"

Blake gives him a look of wide-eyed innocence. "What?"

"Look at people like you're daydreaming about what their insides taste like. It's..." Jay shakes his head, putting his drink down on the table between them. "I don't know if I can do this. I feel like I've gotta pick either you and Timothy and Alexander, or being a part of this." He waves his hand, hoping the gesture adequately encompasses the coffee shop, the street, the city, the human race, the way he means it to. "I. I just can't. I can't be one of you, and I can't be in the middle anymore. I'm sorry."

"Jason —" Blake protests, but Jay doesn't turn around as he walks toward the door, and Blake doesn't try to stop him.

The air is still warm and light outside as Jay walks toward the bus stop, which feels unpoetic, unfitting. After all he's just given up, there should be storm clouds and gale-force winds around him. But there's not, there's just late summer heat and the empty bench of the bus shelter.

The next bus isn't due for ages, of course, because that's just the kind of awesome luck Jay's having lately. He swears under his breath and sits on the end of the bench, propping his back against the brick side of the shelter.

After a few minutes, the pregnant lady from the coffee shop joins him. She's holding a frothy-looking frozen chocolate drink, and gives him the blandly polite sort of smile which kind people give strangers at bus stops. Jay doesn't smile back. He's not a kind person, he knows that much about himself. It's hard enough for him to stop himself from outright glaring at her, for making him acknowledge a part of Blake that he already knew existed.

They sit quietly, waiting at opposite ends of the bench for a bus that's not due for another fifteen minutes. The woman takes a cell phone out of her purse and hits a speed-dial button.

"Hey, Paul, it's Linda. I'm on my way home early. I decided to skip the movie, because I've got some abdominal pain. It's probably nothing. I guess you're not in yet. See you when I see you. Love you. Bye," she says, in the bright talking-to-a-machine tone everyone gets when they have to leave a message after the beep.

Jay watches the traffic pass, the white headlights and red tail lights blurring into blotches of glow if he shuts his eyes almost all the way. The pregnant lady — Linda — leans over her belly a little, shifting uncomfortably on the bench. After a while the pain seems to pass and she lets out an exhausted breath, reaching for her phone again.

"Paul, Linda here again. If you're there, grab the phone, will you? ... okay, I guess you're not. When you get in, call me. I think I might go back to the doctor tomorrow. She said I might need bed rest for the last month, and we're almost there now. Think you can stand to wait on me for four weeks?" She gasps, interrupting her joking tone as she winces and curls over her belly again. "Love you. Bye." Once the call is ended, she gives another gasp, this one sounding more like a sob. "Fuck."

Suddenly, Jay can smell blood in the air. Linda's shoulders are shaking as she stays as curled as her belly allows and rocks back and forth a little.

"I think you should get an ambulance," Jay says, getting up off the bench and stepping over to crouch in front of her. "I'll make the call if you want."

"No, that's —" Linda cries out softly, knuckles clenched white in the loose fabric of her shirt. "Okay. Yeah. Okay." She hands over her phone.

Jay makes the call and gives the operator the location of the bus shelter, grateful for the calm efficiency phone emergency workers have. Then he sits down beside Linda and holds her hand, not caring that she's squeezing his fingers tight enough to hurt. The blood-smell is getting stronger.

The ambulance arrives before there's any sign of the bus, and Linda is lifted onto a stretcher in the back. Jay rides up the front with the driver, watching the road and the half-curious half-fearful expressions on the people in the cars around them as they drive. Everyone always wants to see drama, and everyone's always afraid that the drama's happening to someone they care about.

At the emergency room they wheel Linda away before Jay gets a chance to say anything to her. He sits out in the waiting area on a wholly uncomfortable chair, her phone still held in his hand. He redials the last number in her call list.

"You've reached Linda and Paul. We can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave your name and number we'll call you back. Here comes the tone!"

"Uh," Jay says, as the beep trills shrilly in his ear. "Paul, Linda has been brought to the emergency room. She was having pains and there was some blood. So. Uh. Get here when you can, I guess. Okay. I have to turn this off now, there's a sign on the wall that says phones can't be on in the hospital, but I'll call if I hear anything new."

The coffee from the emergency room machine is terrible. There's a teenage girl sobbing because it hurts to breathe, and her mother comforts her ineffectually and with a look of great distress in one corner. The high-set television on the wall is playing an infomercial for a wrinkle-reduction cream. Jay sits, and lets the competent bustle of the hospital go on around him. He feels very tired.

Three slow hours pass, and then an anxious-looking Japanese man in a slightly rumpled suit comes through the front doors, walking up to the admissions desk.

"My name's Paul Kobayashi. I was told that my wife, Linda O'Carroll, was brought here? She's eight months pregnant."

Jay stands up and approaches Paul, as the nurse behind the desk nods and says "I'll find that out for you, if you'll wait a minute."

"I came in the ambulance with Linda," Jay says, handing Paul her phone.

"Thank you for staying," Paul says, sounding amazed that Jay has spent three hours in an emergency room waiting area for someone he doesn't know. Jay shakes his head.

"Nobody should have to be alone at a hospital," he explains.



Then it's two of them, sitting and waiting. Eventually, the nurse returns, a smile on his face.

"Mother and baby are both resting comfortably. I can take you through now if you want."

Paul's eyes go wide. "Um. Yes. Right, right. That would be fantastic. Yes."

The nurse and Jay exchange a momentary grin at Paul's flustered babbling. "Are you family as well?" The nurse asks Jay.

"You should come," Paul nods. "Come on."

Which is how Jay ends up in a private hospital room, an exhausted-looking Linda sitting up in bed with a tiny bundle in her arms. There's a vacant clear-plastic crib next to the bed. The best word Jay can think of for the expression on her face is beatific, as she looks down at her child and then up at Paul. It makes Jay feel almost immeasurably sad and alone, but he doesn't want to ever look away.

Later, after Paul and Linda have thanked him a dozen times — as if he did anything, all he did was call the ambulance and sit around in an uncomfortable chair for a while — and he's held the baby for a moment and looked down at her scrunched, placid face as if he expects to find secret answers to anything there, Jay walks out into the midnight air outside the hospital and turns his phone on.

He ignores the dozens and dozens and dozens of new messages in his inbox, instead dialing Blake's number.

"Jay."

"Yeah, it's me. Can you come pick me up? I'm at the hospital. There's nothing wrong with me," Jay says, even though that's a lie. There's something terribly, horribly wrong with him.

"Of course," Blake says. Jay ends the call and crosses his arms over his chest. It's still very warm out, despite the late hour, but he's almost shivering.

The elegant, almost predatory-looking black Maybach that pulls up beside him a little while later is pretty much exactly the sort of car Jay expects the inhabitants of the townhouse to have access to. Alexander is behind the wheel, wearing a pair of driving gloves made of soft-looking calfskin. Blake is in the back, and Jay slides in next to him.

"I should have known you wouldn't be driving," Jay observes as they slip back onto the road.

"On the contrary, I enjoy driving very much," Blake replies.

"He's not allowed," explains Alexander, meeting Jay's eyes in the rearview mirror. "Even he can't charm his way out of that volume of traffic tickets."

Jay smirks. Blake is looking at him with an expression that, on anyone else, Jay would call worried. He doesn't know what it means on Blake's face.

At the townhouse, Jay walks through the ground floor to the staircase and then up to the top level without pause. He's never felt less like interacting with strange vampires, and a number of members of the gang whom he's never met before are at home tonight.

He heads into Blake's room and sits down on the center of the bed, feeling grimy and exhausted in the clothes he's had on since he finished work at the conference hours and hours ago. Blake comes in and shuts the door, leaning against the wood and looking at Jay, waiting for Jay to speak.

"If I ask you seriously and sincerely not to be a complete... a complete *you*, while I talk, will you make an effort?" Jay asks flatly, his best disdainful expression on his face. He's expecting Blake to come back with a quippy remark and one of those mean, mocking, self-important smiles that Jay hates. He hates them largely because those smiles always send a sharp shiver down Jay's spine. He hates that it's a giant pop-culture joke that hormones make teenagers crazy and screwed up, because cliché comedy reduces it all and makes it cheap, when what Jay is feeling is real and awful and amazing. Even when he's pissed off at Blake, and weary, and everything, he looks at Blake and feels dizzy, stupid, like he's drugged.

Jay thought at first he should be suspicious of that, that maybe Blake was doing a vampire mind-control thing on him, but Alexander said that Timothy was the only one of them who could do anything like that in a significant way, and anyway Jay knows that the truth is far simpler: he's a teenager with stupid chemicals doing stupid things to his brain, a teenager who's fallen hard for a guy he wants so, so badly even when the guy is being an asshole.

Blake doesn't smile, though. He looks like he wants to, but mostly damps down on the expression and just nods. Jay takes what he can get.

"You think I'm apathetic," Jay starts. "Pretty much everyone does, except my friends. Me and Michelle and Tommy get each other. We all know that... some kids go through stuff. Stuff that teaches them things. Not even just sad stuff. Kids can lose their parents or live in a war zone or be poor and somehow still manage to stay kids. But other kids go through something that makes them see how the... I guess it just depends who the kid was before the bad thing. Some kids stay kids after. Some don't. Tommy was in hospital when he was young. He got better, but a year later the doctor who treated him was arrested. He'd murdered six patients. One of them was this little girl in the same ward as Tommy. The doctor had been the one to tell Tommy when she died. Tommy cried, and the doctor was the one who held and comforted him. Michelle..." Jay blinks and shakes his head, uncrossing and recrossing his legs underneath him on the bed. "Anyway. My point is that we're not apathetic. I'm not apathetic. I've just learned how the world works and I'm trying all the time to hang on and love everything anyway. It's... it's hard."

Jay looks down at his hands. He can't tell this story if he looks at Blake. He won't be able to get it out. He wants to get it out. He's been holding on to it for so long. Even Michelle and Tommy don't know all of it, but he can tell it to Blake because Blake already knows that monsters are real not just in the sense of true evil but in the sense of claws and fangs.

"I don't remember a whole lot about my early childhood," says Jay, keeping his voice even and toneless. "There were eight or nine of us usually. When one of us died we might have someone new come, but not right away. The new kids were babies usually. I don't know if I'd been a baby when I got there. I don't know if any of the others were my brothers or sisters. I don't know who my parents were, even if I can guess easily enough what happened to them.

"We were taken care of. Kept healthy. The... the..." Jay bites his lip. "They called me Jason. I guess that was my name when I got there. They didn't bother with names for some of the babies. The very small ones. I don't know. I don't remember anything before those rooms.

"They drained blood out of us through hypodermics. It was a schedule, so we never got too weak. They always used the hypodermics. They told us that kids who got bitten too often always died from it. Always. No matter how careful they were about not taking a lot of blood. I used to wonder how often was too often but I never asked. Asking questions was dangerous. They only bit the older ones. They wanted the older ones to die. That's what always happened.

"When I was five the oldest was Sofie. She was nine. She had long, blonde hair. She was beautiful. I had never loved anything before her. I loved her. I remember how she'd fight and scream whenever they came near her, or me. She could remember her life before. She'd had an older brother, but he was too old. They didn't keep him. Maybe that's why she decided to love me. She took me with her when she ran away. I was the only boy there.

"She started planning in earnest how to run away as soon as they started biting her. She must have known she was running out of time. Facing down her own death. All she said to me was that the bites hurt more than the needles and she wanted a holiday.

"I don't know how she did it. They'd had their system in place for years. For a nine-year-old to get

away, with a five-year-old in tow, must have been the luckiest combination of cleverness and chance. I wish I could remember. It deserves to be remembered, however it happened.

"We slept on the streets on that first night. We weren't used to sleeping in the night hours, but the city was too noisy and full in the day. I was amazed by it. I wanted to stare at everything. Look in every window. Sofie was more practical, thank goodness. She stole clothes and food for us, so that we looked a little less like refugees from a horror story. I can still remember the taste of it. Chocolate cake. I'd never had chocolate cake before. Now I eat junk all the time. It's amazing I'm thin. I figure it's gotta be a metabolism thing. I'll hit thirty and be the size of a car overnight.

"Maybe it was the theft that got the police onto us. On the evening before the second night, they picked us up. Sofie's hair was a tangle. Mine was short and brown and a mess too. We still had blood smears on our skin. Even clever children don't always think to be fastidious."

Jay doesn't look up, or move, but he pauses to catch his breath — he's been speaking slowly, but his lungs ache like he's been running. He closes his eyes, waiting for his heart to settle before he begins again.

"We were at the hospital for a day. When the doctor told us that our foster father had called, we were terrified. We thought that they had found us. Liam came in and Sofie screamed. She'd been bitten enough to be able to smell vampires. I hadn't. I couldn't tell. I can tell better now. I don't even need the smell. It's not hard to tell if you know what to look for. I know what to look for.

"Sofie screamed so loudly. I'd never heard her make a noise that loud. She cowered in the corner and kicked and fought when he tried to get near. The doctor offered to sedate her. He had a hypodermic. I saw it in his hand and I wet my pants. I was only five, remember.

"Liam told the doctor no. He asked the doctor to leave us alone. We didn't know it then, how he had heard about us escaping and already had all the papers he needed.

Liam had learned forgery many years before. It was the most useful skill he'd ever gained. That's what he always used to say. The mechanics had changed from being able to mimic handwriting to graphics manipulation but the basics were the same. The important details. That's what he always used to say.

"We found that out later. Found out that the fostering documentation he'd made said that we were prone to freaking out like that. It was all exactly what he needed for the doctor to trust him. He was an excellent forger. The doctor left us alone with him.

"Sofie kicked and screamed. I was too afraid to move. I was sure that Liam was one of them. They would kill us for sure. Liam crouched on the floor in front of her and held her arms still. She was small for her age, and ate very little. She'd had a lot of bites already. It would not have taken much to restrain her thrashing. For Liam it was no effort at all.

"Sofie collapsed into sobs. She'd given up. She knew she couldn't fight him. She'd tried to get away but they had caught her. She was going to die anyway. Her crying was so small. So defeated. Her hair was pale and lank around her face.

"Liam held her arms still carefully. So carefully. He looked at her and said 'I promise I will never hurt you'. His voice was steady. Then he let her arms go and stood up. He waited for her to get up. He could have lifted her but he didn't. He waited.

"Liam looked like he was thirty-five or forty. Most vampires look younger. His hair was. Is. Was sandy. Tenses are difficult when describing vampires. He had a scar on one cheek down to his chin. Past tense feels easiest for describing the dead.

"He was a killer. He loved killing. We had to change cities twice growing up, because the police were close to catching the serial killer at large in the area. That was Liam, both times. He loved

killing. But not kids. It seems arbitrary to me, but it meant something to him. He never hurt kids. I guess all morality is arbitrary, when you think about it.

"He'd known about them for a long time. He didn't do anything because it wasn't his to do anything about. You guys don't tell each other how to live. He told me once that vampires don't even kill hunters unless you consider the hunters a direct threat. But as soon as Sofie and I escaped from them we were fair game for him to save. If he didn't take us from the hospital, they would. So he did.

"He was a good father. I have no basis for personal comparison when I say that, but I think he was. We went to good schools. We had good clothes and good food. Sofie had the best doctors. I learned the guitar. Children are resilient. I healed fast, body and mind. There was nothing wrong with me. I'd never been bitten. Sofie was as healthy as she could be, considering. Body and mind.

"It would have been a good scene for a comedy movie. The vampire dad explaining the facts of life to his mortal son, I mean. After one of Sofie's worst episodes, Liam decided it was time to talk to me like an adult. I was nine. Sofie was thirteen. It got worse when she hit puberty. Nine meant something much younger in my life than it had in hers. But it was old enough.

"Liam explained that kids always died from being bitten. Their bodies can't handle the toxin, even temporarily. It's never temporary for kids. The condition sticks them in a kind of in between. Not alive, not vampire. That's the best case scenario. Either you turn them into vampires, or they just... die. Kids who get bitten can't stay human. They go crazy, and then they die. She was losing her mind, and her heart was failing. Liam had always known it would happen to her, and maybe to me. Just because I couldn't remember being bitten didn't mean I hadn't been.

"If she survived another year, maybe two, she'd be old enough. He refused to make her a vampire before then. I don't know why. He was so arbitrary. I was probably safe. If I hadn't manifested any indications yet, after four years of Liam watching for them, then I was probably safe.

"It sounds unhappier than it was. We were a family. It was wonderful. We loved one another very much. Sofie and I fought, as brothers and sisters do when life is comfortable and safe. We raged against the restrictions and curfews Liam gave us, because we were sure in the knowledge that he would love us anyway.

"I wasn't scared of Sofie. Never. Even at her worst, even when she probably was a threat to me. She never felt like a threat. Even when a boy she got into a fight at school with ended up dying in the emergency room from his injuries. She'd bitten his femoral artery open. Even then I wasn't scared.

"On her fourteenth birthday, I wasn't even ten yet. I went to school and when I came home, they were gone. They'd packed a suitcase each and they were gone. Liam had left me... he'd left me a lot of money. I don't need to work, not really. But I try not to touch his money. It's all I have.

"I tried the foster thing for a while but I never fit. Now I just live alone. It suits me better. I'm really too young for it, but. But sometimes I use his money. Money makes pretty much anything happen, if there's enough of it. I've got enough money to get left alone. I tried the foster... I said that, didn't I? I'm probably babbling." Jay looks at Blake, holding his gaze steadily. Blake doesn't blink.

"Tonight I saw a woman go into labor. I held a newborn in my arms," Jay tells him. "And I didn't feel anything. Not awed, not amazed. The baby was beautiful, but that didn't I just didn't feel anything, not at all. I say I want to be just an ordinary person but I don't fit there. There's no place for me in the world. I don't even feel properly alive when I'm as close to pure distilled life as anyone can get. When I'm holding a brand new person. The only place that's ever felt like home was with Liam and Sofie. I don't want to be a vampire. I never want to be a vampire. But I can't stay with vampires any other way. They leave me. They pack a suitcase each and leave. And so" Jay blinks down, mortified to feel the hot fall of tears from his eyes as he does so, and the waver in his voice. "And so I'm lost," he whispers

to himself.

# BETTE

Bette manages to avoid detention for once, so in celebration of actually haven an afternoon for a change she takes the long walk home over the overpass bridge and down past the boutique stores. The lightweight clothing in the windows of the boutiques still looks vibrant and hasn't started to sun-fade, even though the displays haven't been changed in forever. It's like this warm weather is a special bubble of time that doesn't play by normal rules, but Bette's mom says everyone feels like that when they're a teenager. Whatever, Bette's mom is nearly forty, she obviously can't really remember what being a teenager is like. She's just going off the same stuff all the self-help books say about it, and they all believe in some stupid TV-movie type of teenager who always has big Consequences when they do dumb shit.

Those self-help books are full of things about girls having sex and getting pregnant because they don't have enough self-esteem to use condoms. The books don't say what to do if the boy you like is a totally mean asshole but you want to hang around with him anyway, or what to do when he's horny but you're on your period, or how mortifying it is when Rose and Tommy's mom could tell that Bette wasn't a virgin anymore after last fall even when Bette hadn't said anything to Rose or Tommy yet or anything. The books are all self-esteem, self-esteem, blah, blah, blah, blah, like that actually has anything to do with bullies or detention or seeing bands or anything important.

Bette's phone rings in her schoolbag. She has a totally boring ringtone, because Tommy's always stealing it and changing the setting to these awful, obnoxious songs he downloads especially. Bette's gotten into the habit of switching it back as plain as she can whenever he's been near it.

"Hey, it's Bette speaking."

"Hi, it's Gretchen here." She sounds hesitant, and a little sad, though that might just be because Bette's not used to the accent. "I don't know if you rememb —"

"Yeah, from the club, I totally remember," Bette says, trying not to grin too widely.

"Oh. Good. Uh How're you?"

"Same old, same old. What's up?"

Gretchen doesn't answer right away. "It's I, well. Can you come to the hospital with me?"

"What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. My grandfather's a patient and I visit him as often as I can, but..."

"But sometimes it's too much on your own?" Bette asks, feeling sympathetic. Her dad had been nursed at home, mostly, so it's not exactly the same as having someone in hospital, but she remembers how much time she spent in Rose's room reading just because she couldn't cope with going back to her own life. Rose had been glad of the company — that was the same year that Tommy was really sick. Bette knows how comforting just having company sometimes is.

"Yeah," Gretchen says again. "I know this is a lot for somebody you barely know to ask of you, but I don't know many people locally and —"

"No, it's cool, just tell me where and when to meet. I can call Rose, too, if you want. She's good at cheer-up hugs."

"I'd like to see her... but perhaps after? Too many things at once, you know? Plus, what a shitty way to spend a first date," Gretchen replies. Bette laughs out loud.

"Okay, sure. Gimme the address, and I'll come meet you."

The hospital's one of the small, private ones in the leafy old-fashioned part of town, with wrought-iron railings and ivy and white stone walls making each of the stately townhouses on the block look inviting and solid. It's really more of a hospice, as far as Bette can tell as they arrive, but if it helps

Gretchen deal for her to think of it as a hospital, that's cool with Bette. People do what they have to.

"Do you want to meet him? You don't have to. There's a waiting room on every level with books and a TV and sofas. Some families sleep here overnight, sometimes, the ones with kids here," Gretchen says as they walk the cobblestone path from the gate to the front door. She's wearing a black silk slip dress with crocheted lace around the hem and bodice, a dark grey cardigan which she keeps fidgeting with, pulling the ends of the sleeves down over her palms and thumbs, and a pair of black leather ballet flats. Her hair's pulled back from her face into two haphazard pigtaileds, and she doesn't have any dramatic makeup on her small-featured face. Gretchen is acting and looking her age, letting some vulnerability show in the low evening light.

Bette finds it easier to like this Gretchen than the one she met at the club. That Gretchen seemed too cool and smart and sure to have any reason to hang around somebody like Bette, but this one's just ordinary and fucked up and scared and sad like a normal person. It seems strange to Bette that this secret, private Gretchen could live behind the spiky beauty of the other one.

"No, I can come in if you want me to," Bette replies as they step inside. The foyer is lit with bright gold lamps, warmer than the stark white of hospitals Bette has been to before. The walls are pale green. Upstairs is the same, and the room Gretchen leads Bette into is as welcoming to look at as any in an ordinary home. A very frail-looking man is lying on the bed, which is raised into the upright position. He waves hello at the pair of them.

Gretchen says something which Bette assumes is a greeting. It doesn't sound like German. Polish, maybe.

"And this is Bette," she adds at the end, in English. "Bette, this is Artie."

"Hello," he says, smiling at her. "I was afraid my little darkling had no friends at all."

Gretchen's foreign words sound a little chiding, this time. Artie waves a dismissive hand and responds. It sounds like they're retreading an argument they've had many times in the past.

Gretchen crosses the room and climbs onto the high sofa underneath the window, and the rain outside looks so cold and gray against the glass behind her that Bette can't help but feel warm and safe and comfortable, even if they are in a hospital ward.

"Come on, slowcoach," Gretchen says to Artie teasingly, patting the cushion beside her. Bette's not sure if she should offer to help the old man get up from the bed or not, and shifts from foot to foot, indecisive and feeling more than a little like an intruder in a moment she has no claim on.

As if she can hear Bette's awkward thoughts, Gretchen turns her gaze to Bette and grins. "Let him do it himself. He's got all the nurses wrapped around his finger, the last thing he needs is you coddling him as well.

Come try the rocking chair. It's got a massage panel in the back rest; the controls are on the arm of it there."

Bette steps over, her sneakers making little squeaky noises on the linoleum floor as she walks. The rain-sounds from outside are muted by the double-glass of the windows, which is just another of those tiny touches that remind Bette that this room is designed for treatments and medicines and, eventually, for dying. It's a place with a purpose, built for a particular kind of inhabitant, even if it wants to pretend it's a normal everyday room with a normal everyday couch and rocking chair and a watercolor print on the wall and a vase of flowers on the nightstand. It's not an ordinary room at all. Gretchen's pretending like it is, but Gretchen's not who she pretends to be either.

Bette doesn't know what all of it means. Mostly it means she really hates hospitals a lot. It's funny how she can even hate the double-thick glass on hospital windows, for no reason except that it is what it is.

Strangely, her thoughts stray for a moment to Remember the Stars. She's not sure why. Maybe her brain is pondering how some vampires can pretend to be people but they're not, just like a room designed for people to die in can look like it's a room for people to live in.

Artie has shuffled across to the sofa, which he eases down onto to sit beside Gretchen. Bette realizes that the cushions are plumped up higher than usual so that elderly people don't have to bend their legs as much as they get up or down. Another tiny skew of perspective which, once noticed, screams Different! Different! about the room.

Like how vampires seem human until they suddenly don't, when the differences all add up to a different image.

"What're you thinking of so seriously?" Artie asks, leaning back against the sofa with an exhausted sigh. Gretchen rests her head on his frail shoulder, lacing her hand with his. Bette's never felt that close or comfortable with any of her own grandparents, and if they weren't in such a sad situation right now she might feel a little twist of envy for Gretchen, for having that kind of familiarity and love with Artie.

He's speaking to Bette, and she answers without thinking. "Vampires," she says, tracing the pad of her forefinger around the edge of the brass control plate set into the armrest of the rocking chair. She doesn't touch any of the buttons. Automated furniture is a totally weird and alien concept, as far as she's concerned.

"What about vampires has you looking like you want to jump off a bridge, then?" His eyes are a bright blue, and he's smiling. Bette's never really noticed the color of an old person's eyes before. If anyone had asked her before now how she expected them to be, she might have said that their hue would be washed out, faded from age and weariness. Of course, if she said that, then Rose probably would have smacked her on the back of the head and given her a lecture about being more observant and honestly, it wasn't like it was fucking difficult to pay attention to the world, Bette, why don't you ever notice things properly and just always say what you expect to be true or what you think sounds cool as an answer?

But Artie's eyes are vivid and young, even though his face is papery and age-spotted and wrinkled and his body is thin and fragile and his hair is balding and white. His eyes don't look that different to Bette's or Gretchen's, really. Not any wiser, or sadder. Bette doesn't know if that means he's had an easy life, or if it means that she and Gretchen have already gone through a lot in their own comparatively short lives.

"I don't know," Bette answers, shrugging. "I was just thinking that it must be sad to be a vampire. Like being a room that wanted to be a home but was a mausoleum instead." It wasn't exactly what she was thinking, but it was close enough.

Artie turns to Gretchen and says something in Polish. She answers, and they speak back and forth in the language to each other for a few seconds while Bette sits and feels more and more out-of-place. Then Gretchen laughs quietly, and looks toward Bette. "Artie says that you should think about happier things," she explains. It's obvious that they were saying a lot more than just that, but Bette just nods and tries to keep the smile on her face looking genuine.

"Probably," she agrees.

"Gretchen says you have band," Artie says to her.

"Yeah," Bette answers, feeling uncomfortable at being the center of attention.

"A band, Artie. Not just 'band'. 'A band'," Gretchen corrects.

"What, I should bother to clean up my English when I'm never gonna leave this room? You should be schoolteacher, not singer," Artie gripes, glaring at Gretchen. Gretchen just rolls her eyes.



"You're not so sick as you want me to think. You want to talk English, I'm going to make you do it properly," she counters. Bette giggles at the sparring between the two, the pretend-scowls they're exchanging. They're still holding hands, Gretchen's white smooth one and Artie's yellow-pale lined one, the fingers laced together.

"So you have A band," Artie says, speaking to Bette again and putting particular emphasis on the previously missing word. "What kind of music you play?"

Bette shrugs "Just noise, at the moment." She'd mentioned it to Gretchen on their walk from the bus stop to the hospice. She hadn't thought Gretchen was paying attention.

"Noisy bands are good." Artie grins. "The entartete kunst. Best kind of band."

"That's degenerate art," Gretchen translates. "It's what the Nazi Party called any art they didn't like. Artie worked at a dance hall — a cabaret, really — during the Weimar years."

"Most degenerate of all of them!" Artie laughs. "We —"

Bette can see Gretchen squeezing Artie's hand in her own as he pauses for a moment.

"Me and my... you call it girlfriends, yes? Girlfriend? We just called it lover. Me and my lover, we stayed in Dresden long after it was smart to be going to Poland. Or England. Didn't want England. English comedy, is all men in dresses making farts.

"Went to Poland later, with my wife. My wife not the same lady as that girlfriend lover from the cabaret. My wife was Lucia Schmidt. Such pretty hair, she had. Went white in the end of course. But it was so pretty when it was brown. Curls, she had such curls." Artie sighs. "Such curls. But she was not lover in Dresden. That was Gretchen. This one, my little darkling, gets name from her." Artie gives Gretchen a cheeky-looking smile. She's looking at him softly, and with obvious love.

Bette raises her eyebrows. "You named your grand-daughter after an old girlfriend? Your wife must have been a pretty cool character."

It's Gretchen who nods, and smiles at the memory of the departed Lucia. "Yes. She was. She was a great lady."

"When the bombings came, the Dresden we knew was dead forever. Kurt Vonnegut — you ever read him? Read him, his books are wise, wise books. Kurt Vonnegut was prisoner in Dresden when bombings come. The Nazis, they kept prisoners in the slaughterhouse meat lockers. Gretchen and me, we hide in old broken tomb in cemetery. Lovers go to kiss there sometimes in the dark. Think that being so close to death is romantic. Kids are stupid. But we survived there. Vonnegut survived in slaughterhouse. Forty thousand people, not soldiers, just lovers and babies and sisters and brothers and the rest. All dead. Too many bodies to bury."

Artie blinks, shaking his head. His vivid eyes are bright with tears. "Vonnegut, he goes on to write books. Good, brave books. He said music was proof of God. Even after what he saw, he still thought there was beauty in world that was beautiful enough to be proof of a God. You play your noisy music, Bette. Play it loud as it will go. Make joy. Make God. Make music."

Bette swallows. "I will," she promises, her voice quiet.

# JAY

The townhouse is quiet when Jay awakens, and so he pauses to stretch and get his bearings before climbing out of the bed. He's getting used to the lightheadedness, the way his feet feel far away from his hips and body and self. If not for the soreness in his wrists and shoulder, he'd say he felt like a loose-jointed toy, a dummy built of wood and wire. As it is, he just feels strange and a little dizzy and a bit sleepy all the time. But he's getting used to it.

His watch says it's well into evening, but the house has the feeling of somewhere that's been empty for a number of hours.

There's juice in the fridge, one of those expensive cartons with the fruit pulp left in and all kinds of added vitamins. Jay drinks straight from the container without bothering with a glass — it's not like anyone else is going to want some and object to getting his germs in their drink, after all.

There's bread but he doesn't feel like toast, and cereal, but the thought of milk makes him gag. He's hungry but nothing looks appealing, not even the blood sausage in its clear plastic wrap on the smooth transparent shelf of the smooth white fridge, a gory splash of red in the mostly-empty, cold space. Jay makes a face and closes the fridge, noticing for the first time a note attached to the front with one of the small stainless-steel magnets.

*J — Sorry we aren't here. Pressing business. Boring, boring, I wish you could come along and make it less intolerable. Leave your cell phone on and I will call you when we're done. Daylight appointments are such a bother, requiring as they do that we linger in other people's waiting rooms until the dark. — B*

Jay smiles a little, pulling the note off and carrying it back with him upstairs as he goes to get dressed. He likes Blake's handwriting, which is full of loops and flourishes and isn't all that easy to read, actually, even though it's not messy so much as it is overwhelmingly ornate. It's like a written equivalent of Blake's speaking voice, and so it makes Jay feel the same fond frustration that Blake's habitual melodrama always does.

Once he's dressed, Jay spends a little while trying to read. He's been spending so much time out of the sun lately that his usual light tan is fading to paleness. It won't be long before he looks like the rest of the inhabitants of the townhouse. He likes that idea. He doesn't have the attention span for reading today, though, and so decides to explore instead.

The staircase up to the attic, concealed behind one of the nondescript wood doors of the upper level, isn't styled and decorated like the lower rooms. The carpet's just a simple dark blue, thick under Jay's bare feet as he climbs the steps slowly.

He can remember playing in an attic when he was little, with Sofie. He remembers the bare wood floors, once-upon-a-time varnished but not often polished since, and the high un-draped windows. Storage boxes of holiday decorations and unused furniture, the white-sheeted shapes of tables and wardrobes huddled together in corners. He doesn't remember why they were in an attic. They never stayed anywhere long enough to accumulate that much of a stored life, so it couldn't have been theirs, and they'd had few friends, so the location of the memory remains a mystery.

Jay remembers old steamer trunks with lids too heavy for their childish arms to lift without help, and how they'd frightened him too much for him or Sofie to ask Liam for assistance. Some dumb ghost story the kids told at school had stuck in Jay's head, about a bride playing hide-and-seek who becomes trapped inside a trunk, her bones left undisturbed for fifty years.

Even now, too old to believe in stupid scary playground tales, Jay feels a mild shiver of dread at the sight of three steamer trunks, just like those in his memory of that other attic, their leather straps

rotted away to crumbling tan remnants. Setting his jaw and straightening his back, he approaches them, determined to ignore the way the skin at his nape crawls as he gets closer.

The hinges creak and threaten to stick halfway on the first trunk, but with a grunt of effort he manages to get it open all the way. It's fabric, folded clothing, in charcoal shades of black and gray and deep hues of color.

The second trunk is more clothes, with books and papers stacked neatly underneath. The third's the hardest of the three to open, and is cluttered with the oddly-shaped items that obviously wouldn't fold neatly into the others — corsets, walking sticks, painted paper parasols gone tea-brown at the creases over their bamboo spokes.

Everything smells a little stale, but nothing's musty or moth-eaten. The first item Jay lifts out of the trunks is a waistcoat of fine, dark wool. The buttons are dull, but gloss quickly to a shiny black as he rubs at them with the sleeve of his shirt. There are a lot of buttons, all the way up the front, way more than on most waistcoats Jay's seen on people at functions or in stores. This one looks a little uncomfortable to wear, but very elegant.

There's a white shirt folded up in paper just underneath where the waistcoat was, and apart from the fragile, vintage feel of the cloth — a bit like paper itself — there's not much to distinguish it from the shirts which Blake wears now.

There are pants and coats, more waistcoats, a few more shirts with sharp-angled collars and crisp cuffs. Some of the clothes are velvet, and these ones Jay lingers over, skating his fingertips over the soft lines of the fashions. There are a few dresses, beaded bodices and bias-cut skirts, made for girls with corset-curved bodies and shorter statures than most of the girls Jay knows.

In the second trunk he finds an opera cloak, wine red with ivory-colored lining, the drape reaching from his shoulder to his ankle. It has a hood and he pulls this up, nose twitching at the locked-away staleness of the smell. He feels like a character in a fairy tale, and considers for a moment spinning in circles to make the cloak furl out around him like flower petals. The movement would probably make him dizzy, though, so he doesn't. There's a matching bag, a little draw-string pouch, with a tangle of bracelets and rings inside. Jay pulls a length of black ribbon free, a choker with a shell-pink cameo set against the smooth inky satin.

Jay re-packs the choker, bag and cloak carefully, then rummages in the third trunk, hefting out the hat boxes which crowd it. He tries a grey top hat first, very like the one Blake wore the first night Jay met him, planting it rakishly at an angle on his head. He could pull the dust cloths off one of the freestanding mirrors if he wanted a proper look at himself, but it's dark enough now outside that a ghost-reflection of a boy shows up in the glass of the windows anyway.

He tries on a black bowler, and a peacock-green beret, and a black leather cap with a snubbed brim at the front, posing for himself in the fading light. Part of him feels like he's a kid again, playing dress-ups with Sofie and pretending he's an adventurer or an enchanter or an imperious prince, while the rest of him feels like he's someone grown up, dramatic, a cabaret emcee in an old-fashioned club full of smoke and catcalls, or a witty society lord inviting artists and vagrants to tea in his private rooms just to shock the gossips.

One of the umbrellas has a sharp metal point at the tip of it, the end gone colorful with rust. Jay reaches to pull it free, so he can get a closer look, then hesitates with his hand in mid-air. Suddenly, being in a fairy tale doesn't seem as charming as it did a minute ago. He thinks of Sleeping Beauty's spindle, and imagines pricking his finger on the umbrella's point and falling into an enchanted sleep here, among the strewn remnants of another time. It's not the most inviting place to have a nap, that's for sure.

Shivering a little, Jay pulls back, slamming the lid of the third trunk. The crack of noise breaks him out of his disquiet, but now he's conscious of how dark it's gotten up here while he explored.

There are matches in one of the hat boxes, a little tin of them kept alongside a folded handkerchief and a pair of gloves. Jay strikes a match against one of the window frames, surprised when the head flares up as merrily as if it'd been put away only days, rather than decades, before.

The match pinched between his thumb and forefinger, Jay hunts around quickly for candles to light. There are a few tucked away on top of a tall chest of drawers, made of heavy golden-cream wax. They have the blur-edged, leaning look that tells him they've been up here through a lot of warm summers and cold winters, the shape of them softening with the heat and going brittle with the chill over and over again, but they light up just as readily as the match did.

"Jay?" Blake calls. Jay's certain that Blake already knows he's here — he'd be able to hear him, and maybe even smell him; he'd sense him in one way or another for sure. It seems likely that the shout was for Jay's benefit, so that Blake's silent footsteps wouldn't startle when he stepped into the room.

"Hey!" Jay calls in reply. Blake's dressed in slacks and a dark shirt, but his feet are bare and his hair still has faint kinks in it from a hat and, as usual, the realness and solidity which such small details lend him surprises Jay a bit. He likes Blake best like this, imperfect and unfinished. It makes Jay feel like Blake's someone who might be able to love someone like Jay.

"I haven't been up here for years," he says as he joins Jay at the trunks, looking around as if he's reminding himself of the lay of the room. "And I haven't had much to do with these trunks in even longer."

"Would you have preferred I hadn't looked at them?" Jay asks.

"Yes," Blake answers after a moment, then smiles. "But now I'm glad you did. You're proving to be rather a surprise like that."

In the last trunk, under a packet of yellow-grey envelopes, wrapped together with a now colorless ribbon, is a carefully kept copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Jay eases the front cover open, mindful of the fragile paper. On the title page, three extra lines have been handwritten under Oscar Wilde's name.

To my dear Prince Charming —  
May you live happily ever after,  
As only fictions can.

A card falls from between two of the pages, onto Jay's lap. No, not a card, he realizes as he picks it up. An old silver-plated photograph, of Blake in a dark suit.

"You look younger," Jay notes, tracing the line of Blake's jaw in the photograph with the tip of his finger. Blake looks so still, stern and afraid, eyes frozen wide in something like terror. A lot like Jay's been feeling since the last time he saw Liam and Sofie, really. Like the world fell away. The Blake of the picture hadn't yet worked out where to find new footing. "I didn't expect... I mean, this is after you were already a vampire, right?"

He's not sure how he can tell, but it's something about how his eyes catch the light and something about the set of his mouth and something about the posture of his shoulders. The boy in the picture, no matter how frightened he may be, is a predator nonetheless.

The Blake sitting opposite Jay on the attic floor gives a small nod in response to the question. Jay keeps talking.

"But you look younger. It's weird."

"May I?" Blake takes the photograph from Jay's hands, looking down at himself. "This was just

after I'd become what I am. Only a few weeks after, if memory serves. I was still jumping at every shadow." He chuckles. "Like a little frightened rabbit. That's what... it was my pet name for a while. Little rabbit. You can't tell from this, of course, but my hair was quite green."

"Green? You had green hair, and you give me grief for my haircut?"

Blake rolls his eyes. "Must every story serve as a parable for what a tyrant I am against you? Your hair looks awful, just as mine did then, and so I scold you from bitter personal experience.

"My hair had turned white when I changed. This is often the case, I've been told. Not always, mind you, but often. It was thus with me — within a few hours of reawakening, my hair was white as paper.

"I was scheduled to return to my father's home in less than a month, and there was no way of knowing when — or if — my hair's previous color would return. For some it takes years, or never happens at all. So I dyed it. It was meant to go black, but it... didn't."

"I bet dark green looked wicked cool, though," Jay teases.

Blake's tone is dry. "Quite. In the end I simply shaved it off and told my assorted cousins and aunts that I was recovering from fever. I felt terrible for worrying them, but at least it gave me an excuse to keep to my rooms in the daytime and a reason for never displaying much of an appetite."

Jay looks at Blake, suddenly thoughtful. "So you kept seeing your family after you got turned into a vampire?"

"Yes. For several years. It takes some times to extricate oneself from life. Even being murdered doesn't always make the process instant."

"Did any of them ever guess?"

Blake's gaze drifts over to the dark panes of the high windows. Faint lights of the city beyond ghost against the glass.

"Yes. One of my cousins."

"What happened to him?"

The lids of Blake's eyes drop, and he lowers his chin, breathing slowly. His eyelashes are very dark against the thin skin above his cheekbones. Jay wonders if those lashes went white with his hair. It's difficult to tell in the photograph.

"The same thing that eventually happens to most people," Alex answers quietly. "She died."

Jay swallows, letting his own eyes blink closed for a second. Death's like the bad punch line that ruins every joke, it seems to him.

"Not you, though," he says in the silence. "You haven't."

Blake looks at Jay curiously. "Is that what you think?"

# BETTE

After Gretchen and Bette leave the hospice and say good-night to each other, Bette catches a bus to as close to the warehouse as the busses go and then walks the rest of the way. It's dark, and late, and she's alone, but she's pretty sure that there's not enough irony in the universe for her to get attacked by vampires on the way to the home of a gang of vampire hunters.

Russ is the only one there when she arrives. He's drinking tea and watching a movie on the TV, but he turns the set off and offers her a cup as soon as she's inside.

"Yes, please," she answers. "I'm starved." The hunger's getting worse, every hour. At this rate she's going to be eating raw hearts from the butcher before the week's over. The thought is actually starting to sound very appealing.

He boils the kettle, shooting her searching looks as he adds a teabag to a second mug and then carries everything to the low-set table near the couches. "Bette, I'm glad you came. I wanted to have a talk to you. The others don't know I'm doing this, but... I think it would be best if you stopped coming here. If you went on with your life."

Bette stares at him, her thirst and the tea both completely forgotten. Russ glances down at the cups and then gives her a small smile. "I know, let's have a beer instead, shall we?"

Without waiting for an answer, he takes the newly-brewed tea back into the kitchenette area, leaving the cups on the countertop by the sink and retrieving two bottles of beer from the fridge. He keeps talking as he does all this, not looking at Bette.

"I know you're probably angry at me for saying this. But I've only got your best interests at heart. All of us here... we've all lost someone very close to us to these vampires. It's a terrible, terrible price to pay, but I think it's necessary in order to treat hunting with the gravity it deserves. Otherwise you won't —"

"Fuck you," Bette cuts him off as he returns to the sofas and sits down. "I know more about dying than most kids my age. I know about the smells of it, and how people look when they're scared of it, and how people look when they're secretly pleading with God in their heads that they'll do anything if they can stay alive."

"But you don't know vampires. You aren't part of this world. In a few more days, your infection will wear off —"

"No it won't! Drinking those mixes with Will made it stronger, I can feel it! I feel thirstier than ever, I —"

"And then you'll never have to think about vampires again," Russ continues, ignoring her outburst. "You can go back to your life, Bette. Don't you want that?"

"What makes you special? How come you're allowed to do this and I'm not?" Bette challenges, sticking her jaw out. She feels like she's being kicked out of a party because she isn't cool enough.

Russ shrugs. "I was born on a Saturday. In some cultures, that means I was destined to be a hunter."

"Yeah, and I was never baptized, so in some cultures that means I'm destined to be a vampire," Bette retorts without missing a beat. "What's the real reason?"

"It's really none of your business."

Bette glares. "Fine, it's none of my business. That means it's none of your business why I do or don't want to be here, either."

Russ looks at her for a moment, then takes a long swallow of his beer and nods. "All right. It was my little brother."

"He was on the local soccer team... my theory is that the vampire who attacked him was watching the evening practices and night games. That's what other kinds of predators after kids do, so it makes sense."

Russ takes a deep breath, pausing in his story for a moment before going on. "Whatever the specifics were, he barely made it home. It sometimes presents like a very bad flu, the kind of fever any child might get. There were eight of us, so my mother never bothered getting too worried when one of us was sick — in the colder months, at least one of us was always sick." He smiles a little at the memory and raises the bottle to his mouth again. Bette takes a sip of her own drink, trying not to wince at the gross taste of the beer.

"My sister knew what it really was, though. I don't know how. I wish I'd had the chance to talk to her about it, to find out how vampires had become a part of her world. She was sixteen. I was fifteen, our brother — the one who was bitten — was twelve. We had an older sister and brother but they'd already left home, and the other three were still very young. We were the ones in the middle, and tried to watch out for each other.

"She found the bite. That's how she knew for certain. It was on his upper arm, disguised as a scrape. Nothing remarkable on a sporty little kid, unless you already knew. I wish I knew how she already knew.

"Sometimes on weekends, if Dad let her have the car, the three of us went to the drive-in to watch the horror features. They terrified my brother, but he loved them." The memory earns a small smile of nostalgia from Russ. "My sister and I would be in the front seats and my brother would climb through and curl up on her lap, wrapping her arms around him like a safety belt.

"That's how I found them that night. He looked so sick... pale, horribly pale, and his eyes were so shadowed it looked like bruises. His skin was clammy and it would have been obvious to anyone that he was really ill. Dying." Russ stops and scrubs his eyes with the back of his hand, breaths shaky. Bette looks away and swallows a mouthful of her beer, just for something to do. After a few seconds Russ collects himself and starts speaking again.

"He was on my sister's lap on the floor, and she had her wrist pressed against his mouth, and he was holding it there, and there was blood on his mouth and these... slurping sounds. She looked up at me and just said 'I had to save him'. Simple, like it was all she had to say. Maybe it was.

"I stood there and stared. It was the strangest and most frightening thing I'd ever seen. My little brother, gulping my sister's blood like he was starving.

"Then she told me to put the kettle on and make her a cup of tea. Of all my sisters, she was the one most like our mother. When she told you to do something, you couldn't help but pay attention.

"I went to the kitchen and I put the kettle on, just like she told me. Our kitchen window looked out into our garden and I can remember staring out at it while that water boiled, like I was in a trance. The dark trees, the sky. It all looked so quiet and normal.

"After a while my sister came in. She'd wrapped her wrist and was holding it up against her shoulder to slow the blood flow. She looked pale and exhausted but otherwise just the same, just my sister." Russ blinks again, his eyes bright, but he doesn't stop talking. "'He's going to wake up,' she told me. She didn't explain anything more than that. She sat down and drank her tea, then made another cup and drank that too. Neither of us said anything until she was finished, and then she asked me if I had any money.

"I had forty-seven dollars in a shoebox out in our garden shed, where none of my siblings would find it. She had twenty, and we found another seventy-two in our father's wallet and mother's purse.

"I'd been out late. On a date. That was why I'd been awake, why I'd found them. I shared a room

with my brother but my sister, as the eldest still at home, had a room of her own. If she'd taken him in there I never would have known, I never would have come home and interrupted them. Sometimes I think that it was just bad luck — it was an emergency, and she didn't have time to move him. Mostly I think she did it on purpose. She needed someone in the family to know the truth of what happened. She didn't want to do it all alone.

"She'd shut the door to my room with my brother still inside, before she'd come out for her cups of tea, and I didn't try to open it. I helped my sister take linens out of the cupboard and out to the car, and make a bed on the back seat with my brother's *Star Wars* sheets, fresh from the laundry. I helped her stuff her schoolbag with her clothes and my brother's. I suggested she take some tea bags, just in case she couldn't find the kind she liked in stores right away, and she cried a little then, but we kept on working.

"When the car was all packed up we went back inside and my sister said 'help me carry him,' and opened the door to the bedroom. My brother was sprawled across his bed, arms and legs at strange angles. He looked like a forgotten doll, a GI Joe toy discarded on the carpet after one of his games. His eyes were closed and his mouth was slack and open, the lips bloodied, the smears starting to go dry and rusty.

"It was horrific.

"I lifted him, glad for a moment that he hadn't gone through a growth spurt yet and so was still light and small enough to carry easily. Then I realized that I didn't know if he'd ever grow, now, or if he'd be stuck just as he was in that moment. I'd seen a dozen films about vampires, at least, but I'd... this was nothing like a movie. It was nothing like anything.

"He wasn't breathing and his head lolled over my arm as I carried him to the car. We laid him in the back seat and my sister covered him with a blanket — completely covered him, toe to forehead. He looked like a dead body. I started shaking then, and I couldn't stop. My sister hugged me and held me, and we cried. She said 'I wish you could come too, I wish you could come too' over and over, but she pushed me away just the same before she got in our father's car and drove away.

"It took a long time before things went back to anything like normal at home. I never told my parents that I'd played any part in what happened. The mystery was kinder than any lie I could think up.

"I started watching the evening soccer practices. Photographing them for their league yearbook. My parents thought it was because I missed my brother and maybe part of it was, but it was also because I needed to protect the kids who were still there and make sure nobody hurt them.

"I noticed that there was this lady who watched them a lot, too. Not how the moms who sometimes came along watched, either. There was something sharper in her eyes." Russ huffs a laugh. "We almost had knives at each other's throats before we worked out that we were both there for the same reason. Her name was Charlie, short for Charlotte, and she'd heard about what happened to my brother and put two and two together. She'd been hunting vampires for a long time; she could spot a pattern where most people wouldn't see a thing. She started training me, and that was that.

"I asked her once why my sister had done what she did. Not saving my brother, that I understood, but leaving me behind. Charlie told me it was because that was the only way my sister could stand to do it, that it was the same reason why Charlie's daughter lived with her dad. Because hunters have to believe they're keeping somebody safe. That someone, at least, gets to keep on having all the ordinary happy stuff they have to give up."

"But you became a hunter anyway. It didn't work," Bette points out quietly. Russ nods.

"Yeah. But that's because I'd lost my brother, same as her. The fight was already personal for me,



there was no way to keep me from it. But you and Rose both got out safe from that fight near the overpass, Bette. You've got no stake in this war — and don't tell me that you're in it because you want to help, because that's not enough. I won't let it be enough. I can't keep on if I believe that everyone I save winds up a soldier. I need to hope for better than that."

Bette shakes her head. "But it all feels like bullshit. It's all such stupid shallow crap, now that I know that all this real stuff's going on."

"Then don't let it be shallow crap. Become a scientist and make new medicines. Teach kids to read. Be in a punk band and start a revolution. There's a thousand important things you can do. Do them for the ones who never got a chance."

"Okay," Bette says, because Russ is looking at her like she's a living embodiment of all his aspirations. It's the same way Rose and Tommy's parents look at them, or how the art teachers look at Rose sometimes. People don't look at Bette like that very much.

"Okay," she says again. "I will." She clinks the neck of her bottle against his, and they drink together in silence. She feels like she's been making promises to everybody lately. She's got a lot of people's dreams to live up to.

# JAY

Amusingly enough, Jay is using Timothy's laptop to check his email when he receives the letter from Alexander, and Jay knows that Alexander is just downstairs in the recording studios, transferring more of his old records into digital format.

Timothy's playing *Silent Hill* on the flat-screen and Jay is, in theory, watching him in order to appreciate what a master he is at games or something ridiculous like that. Jay's mostly using the time to catch up on stuff on the internet. He opens the message from Alexander.

Jay —

*One of the things Blake has mentioned during his frequent listings of your virtues — and while I have no doubt of your worth as a person, I feel it's only fair to tell you that you are an exceedingly dull topic for extended conversation — is that you like things which are, in one way or another, quaint. I hope you don't mind, then, that I'm writing to you in a more formal style than I imagine your inbox usually sees. Be at least a little grateful that I am sending this by email and not writing it with a fountain pen.*

*(To tell the truth, I have done exactly this. I like my fountain pen, and hate keyboards. Blake's scanner can translate written pages into text on the screen, and I shall transfer this message in that manner when I am finished.)*

*I don't like to talk about what happened to Timothy. Twenty years may seem like a long time to one not yet sixteen, but for me the wounds are still quite raw. But I think you should know it, if you're going to be his friend — and you are already his friend. Also, I think I am better equipped than Blake to tell the story clearly and coherently, and I know that if I don't tell you, you'll just ask him what happened. Blake is too given to letting the poetry of the memories overwhelm sense and logic, though. It's better if I grit my teeth and get it done myself.*

*To begin: I met Timothy and Blake in the winter of my twentieth year. It may have been my nineteenth, or even my eighteenth, but I am fairly sure it was my twentieth. My father, who had been doing the counting to calculate my age, had been dead some years, and though I did my best to keep my tally accurate after he was gone I cannot be certain.*

*I was born in San Francisco during its first boom from town to city, during the gold rush. Some say that's when America as we know it now began, too: the idea that there is a fortune to be sought and claimed, somewhere out past the edge of the familiar. That started with the gold rush.*

*I cannot remember if we were rich or poor, which most likely means we were not especially one or the other. They died and I spent a few difficult years without very much except my feet and a road to put them on. When I was twenty I worked at a rail yard in Nevada, and this is where Blake and Timothy first caught sight of me.*

*Blake had distractions of his own — his tendency to be bewitched by lovely people is a lifelong weakness, and I'm sad to say his taste has not always been as discerning as it's proved to be in the case of yourself. He'd fallen starry-eyed for the daughter of the local doctor, a young newlywed with a fiery temperament.*

*The less said about Cora, the better.*

*Timothy hated the desert climate, especially for the way seasons blurred together in the heat and dust. He bought the rail yard from the old owner and would come down at sunset to spend time with the workers and hear stories of the places we'd come from — Madrid, Venice, Sydney, Cardiff. All the rail workers were foreign save for me, who simply looked foreign. Since I'd grown up in San*

Francisco, and couldn't offer stories about strange and distant worlds, Timothy would tell me about where he was from. He told me about thick dark trees, growing so densely together that woodsmen had to chop paths between them and out into the clearings around houses and towns.

Those woods were so packed tight, he said, that daylight never truly filtered in. The light was green and dim and one day became another almost without notice, except that different birds made sounds when the sun was down. That was where he'd come from, but he'd been so many other places too. He told us about the music in Vienna and the intrigues of Russia and the majesty of India, sitting there at our dusty campfire in his finery as if he wasn't the owner of the yard.

Some recognized him for what he really was, and warned the rest of us, but nobody cared. We'd seen the greed and cruelty that ordinary living humans could carry inside themselves, and Timothy was no worse, and kinder than some. He'd beat workers for stealing or lying, but not for being ill as the last one had done. Those of us within the rail yard had no reason to make use of this vulnerability of his we knew of. If he ate no food, that meant more for us. If he appeared only at night, it left us uninterrupted by visits in the day.

We would hear about terrible murders in the city, but there were always terrible murders in the city.

But this is not the story I set out to tell you. The abortive sweetness of first courtship, and the ways it was thrown off course into emergency and my death, is a story for another time. The important tale I wish to recount is how I lost that Timothy forever.

Ah, but now I remember why I began to tell my own beginnings. I wanted you to know the end: the first night I awoke as a vampire, I found myself held in Timothy's arms on the thick feather bed he shared with Blake.

Panic gripped me. Even the bravest of my kind have gone through that first horror, when they wake up and find their body dead. But Timothy held me still, and stroked my hair, and whispered "It's all right. You are safe, and you are loved."

He needn't have bothered with the words, really. Past the initial moment of dread I was already calming down just from his scent. Vampires who are kin can recognize each other, though 'recognize' is a poor approximation for the sensation. Perhaps there's no true equivalent in the realm of human experience, for this sense is not familial, nor erotic, but it does contain elements of how those connections feel. It is the pack. It is knowing you are close to another of your pack.

Other vampires can scent it on you, Jay. That you belong with Blake, and Timothy and myself, and Raoul and Sebastian and Mikhail and Carrillo and the rest. You are marked as Blake's pack, in your blood, though you yourself will only become aware of it once you are turned. If you aren't turned, and your blood is given the chance to revert eventually to normal, the scent will fade. Or, at least, so I am told — it's highly uncommon for a marked human to do anything but become a vampire, sooner or later.

"You are safe, and you are loved." He didn't need to say the words, but they were a comfort in the beat of time before I recognized him and recognized the room and remembered what had happened.

Vampires are creatures of packs, and we are highly territorial. Population densities have made the situation far worse in this last century — now border skirmishes between the packs are almost as common as battles with roaming groups of the wild misfits.

It was during one such border skirmish that Timothy was killed. We lost members from time to time, but not as frequently as some packs, for Blake is a smarter, stronger leader than his frivolous heart might suggest. We lost members but I had never thought for a moment that Timothy could ever be among their number. A silver crossbow bolt had punctured through his right eye, into his brain. We

are a difficult creature to kill, but it can be done.

Damage the brain, remove the head, destroy the heart — we are not all that much less fragile than humans, in the end, just a little more durable.

Blake tells me that an apt modern metaphor you will understand is that of a ruined computer. A dead vampire's body heals itself if it can. This is, after all, what vampire bodies do. Provided the remains are mostly intact — not ashes, or too badly dismembered; some things even we cannot rebuild from — the body will repair. It will even wake up, and go back to its previous state of robust undeath. But — and here is where I rely on Blake's proffered computer analogy — the memory banks are restored to the factory defaults.

To elaborate: I am twenty. My face is twenty, my body is twenty. If I take this fountain pen and stab it into the back of my hand, my clever skin will knit and regrow to the pattern it's locked to: me, aged twenty. It did this when I was twenty-one and, should I live this long, it will do it when I am twenty-one-thousand. I stab my hand and it grows back to exactly as it was the day I died, when I was twenty.

The same is true for brains.

I wept for Timothy, of course. He was, and is, the love above all loves for me. And then, when I was done weeping, I readied myself to begin again. I held him carefully, cradled him, as his body healed itself. I waited for him to wake up. And then he did, with a violent start, looking at me with terror and no recognition in his beautiful eyes.

"It's all right," I said to him, doing my best to smile. "You are safe, and you are loved."

His brows furrowed in confusion, and he answered me in a language long-ago lost to time. He was, it seemed, far, far older than either Blake or I had supposed. He knew none of the languages our Timothy had, not even the dusty cadences of Latin and ancient Greek.

He has never told us what memories he has, what life was his in those years before he first became a vampire. He learned English quickly, and other languages as well, but even once we could converse with ease he would never say.

I know he loves us, but I know too that our love is a heavy burden for him to bear. He feels he has no claim to it, since he is not the Timothy who earned it. He is, in many ways, scarcely older than you are.

And so I am sincerely grateful for you, and for the role you play in our family. You are the brother he needs very much. I regret deeply that I gave you cause to pull away from him, and I am glad that you returned.

As a token of my gratitude to you, I have asked a number of those who owe me favors to find out whatever they can about Liam and Sofie. You must never doubt that you are a part of the home here in this modest townhouse, but the faraway look I see in Timothy's eyes sometimes has taught me the importance of knowing what has become of the family one grew up within. I will let you know as soon as I have answers to give you.

With respect and fondness,  
Alexander

# BETTE

It's distressingly easy to go back to ordinary life. Bette does extra shifts at work, and gets into fights at school, and everything's just boring and normal for three days. When her cell phone rings one evening and the display reads 'Gretchen', the mere fact of something different and unpredicted excites Bette enough that she answers before the second ring.

"Hey, it's Bette."

"Hi Bette. It's Gretchen. Are you busy tonight?"

"Nope. All homework is successfully procrastinated until a later date. What're you up to?"

"Well. This probably sounds like the dumbest idea ever, but a friend of mine has a tattoo studio, and when I mentioned that I had a friend who wanted to get a tattoo done, she said I could borrow it tonight. The studio. She's out of town this week, so it's all shut up. Do you still have the drawing Rose did for you, of the bird?"

Bette's smile is so wide it practically makes her face hurt. Thank goodness her ordinary-life rut didn't last long enough to send her crazy. "I certainly do indeed."

Which is how she winds up in a tattoo studio downtown, sitting as still as she can manage as Gretchen transfers the bird design carefully onto her arm with a pen as a template for the needle. Gretchen is meticulous and careful, and the design looks exactly right. Bette's glad of that, but it's not like she would have kicked up a fuss if it was slightly wrong — sixteen-year-olds getting tattooed illegally by their friends probably aren't allowed to bitch about things like that, Bette figures.

The tattoo needle makes an earsplitting sort of whir as Gretchen begins to ink the design on permanently, but even over that din Bette can hear the beauty of Gretchen's voice as she sings softly to herself.

"You should make an album," Bette says when Gretchen pauses to load more ink onto the needle. "Or at the very least record one of your shows. You have an amazing voice. It's really beautiful."

Gretchen gives Bette a small, almost sad smile. "Artie always used to remind me that not all beautiful things must be preserved beyond their moment. I sing because I love to sing. I have no reason to keep a record."

Bette opens her mouth to argue, but Gretchen keeps talking before she's got a chance to say anything.

"Have you heard the story of Elena's Tomb? It was a story, but it really happened. In the 1930s. There was a man, a Count. From Dresden, actually. He fell terribly, terribly in love with a girl named Maria Helen, though his pet name for her was always Elena. She was twenty-one and the most beautiful girl in their village. The Count showered her with jewels and clothes and riches and his undying devotion, but none of that mattered. It didn't matter if his devotion was undying, because she was not. Elena had tuberculosis, and in those days that meant certain death, and so she died.

"The Count built a beautiful tomb for his beautiful dead love, and visited it every night. She was still the only thing that mattered to him and, though she was gone forever, he could not let her go.

"Two years later, the Count stole her away from her tomb and kept her in his house. He rebuilt her face with silk strips dipped in plaster, and made her body lovely again with disinfectants and perfumes and stockings and jewels and wire loops to hold her bones together. For seven years he held her every night, close in his bed, until her family discovered what he'd done and took her back to be buried once more. So then he took a death-mask casting of her face as it had once been, when her flesh was lovely and her spirit only just gone. Out of the mask and silk scraps and wax and ribbons, he remade his twice-lost love again, and lived with her until he died. Now his bones are on display, alone, in a

Believe-It-Or-Not hall."

Bette mimes a retching motion. "God, no wonder Rose has a total girl-boner for you. You're as gross as her. Gross, gross."

"Do you know what the moral of that story is?" Gretchen asks, head tilted to one side, staring at Bette intently.

"Uh, that you're totally disgusting, and that some people are freaks?"

"That there are some lovely things that perish no matter how much we wish that they would remain, and that trying to hold onto them when they're gone kills a part of us in the process."

Bette rolls her eyes. "You've made a mountain-metaphor out of a molehill there. I suggest that you tape a couple of songs and you give me a parable about corpse-fucking. A sense of perspective might come in handy, you should think about one."

Gretchen nods seriously, like Bette's given her a piece of genuinely useful advice, instead of Bette just being a sarcastic jerk as per usual.

Bette scrunches her face up and fidgets in her chair, squirming around as much as she can without moving her arm. "I hate all that stuff. Sick guys doing awful things to girls. I guess that sounds weird from someone who likes violent movies as much as I do, but that's how it goes. The only monster I've ever had nightmares about is Jack the Ripper."

"No." Gretchen shakes her head. "He wasn't a monster. Do not make him one. He was just a man with a sickness. There is true evil in the world, yes, but there are no monsters. Just people, and when they are dead they are dead. No need for nightmares. He's gone and his mad thoughts and deeds are gone with him."

"Do you really believe that? That... are the dead always completely gone?" Bette asks awkwardly, looking at Gretchen's dark bangs and paper-white skin and even, sharp little teeth. Gretchen's elegant eyebrows furrow in confusion at the question, her eyes with their forest-green contacts and inky mascara narrowing.

"Are you talking of ghosts?" she asks Bette. "There's no such thing, I promise."

"No. It's silly. I just thought... I don't know, sometimes with you I think... it's dumb. Never mind." Bette looks away, blushing.

"It's all right." Gretchen turns off the tattoo gun and rests a cool palm on Bette's forearm. "What is it?"

Bette swallows. "Vampires."

"Hm." The sound Gretchen makes is non-committal. She folds a paper towel into quarters, wets it with disinfectant, and wipes excess ink and blood away from Bette's skin. The bird's wing and face are colored, a brilliant vivid blue, and the paper towel comes away patchy and purple. Bette's skin feels like sunburn, tender and hypersensitive.

"Do you remember the first time you discovered something terrible about the world?" Gretchen asks, still carefully cleaning Bette's arm. "That all things age and wither, or that your parents had human flaws?"

Bette nods. "Sure, I guess."

"Do you remember how, once you knew this thing, you could never un-know it? How you felt a little part of who you were die, and re-grow as someone older and sadder for the wisdom? What you speak of now holds that threat. Be certain it's a price you truly wish to pay before you ask."

Gretchen turns to the work table and begins refilling the ink dishes with fresh splashes of color. Bette swallows nervously, then shakes herself to clear her spine of shivers. Gretchen really is just as bad as Rose with all this crazy diva stuff, acting like this is some big dangerous threshold that Bette

should hesitate at. She already knows that vampires exist, and Gretchen's reaction makes it pretty clear that she does too. Bette's got more than a hunch that Gretchen might even be one herself. It's not like there's much innocence on the subject left to get crushed if she asks questions.

"So you're a vampire?" Bette asks. Gretchen doesn't look at her. Bette's arm is beginning to sting.

"Yes."

Bette breathes in. "Sorry to disappoint, but that doesn't really compare with finding out that Santa's not real."

Now Gretchen does turn, and her expression is rueful and fond and frustrated and sad. "What a young darling you are, Bette. You have no idea how young."

Bette scowls. "I'm not a kid."

Gretchen hefts the needle gun in her hand once again, and wipes away the newest blood welling on Bette's little blue swallow. "You don't even understand yet what it means to have a vampire as your friend."

"Tell me, then."

Gretchen tilts her head and looks at Bette silently for a long, long second. "There's only ever one reason for a vampire to notice a human, or spend time in their company."

Bette swallows nervously, and feels her heart rate kick up to a faster beat. Her voice is quiet and breathless when she speaks. "Because you want to bite them?"

Gretchen's smile is sad and old and strangely gentle. "No. We bite so many that we hardly notice them. They're shadows flickering on fireside walls. But you are so sweet to think that."

Bette swallows again and feels a little bit like she did the day she realized that dragons only existed in stories. It's awful to think that Gretchen doesn't think of people as people, doesn't notice them. It's sad and horrible and okay, maybe Gretchen kind of had a point with her warnings about what this would feel like to know. Bette forces herself to speak normally. She's not going to get dragged into this melodramatic crap.

"Okay," she says. "What, then? What's the reason for a vampire to notice a human?"

Gretchen smoothes a lock of hair off Bette's forehead with soft, soft fingertips, the whorls of her fingerprints ghosting coolly against Bette's skin before Gretchen drops her hand down to hold Bette's wrist in place.

"We notice those we long to turn," she explains, and then the whir of the tattoo needle cuts, abrasive, through the quiet, and Gretchen goes back to working on Bette's design.

"Is this difficult for you? Being next to somebody who's bleeding, I mean," Bette asks, to fill the noisy silence.

Gretchen makes an 'mm-hmm' noise. "A little. We get used to it as we get older. Accustomed. At first it's harder to resist... like teenagers with sex, I suppose." She gives Bette a teasing smile. "It's such a new sensation, and it overwhelms. But I haven't been a teenager for a very long time. To be quite honest, the smell of your blood is very pleasant for me. Much like the smell of coffee or pizza might be for you when you are only a little hungry and can wait."

"Does music sound different?"

"No. Music is the one thing which remains the same."

They're quiet after that, until the tattoo is finished. It looks absolutely beautiful, and Bette is awed by the idea that this is a part of her now, something Rose designed for her will be on her skin forever. She can't stop smiling.

The night is cool and quiet around them as they leave the tattoo studio. Gretchen seems distracted, caught in her own thoughts. Bette lights a cigarette and they linger together, neither suggesting that

they should go anywhere but where they are.

"I've seen... it doesn't feel like so much, not really. It all fits inside my head," Gretchen says after a long time of quiet, tilting her head back to look up at the stars. "I suppose it is a lot. I don't feel the wiser for it, most of the time. Just tired. I remember when these stars looked different, you know. I used to be so scared of them. That sounds silly, but I was. I was so scared of the stars, because they were such a long, long way away, and so terribly huge. It was impossible not to feel hopeless and small beside that kind of scale.

"But now I find them a comfort. They take so long to move that I can reconcile myself to the passage of time. People..." she sighs, and closes her eyes, her head still tipped back. The shadows beneath her lower eyelids are very deep and dark. Those bruise-like purple smears come from a lack of oxygen in the blood. Bette remembers that from science class. She wonders if such marks happen to vampires when they need new blood in them, or if exhaustion governs that thin skin for them just as it does for people.

"People are so fast," Gretchen says quietly, her voice terribly sad. "They're too fast. I can't keep up. I can't run the treadmill of days and nights and months and years. I fall behind. The stars, I can almost keep up with. And sometimes... sometimes the idea of being tiny and unimportant and meaningless is." She pauses and straightens her posture, glancing at Bette for a moment and then shaking her head. "I was going to say a comfort, but it's not. It's never a comfort. But it's an absolution. Everything I feel, no matter how overwhelming... it's just tiny. Conquerable, compared to the stars."

They walk a little, along the cobblestones of the gutter to the corner of the street, where the lights are a little brighter and there is intermittent traffic. Bette's glad of that — Gretchen's slow words and the quiet darkness of the road were beginning to send shivers up Bette's spine.

"I've been married five times," Gretchen says, her tone more conversational now, as they pass the late-night shops with fluorescent windows and the dark glass of those already shut up for the night. "Not all of those had ceremonies, of course. I didn't have a wedding with Artie. But there have been five, five people that I've spent time with. Until death do us part. The vows would mean less from me than from most other brides, I think." She smiles, her eye teeth dimpling the plump of her lower lip. "There have been others as well, of course. So many others... but those five are the five that hurt the most. I carry those five holes inside me. Artie is the newest and the rawest, but the others ache as well. I..."

Gretchen stops walking mid-stride, outside a closed store with woodblock prints and cards and calendars on display in the window, and takes Bette's face between her hands. Her palms are trembling.

"Are you another Virginia Poe, Bette?"

Bette makes a puzzled noise. "I don't kn —"

"Edgar Allan Poe's wife," Gretchen elaborates. "He was a hopeless romantic, more hopeless than most. He always fell in love with the dying, with doomed and beautiful girls, thin and pale and already sick with what would kill them. She was playing the piano and he thought she'd burst a blood vessel in her throat because the blood just came and came, past her lips and down her chin, but it was tuberculosis. She took such a long time to die.

"She was only one of the pattern, the one we know the most about. There were other girls, right back into his childhood, other women who were just the same. It was like he had some compulsion to repeat the pattern, to fall in love with the dying as if eventually he'd find the secret to saving them. He never just fell in love with a healthy girl, one who'd stay at his side for the whole of his life.

"And it sounds so stupid when we talk about it, so self-indulgent and ridiculous, but I'm no better



than him, am I? I'm just another Edgar Allan Poe, forever chasing the chilled Annabel, the lost Lenore. I fall in love with those I would spend forever with, but I never fall in love with anyone who'll stay forever. I can't.

"If Artie had been a different man, a man who would have let me save him and turn him into something lasting, then he wouldn't have been the man I loved. For him to be who he was, it had to end the way it did. And it always ends that way, it always, always ends, and I'm so tired..."

Her eyes are bright and wild, and Bette feels sure that if Gretchen were capable of blushing then her face would be flushed, pink with the same half-mad emotion that makes her voice quiver.

"The critics said that Edgar killed Virginia. Hastened her death, at least. He didn't give her the tuberculosis, but he didn't save her as he might have, either. They said he'd done it so he could write his odes to her memory. His lamentations. Do I do that? Do I let them die where I might have kept them if I'd wanted it enough?"

Bette's blood runs icy. "Gretchen, don't..."

"You and Rose would be such beautiful vampires, Bette."

Bette shakes her head, tears welling in her eyes. She tries to pull away but Gretchen holds her still. "Please don't do this," Bette whispers. "I don't want to die. I'm still just a kid."

"So was I." Gretchen hangs her head and lets Bette go, but she looks so small and alone that Bette can't bear to run like she knows she should. "I'm leaving this city. If I stay, I'll fall in love with you and Rose. I think I have already." She gives Bette a twisted, rueful smile. "And so I'm going to go. I'll let you have a life. I can give you that. I could give you so much else, but I think that is most valuable."

Bette nods. "Thank you," she replies, her voice a whisper.

Gretchen's smile softens, becomes resigned and sad. "Goodbye, Bette." She turns, walking away.

"Wait," Bette says quietly, knowing she won't have to raise her voice for Gretchen to hear. "You... I mean. I can't give you that. I wish I could, but I can't. I'm going to grow up and make music, like I promised Artie, and start a revolution, like I promised Russ. I have a hell of a lot of life left to live before I'm ready to die. But I... I can give you tonight?" She bites her lip, hoping the offer doesn't sound as pathetic and lame to Gretchen as it does to Bette's own ears.

But Gretchen steps back to her side, and takes her hand, and then leans in and kisses Bette gently. If Rose ever hears about this, Bette is so totally a dead woman.

"I'd like that very much," Gretchen says, and smiles.

~

Bette goes to school the next morning with the ghostly memory of Gretchen's teeth in her neck making her shiver whenever she thinks of it, and the ghostly taste of Gretchen's blood on her tongue whenever she swallows. She's distracted all day, even when Rose and Tommy and Jay come home with her and they all mess around in her garage on instruments. They've almost got something approximating a song already, even if it does have totally crazy lyrics.

"They're about a story a friend told me," Jay answers, when Tommy asks about the verses that're in Jay's looping scrawl. "They went to this little country in Europe where there was this giant golden statue of an egg, and the idea was that someday something beautiful was going to hatch out of it, you see? And my friend was there with his friends and they all thought yeah, whatever, it's a nice idea but it's really just a big lump of metal, you know? Metaphors don't mean anything in the real world.

"And they were out walking in the snow one night, and Alexander — that's the friend who told me

the story — heard this howling, because the wolves were coming back. They'd been wiped out from the area years and years before, but now they were coming back. And that seemed like it meant something, to him. More than the statue, even."

"Cool," Rose says, smiling. Bette just shrugs. She's feeling punchy today. Spoiling for a fight. If she hadn't been so distracted at school all day, she might've been able to get into a brawl with a jock asshole or something, but she didn't think to and now she's got no outlet.

Tommy and Rose's mom calls Tommy's phone and summons them home for dinner. Jay starts to pack up his stuff, too, and Bette is trying to untangle and wind all the cables and cords but they're knotted and they just get worse as she tries to pull them apart.

"Hey, calm down," Jay says, and she realizes she's been grumbling to herself out loud. He puts a hand on her shoulder and she shrugs it off, feeling furious for no particular reason except that she's thirsty and cranky and she wishes that people wouldn't touch her without permission.

"Bette?" Jay looks a little wary of her, and takes a step back.

Before her brain catches up with what her fist's planning, Bette's already landed a punch square on Jay's mouth. His lower lip splits against his teeth, leaving a streak of blood on her knuckles as she pulls her arm back and blinks at him. Jay looks more surprised than hurt.

Bette's never been some kind of sadistic freak who gets off on fighting or anything, mostly because she usually really hates, loathes, whoever she's trying to fight with, and she might be fucked up but she's nowhere near fucked up enough to get turned on by the bullies at school.

Plus, she might be a teenager and all, but she gets in a hell of a lot of fights, and even teenagers aren't mindlessly, totally, fuck-or-die horny that much of the time. It'd make getting through a normal week pretty tough, not to mention how expensive her condom budget would end up.

The point is, clocking a guy in the jaw for being an asshole doesn't typically make a bolt of want and need hit Bette in the belly and shoot down, doesn't make her breath go raggedy and her arms and hands ache. But Jay's staring back at her, looking just as shocked and wild-eyed as Bette feels, and when he sucks his wounded lower lip into his mouth Bette growls, this weird choked groan noise she had no intention of making, and then she's grabbing Jay's stupid poser hair and pulling his head down so she can kiss him hard, rasping her tongue against the tiny cut so she can taste the blood.

She is a creepy, creepy, fucked up freak. So is Jay, apparently, because he's kissing her back just as hard, one palm grazing against the edge of her breast as he pulls her closer, the other sliding up her arm and over her shoulder to her hair. On the way, his hand brushes over her collar and the bruises underneath and Bette shivers hard, groaning softly against Jay's mouth.

Bette doesn't even care if this is a bad idea or if it screws up the band or anything. She just doesn't, doesn't care. She breaks the kiss for long enough to take a step back and wrench her shirt up and off. She's wearing one of her older, kind of scummy-grey sports bras underneath, but she doubts Jay even notices her bra at all with the way his eyes are fixed on her bruises. His cheeks are flushed a hectic red, expression curious and dazed.

"Those look new," he says. His fingertips reach out to touch the cut and Bette tilts her head, encouraging him.

"They got reopened last night."

"Oh," Jay says, and Bette gets the feeling that she could have said anything and he would have reacted in the exact same way. Before she can tell him he's a jerk who doesn't pay attention to what people are saying, Jay leans in and swipes his tongue against the bites, and Bette gets another sharp hard jolt of want through her bones.

She manages to get his shirt off, and finds the little dark bruises on his own neck, with little pale

fang scars in the middle of them, like makeup from a horror movie.

"Did Remember the Stars save you, too?"

"Huh?" Jay asks, still nuzzling at the soft pulse below Bette's jaw, his hands roaming over the bare skin of her lower back.

"Were you attacked? Did the hunters save you?" Bette specifies. As wild and unlikely as it is, she can't help but hope that Jay has met another vampire like Gretchen. To be able to talk to someone who understands how confusing and crazy something like that is would be a weight off Bette's heart, but she's not stupid enough to expect that it's going to happen.

Jay moves away from her throat and steps back, a strange and almost ashamed expression on his face. "Nobody saved me. I'm, um. Kind of dating one. A vampire, I mean."

"Oh," Bette answers absent-mindedly, because apparently sometimes she's just as vague as him. Then, the words sink in, and she blinks. "Wait, seriously?"

Jay takes another step back, looking around the garage floor for his shirt. "I guess I'd better, um, go."

"Are you —" Bette starts, words tumbling over themselves in her nervousness and haste. "Are you exclusive? Because my mom isn't home and there's condoms up in my room and I think that if I don't have sex my vagina's going to explode, which would be a shame because I love my vagina most of the time, but I don't want some vampire pulling my arms and legs off for molesting their boyfriend."

Jay looks back at her, not picking up his shirt, and swallows. "No. No, not exclusive."

Bette breathes out in relief and grabs his hand, leading him toward the door into the house. "Good."

~

Weekends where Bette's mom wants them to see family are the absolute shittiest weekends of all the kinds of weekend there can be. These meetings are never on actual occasions, like a birthday or Christmas or Thanksgiving or anything. They're just whenever Bette's mom gets an attack of the guilts for not seeing them and calls everybody and arranges a lunch at Bette's grandparents' house.

This is Bette's mom's own family, not the people still alive on Bette's dad's side, and Bette's mom has like a zillion sisters and cousins and brothers and sisters-in-law. When Bette was going through a really awful awkward stage when she was thirteen, all of her boy cousins teased her and made her miserable. Now they try to see down her top and ask her if she's got a guy and that's all even grosser and stupider and more awful than the teasing was.

Bette's mom always makes her dress up really nicely for these family things, and that part is very closest to being the shittiest part of the whole thing. Today Bette's got a light blue sun dress made of linen, printed with darker blue little stars, and it practically starts creasing as soon as she looks at it. On someone else it might be pretty but Bette feels dumb and she knows that Darcy will be able to tell that Bette's dressed up in a fake version of herself.

Darcy is the worst part of the family days.

"How's school?" Bette's grandfather asks as they eat. It's leg of lamb and Bette's just eating the vegetables and not making a fuss, because back when she first decided not to eat meat anymore her cousins gave her heaps of shit and her grandparents sniffed and grumbled that kids didn't know how spoiled and greedy they were, turning their noses up at good food, and Bette's mom had frowned and looked disappointed. So now Bette just shuts up and eats lots of pumpkin, imagining that it's the pulpy orange flesh of a grinning, fanged, fiery jack-o-lantern, and that eating it gives her dark demonic

powers.

"Good," Bette answers, wishing that'd be enough of an answer to satisfy them. She knows from experience that it's not, though, so she searches for something family-friendly and cheerful to say that's not about detention or getting beat up or freaks leaving dead puppies in the gym. "My friend Rose is in the school musical. I'm doing good in Chemistry, so my teacher wants to put me in this achievement program for high schoolers that the university runs. It's more homework, but it looks good on college applications."

Darcy makes a noise that only Bette will think is anything but random and accidental.

Darcy has pumpkin in front of her too, in a little plastic bowl, and she's spooning little mouthfuls of it to Kristina, the plump dark-haired nine-month-old wriggling on Darcy's knee. Darcy's not going to college any time soon, or even going back to high school any time soon. She has a pretty good job as a receptionist at an industrial laundry company, so it's not like she's miserable or hopeless or anything. Her life just went a different way to Bette's.

Bette heard about the laundry job from her aunt Sara, who's Darcy's mom. Bette and Darcy don't talk to each other much anymore, but Bette can remember when they were kids and the only two girls in a generation of boys and they would play dolls together. The stories they told with their dolls were always violent and weird, full of rapes and kidnappings and murders and other fucked up shit. Darcy had always gotten cranky if Bette mentioned something she'd done with Rose and Tommy, so Bette would do her best not to mention them, or to remind Darcy that they were family, and that was always gonna be as important as any other friends Bette had.

Then Bette's dad got sick and Bette remembers the wake, all of her family dressed up in black and crying and standing around Bette's house holding uneaten ribbon sandwiches full of disgusting stuff like egg and herb mayo and cucumber puree. Bette had felt so angry about that, that even now that the really awful sick-sad-waiting part was over, and they'd said goodbye and sang hymns and said prayers and everything, everyone was still miserable.

Bette had been so tired of being miserable. She wanted to be able to remember her dad for the good stuff, the way he hugged and how he told stories and the gross things he'd make for dinner if Mom was out in the evening. Bette wanted to have a party and yell and laugh and celebrate how great her Daddy had been and how much she was always going to love him, but instead everyone was still looking just like they had in the church for the funeral.

So Darcy and Bette had snuck upstairs and put on swimming clothes — Bette in the new bathing suit her mom had bought her for the trip they'd taken with Dad to the beach just after the last round of chemo failed, and Darcy in Bette's older suit because Darcy was skinnier. Then they'd put on lipstick and blush from Bette's mom's makeup table, and set up the sprinkler in the front garden of the house, and ran back and forth under the sharp cold spray, yelling and yelping at the shock of the cold on their sun-warm skin.

The grown-ups came outside, drawn by the noise, and Bette had heard some of them muttering about 'disrespectful children' and 'too young to understand death or grieving', and 'irresponsible'. Rose and Tommy had come over but Tommy was too sick to get wet like Bette and Darcy were, so Rose and Tommy just stood off to one side like pale big-eyed freaky gothic children from a weird picture book and watched while Darcy and Bette shrieked and screamed and ran around. And if Bette cried, the sprinkler washed away her tears and left her fresh and cool and strong.

But it was after that day that things had started to go shitty. Well, sort of shitty. That was the problem. Some things got better, and so Bette can never work out properly how she feels about all of it in her head. The compensation and insurance Bette and her mom got from Bette's dad dying turned out

to be more than they thought it was going to be, and Bette's mom decided that a big chunk of it should be used to send Bette to the prep school that Rose and Tommy had their names down for. Even though the school wouldn't take them until eighth grade, this decision made Bette relieved and happy, because she'd worried all the time about what was gonna happen when they were stuck at different schools, Rose and Tommy at one and Bette at another, and how that was going to ruin everything. Now it wasn't going to be a problem at all.

Bette and Darcy had never been in line to go to the same high school, because their families lived on totally opposite sides of the city and everything, so Bette had never imagined for a second that these new plans would affect them at all. But it had meant something to Darcy, something bitter and lonely and quiet, and they'd drifted apart and apart and now it's almost like they're enemies or something, which is awful and crazy.

The bird tattoo on Bette's arm — peeling a little, and rough to the touch, and so itchy she wants to amputate the entire limb, oh god seriously — has necessitated a navy cardigan over the linen dress. Her mom doesn't know about the ink yet, and it's going to be bad enough telling her without their entire family there too. Bette fiddles with one of the buttons of the cardigan, staring down at her plate, and tries not to think about Darcy or her dad or anything else until the whole horrible visit is over.

On the drive home Bette stares out the window, distracted, thinking about Darcy's baby and Bette's dad being gone and how sad and crazy and complicated ideas about good luck and bad luck actually are. At one point, as they're waiting at a stoplight, Bette's mom reaches over and gives Bette's arm a squeeze and says "I know it's rough sometimes, baby".

But if Bette's mom knows how much Bette hates these family gatherings, why does she always pitch such a drama fit when Bette says she doesn't want to go?

"Can you drop me off at Rose and Tommy's?" Bette asks and god, even her voice sounds miserable and tired. Her mom gives her a worried, small smile.

"Sure. You don't get enough wear out of that dress. It suits you."

"I feel more comfortable in my normal clothes. They suit me better on the inside," Bette protests, still sounding to herself like a worn-out and unhappy child. Bette's mom sighs with a bit of weary frustration of her own, and that makes Bette feel guilty, so she adds "But sure, I'll wear it out tonight. The dress. I think Remember the Stars are playing. Don't wait up."

Bette's mom shakes her head. "I know better than to try to with you, kid. I consider it a victory if you make it home alive within the week."

Overcome with a sudden wave of affection for her mother, Bette leans over and gives her a peck on the cheek. "Okay, boss. Come back alive. Got it."

~

Rose and Tommy are both down in the basement, Rose painting that secret project she isn't letting Bette see, and Tommy's getting killed badly on the X-Box.

"Seriously?" Bette asks as she reaches the foot of the stairs — she came the normal way for once, figuring that rosebushes and windows were most likely not all that linen-skirt-friendly. "Who gets beaten by the computer?"

"It's on 'hard' setting," Tommy objects defensively. "Let's see you do better!"

"Soon as you hand that controller over," Bette promises with a smirk. She suspects her face still looks a little wobbly and morbid from all the moping (her mom would call it sulking) she was doing before. Luckily, Rose and Tommy are just about the least socially observant people on the face of the

earth, and don't notice.

After proving to Tommy that computer-controlled opponents are easy as shit to beat and seriously, he plays like a girl, Bette stretches her legs out in front of her and wiggles her bare toes, visible through the crisscross straps of her black sandals. "I had to do family stuff today," she says.

"Need a drink?" Rose asks, and Bette knows she's just being helpful but Bette fucking hates it when Rose is drunk, she's sick of it, and it just makes her mood worse. She gives Rose a hard look, but can't be sure if Rose was drinking before Bette got there — she might just be happy because it's the weekend and it's warm and she's painting and hanging out with Bette and Tommy. Rose's needs in life are simple, if specific.

"Nah," Bette shakes her head. Then, on an impulse, because she hasn't actually been thinking about this at all, "I'm thinking of going straight-edge. No drinking, no substances. I feel like that would leave me less shit to worry about all the time, you know?"

"Like when Billy Corgan shaved his head," Tommy agrees, because sometimes Tommy is just as random and weird as Rose can be. Bette gives him a look, but he just nods. "No, for real."

"That guy in The Smashing Pumpkins?" Bette asks.

"Yeah. He shaved his head so he didn't have to think about his hair anymore."

"Hah," Bette replies. "I figured he was just going bald."

"Okaaaay done!" Rose says suddenly. "Bette, come see. I made you something."

The picture is of a pair, a man and a woman, in old-fashioned clothes. They're holding a baby between them, a tiny beautiful little girl, and all three of them are smiling joyfully. Beneath the hem of the baby's lacy dress are a dozen long, waving tentacles, like those of a pink octopus.

At the bottom of the canvas, in uneven calligraphy, is written 'For sale: Baby shoes. Never worn.'

"To remind you that there's usually a more hopeful way to look at things," Rose says, putting her arm around Bette's shoulders. Bette continues to stare at the picture, unsure of what to say to express how touched she is by the gift. The picture is brilliant, the best Rose has ever done, and it was done for Bette.

"I love it," she manages quietly. "Thank you."

"I think I'm gonna dress up tonight," Rose declares. "A skirt and everything. Tommy, you gonna come out with us?"

"I can't. Going out with Michelle. Want to invite Jay instead?" Tommy asks. Bette shoots him a look.

"What?"

Tommy holds out his phone. "Invite Jay. Don't give me that look. I know you think we just stand around being cooler than everybody, but he's my best friend. We do talk about things occasionally. I know you two hooked up."

The look of happy pride on Rose's face crumbles. "You hooked up with Jay?" she asks. Bette doesn't know how to answer that, so she grabs Tommy's phone and goes upstairs to get good reception.

"Tommy?" Jay answers.

"No, it's Bette," Bette says, then bites her lip. She doesn't know what else to say. "Um. We're maybe going out tonight. Just me and Rose. And you, if you want. Do you want to meet up? We're not going anywhere special. Just hanging out. But you can come if you like. But you don't have to. But —"

"Bette, it's cool," Jay says, and even in his deadpan tones she can hear the smile. "That would be nice. Where should we meet you? Oh, is it okay if my friend Timothy comes too?"

"Yeah, sure. Is he from school?"

"Um. No. He's... kind of a night person," Jay says, putting ever-so-stealthy emphasis on the final

phrase. Bette snorts.

"Oh, right. I'm pickin' up the subtext that you're puttin' down there, you code-talker you."

Jay laughs. He's got a nice laugh. Oh god, when did Bette turn into a teenage girl.

"We'll see you two at the mall, okay?"

"Okay," Jay says. "See you there."

# JAY

The mall isn't eerie when it's closed. Just vacant, empty.

"Like a doll when it's not being played with," Timothy says, in response to nothing in particular, and Jay smiles at him because they're on such a similar wavelength, it's kind of creepy and cool at the same time. Jay doesn't click that well with many people, and when he does it's usually people who don't talk much. Like Tommy, and Michelle. Jay loves them, but they're introverts, like him. Timothy is an extrovert. Or, at least, he might be an extrovert when extenuating circumstances aren't screwing him up five different ways at once.

Tonight Timothy's dressed in one of the weird formal outfits that the vampires sometimes wear when they go out, like they have to periodically play a role of a member of their pack in public or people will forget. Jay doubts anybody could forget how dangerous Blake's gang is, no matter what they're wearing, but nevertheless tonight Timothy's sporting an ivory-colored brocade coat over pale grey pants, a matching vest, and an off-white shirt. There's a silver pocket-watch chain on his vest and a silver pin holding his dark grey silk tie neat. He even manages to make it all look cool, somehow, which Jay finds very impressive.

"They leave the pets in the store overnight? Seriously?" Bette yelps, pointing at the faint glow of night-lamps in the glass window-pens at the pet store. Sure enough, there are a few kittens in one case, and a lone puppy in the other.

"Hey there, little guy," Rose says to the puppy, which is a mongrel of white and black, with out-of-proportion ears and paws and dark, wet, mournful eyes. "I think this might be my spirit animal. Seriously."

"Please." Bette snorts. "If someone locked you in a box with food and toys and somewhere comfortable to sleep, there's no way you'd be making little whimpery noises in the hope that someone would let you out. You'd wanna stay in there forever if you could."

Rose kicks her in the shin without much malice. "You're a douche."

"You're a double-douche. With, like, baking soda and feminine deodorant and thrush medication in it."

Jay makes a disgusted noise. "Can't you two at least pretend a little feminine mystique? For the sake of the menfolk present?" The protest would probably sound more convincing if Timothy wasn't cooing gently at the kittens in the next window over.

"I wish I could get him," Rose goes on, still having a staring contest with the puppy through the clear Perspex barrier. "But —"

"But he'd probably get lost under a pile of Tommy's old T-shirts and end up as the first of a race of mutant filth-dwelling hell hounds?" Bette guesses. Rose tries to kick her again, but Bette skitters out of the way and takes cover behind Jay.

"But, I was going to say, before I was so rudely interrupted," Rose huffs. "I don't think it's a good idea to have puppies in our neighborhood right now. Apparently there are a couple of total sickos doing awful shit to dogs. I overheard Mom talking about it on the phone, one of her customers lost both her schnauzers."

Jay and Timothy exchange a brief look, and Jay clears his throat. "Uh, that won't be happening anymore."

Rose looks confused for a minute, and then comprehension dawns across her face in the form of a wide smile. "Really? You're not just shitting me, right? Really? You killed that guy?" The last question is asked of Timothy, who shakes his head. "Oh, uh. Bette told me. That you're a vampire. We



don't care. I hope you don't mind I know. We knew some vampire hunters but they were sort of jerks, a bit. So we're neutral on the whole thing now."

Timothy blinks. "Oh. Okay. No, it wasn't me. It was someone Jay and I know."

"That is so fucking cool!" Rose's smile manages to get even brighter and broader.

Bette has edged away from Jay, away from the pet store and the three of them and further into the stark crowdless open area of the dark mall thoroughfare. She looks at Timothy, Rose and Jay with an unreadable expression.

"That's kind of fucked up," she says uncertainly. "I mean..."

"He was killing dogs, Bette. Puppies. In really awful ways —" Rose starts.

"I know that!" Bette snaps, cutting her off. "But it's still... I'm not really okay with hearing about people getting killed, you know? It kind of doesn't jive so great with my worldview."

Timothy looks miserable. "I'll go."

With a shake of her head, Bette holds her hands up in a 'no, stop' gesture. "You don't have to do that. I'm... we'll... let's just talk about something else, ok? We'll just pretend that this whole conversation happened to some other people. Some people who are living in a Wes Craven movie or something crazy like that."

Timothy nods. "Got it." He takes a deep breath, with Jay knows is just for show, just to make Timothy seem more normal. Jay appreciates that he's making the effort, and he gets the feeling that Bette and Rose do too. Timothy's not really fooling anyone with the whole "normal" thing, not under half-dim fluorescents in an empty mall, anyway. Maybe it would be a more convincing act in a crowd.

"Let's go out," Jay suggests. "To a club or something."

"Tommy said he and Michelle were going to go see Remember the Stars at that little downstairs place," Rose says. "The one with the mural."

Jay feels bad that he didn't know what Tommy and Michelle's plans were for the evening, but the feeling passes soon enough. They're a couple, after all. He shouldn't be expected to hover around being a third wheel every time to two of them felt like a night out.

"We could go do that, then?" Rose asks, sounding uncertain, giving Bette one of those weird mind-meld silent conversation looks that the pair of them do, like, all the time. Jay doesn't know if they're aware of it or not.

"Remember the Stars were a band I liked before I knew any of the members as people," Bette says decisively, like she's settling a complicated argument with herself, or maybe with Rose.

"Yeah," Rose echoes with a nod of her own. "Let's go see them. It'll be like old times."

Bette glances at Jay, then at Timothy, and her mouth curls up in one of her smarmy, smartass smirks. "Well, no. Not really that much like old times," she says.

They catch the train into the city centre, Jay and Bette in one double seat and Rose and Timothy in the one in front of them. Jay thinks that the seating arrangements probably ended up like that because Timothy and Rose are trying to give Jay and Bette a chance to hang out and talk to one another, but what actually ends up happening is that Jay and Bette sit and eavesdrop creepily on the conversation Timothy and Rose are having in front of them.

"I don't feel like I'm *not* meant to be a girl," Rose is saying. "I just... I've never felt like I *am* meant to be one, either. I'm just sort of... me." She shrugs helplessly, twisting her fingers together in her lap, plucking at the dusky velvet of her skirt idly. "Then, I don't know, this probably sounds super-lame, but when I was thirteen I got some money, because I won some stupid essay competition about the environment or something pathetic like that. And it was nearly Halloween, and we always do kind of a big deal for Halloween because it's badass and silly all at once, you know? Everyone gets to dress up

awesome and eat candy and watch horror movies, and Bette always ends up getting in trouble for TPing the trees of all the teachers who've given her detention.

"So I spent the money I'd gotten on this Jedi costume. You know, from *Star Wars*?" Timothy is nodding. Rose smiles. "Of course you know *Star Wars*. Everyone knows *Star Wars*, even vampires. So anyway, I put on the robes and the cloak and everything, and... I felt really powerful. Not in, like, a Jedi way, obviously, but in a way where I was suddenly fearless about what people might say about me, or what they thought about how I was dressed. Suddenly it didn't matter what they thought about it, because I knew I looked awesome and I felt kind of, I don't know, invincible or something."

Rose gestures emphatically, like she can make her point clearer through forceful movement. "It was this totally insane feeling and I'd never felt anything like it before. It was amazing. And... this is going to sound so dumb and lame, I know it. But I kind of feel like that when I wear this dress? Like, it doesn't matter how I look to anyone else, just like it didn't matter if people were smirking at me when I went out that night in the Jedi costume. Because I feel so beautiful, and so I'm completely fearless and invincible. It's like I'm playing a character. This is my costume. My Rose-as-a-girl drag."

Timothy waits for her to finish, and then nods. "That's cool. That you're so aware of the ways it makes you feel. Most kids aren't that self-perceptive."

Rose laughs softly. "I spend a lot of time in my own company," she says in a quiet voice, and then glances away from Timothy and out the darkened window at the light-lit city rushing past. "Do you ever start forgetting who you are?"

"What?" Timothy sounds taken aback by the question. Rose looks away from the window and back at his face, as if she's surprised by the sharpness of the way he asked the question.

"Well," she says, screwing her mouth up in a lopsided scrunch as she searches for the right phrasing. "What you're wearing is a kind of drag too, isn't it? And sometimes, if I wear this for too long, I start feeling like I'll forget what makes the real me who I am. The person I stay underneath when I dress up. It's like I get... blurry. That's not the right word, but I don't know what the right word is."

Timothy doesn't answer immediately, and when he does the pace of his words is measured and deliberate. "Yes. I know what you mean. And it does happen to me, sometimes. But... I don't hold together properly except when I'm letting myself get blurry. The character I'm playing is realer than the me underneath, most of the time, so if I took him off I'd be nothing much of anything."

"But, but, that's not true!" Rose protests. "You're... you're you. I've only just met you and I can tell that. People who are more pretense than truth are horrible. You're not horrible."

"I'm not even actually a people, either," Timothy points out, a little twist of sadness in his tone and the set of his profile. Bette and Jay are listening so intently that Jay suspects they would both stop breathing, if they could, in order to hear the conversation better.

"Oh, like I give a shit if you're a vampire." Rose snorts. "I don't like most people, and I don't even have the excuse of being a different species to them. I'm way worse than you."

Timothy reaches across and squeezes her hand. "No. I think you're pretty cool, actually. I love the way you wear your makeup. It's very old-school kinderwhore, like early Hole or Babes in Toyland."

Rose's eyes get comically wide, and Bette digs her nails into Jay's thigh like she's trying to distract herself sufficiently that she'll avoid bursting out laughing. Jay's not sure exactly how causing him pain is going to act as a useful distraction for Bette, but it seems to be working well enough.

"Oh my god, you are the first person to get that! That's totally what I was going for!" she says delightedly. Timothy grins, the happy effect only spoiled a little by the fact of his fangs.

"I love all that stuff. My cat is named Bikini Kill, after the zine and the band. I still have the

original issues of the zine from when it came out, somewhere at home. I could dig them out, if you're interested?"

The noise Rose makes in the back of her throat might be politely described as a yelp, or maybe a squealy squeak.

"Timothy manages to find the one girl for whom 'come see my collection of vintage riot grrrl crap' sounds like 'you must come up some time and see my etchings, my dear'," Jay whispers softly in Bette's ear. She giggles, turning a little, and suddenly her face is very close to his, and Jay can see the light pinkness across the bridge of her nose where sunlight has given her a very mild burn.

Her eyes are dark, the pupils dilated wide.

"I thought we were supposed to be the young lovers here," she quips, voice very quiet and a little breathless.

"No reason it can't be a double date," Jay points out, and kisses her. She tastes like spearmint and the stale crackle of cigarettes.

At the club they meet up with Tommy and Michelle, the six of them cramming into a booth off to the side as the band set up. After a second, Bette says "hang on", and walks over to Remember the Stars. They pause in their setting-up to chat to her, but their postures all seem tense to Jay. He shakes himself and turns back to look around at his friends. A smile spreads across his face.

"Get Rose's phone off her," Jay orders Tommy in a whisper, nodding in the direction of where Rose and Timothy are talking. Their topic of conversation seems to have moved to the work of Francis Bacon. Or Kevin Bacon. It's hard to be completely certain. Either way, they're talking animatedly, obviously enjoying themselves.

"Rosie doesn't carry hers. The battery's always dead," says Tommy. "Why?"

"I was gonna put Timothy's number in it. Couldn't hurt, right?"

Tommy quirks his eyebrows, readjusting his glasses on his nose. "I have a whole bunch of friends who are teenage girls already. You don't have to fulfill that role."

Jay punches him in the arm. "Cockface. They're having fun, aren't they?"

Tommy looks over just as Rose starts giggling at something Timothy said. They look so much like ordinary love-struck kids that Jay thinks it's kind of nauseating.

"That's kind of nauseating," remarks Tommy. "Okay, okay. When Bette gets back, I'll give you her phone and you can put Timothy's number in. She'll help us find a way to get Rose to call it."

"See, you're practically a girl too. It's not just me."

Bette comes back and the plan is carried out, Timothy's number added into the address book. Jay will explain the plan later. For now, there's music to listen to.

"Maybe it'll be us up there one day," Bette muses, nodding at the stage as the band's short set comes to an end.

"Do you have any songs yet?" Michelle asks. "Once you're really a band, I'm so going to be your manager. That would be cool."

Tommy whispers something in her ear, and she smacks him. "No, I'm not going to be your groupie, loser. God."

"We've got one song. Sort of," Rose confirms, hunting around in her purse before drawing out a folded-up sheet of paper, which she hands over to Jay. "These are the lyrics."

Timothy and Michelle both lean in to read the paper, and Jay, sitting between them, scans the words he already knows.

In a distant country

There's a statue of an egg  
And the shark dies in the final reel  
But that just means we don't have a name and face  
To put to fear anymore  
She scented my blood in the water  
But I never wanted her to die  
(And even if I did, I didn't kill her)  
In a distant country  
The wolves are coming back  
And even so, I'm still unformed,  
And even so I'm out of focus  
And in a distant country your baby's going barefoot  
But she's fine, she's fine, she's fine  
Death is not your friend  
Death is not a confidant  
But in the dark Death holds you  
When you cry beside the beds he emptied  
In a distant country  
That's how stories end  
And the way some childhoods will  
The haze distorts and throws mirages  
When I grow up I will be more than you can dream  
And in a distant country  
There's a statue of an egg  
And a sign that says  
Something beautiful is coming

Timothy finishes first, and gives them all a wide and blinding grin, fangs flashing. "That is so cool. I'd love to hear it, as soon as you have a demo."

Suddenly half the band isn't over by their stage, packing their stuff up. Anna and Lily are both crowded in near Timothy, looming over the still-sitting group.

# BETTE

The point of Anna's long, thin knife is over Timothy's breastbone, a fraction of an inch from slicing through the crisp cloth of his shirt, and Lily's got her menacing little gun held to Timothy's temple. He is completely still, still as stone, but his eyes are wide and afraid.

Michelle and Tommy look confused. Rose and Jay both look terrified, like Timothy. Bette doesn't feel scared, though. She's just so angry and worked up and they wouldn't let her fight with them and now they're threatening someone she has laughed with, with a blade and a gun. Bette is tired of this. She's had enough.

"Put the fucking gun down," she snaps at Lily. "And the sword." This to Anna. They don't move.

"There are no good vampires," Lily says quietly. "Whatever he's told you..."

"Fuck you. If you hurt him, you will regret it. I will make you regret it," Bette says evenly, standing up and beckoning for the others to follow her. "Come on, we're going."

"I can't let you do that," Anna warns.

"You can't stop me," Bette retorts.

Lily fires.

# JAY

The gunshot is loud. World-ending loud. It's an eternal, horrifying split second before Jay realizes that the wet splatter of gore on the side of his face isn't Timothy's brain. It's just blood and bone fragments. Timothy is still alive, his palm a mess where it was pressed over the muzzle of Lily's gun. There's a dark stain spreading over his pale jacket from a wound on his shoulder, too, where the diverted bullet ended up entering. Timothy must have moved at the very last possible moment.

"Run!" Bette orders, and the six of them are already moving before the first commotion of people looking around for the source of the noise has stopped. All four members of Remember the Stars are following them as they push through the back door of the club and out into the evening air.

"Split up!" Jay says. "Scatter!"

Tommy and Michelle, still looking bewildered, dart off in one direction. Bette and Rose head in another. Timothy, despite his injuries, hoists Jay onto his back and runs, faster than any human following them could keep up with.

When they're miles from the club, Timothy slows and lets Jay down again. Then he doubles over and vomits into the gutter, the blood leaving a viscous, dark splash on the ground.

"I ruined his music," Timothy says, voice cracking on the final consonant. "We had another — I tried to have another fight with him, but he never gets angry. I grabbed his records in their sleeves and I snapped them in half. All of them. Because I'm not who he needs to be and he's still pretending I am. That's what I said to him. Just before you woke up. That's why I was so keen to go out when you suggested it."

Jay is already scrolling through his phonebook to find Alexander's number. "It's okay. You're okay. That'll heal up fine," he says as he dials and waits for Alexander to answer. "Shame about the jacket, though."

He's trying to keep things light, but Timothy's face is pale and shocked and pained, so instead Jay just hugs him close until the car arrives to take them home.

# BETTE

Jay calls her just before dawn.

"Blake's on the warpath. So's Alexander. Stay far, far away from Remember the Stars, okay? In fact, stay inside completely for a couple of nights. Days, too, if you can. I'm going to skive off school a bit. Be a good idea if you all did, too."

It's cool for the first day. Bette fakes a stomach ache and watches a whole heap of bad daytime television, keeping in touch with the others through email. Rose keeps sending her bits of really awful fan-fiction based on Tim Burton movies, but Bette's not sure if this is stuff Rose is finding online or stuff Rose is writing herself, so she tries to keep her replies neutral.

On the second day, it's boring, boring, boring. Bette's going crazy. By the time night falls she's ready to climb out of her own skin just to get some freedom. For someone whose best friend is basically a hermit, Bette really doesn't deal well with being an enforced homebody, however temporarily.

She'll just got for one quick jog around the block. It's barely even dark out. No way any vampires would be this close to so many houses, especially not while the light of the sun is still painting gold and pink shades on the undersides of the clouds.

She's gone two blocks, reveling in the freedom and the air around her, when she hears a noise from behind her.

Bette turns. It's Lily, her face pinched and pale, her clothes rumpled and stained with dark splotches of blood. As she stares at Bette she tilts her head to the side in a graceless jerk, the movement uncanny and strange and completely inhuman.

"Hey, Bette. I'm kind of pissed at you," Lily says. Her teeth gleam in the low light, especially her fangs.

Bette runs.

No, no, no, it can't end like this, not when she's still got so much to do and not when she doesn't even know the story, how Lily got away from Jay's friends and how she woke up as a vampire at all and no, this isn't how it ends, oh god.

Bette runs, and runs, and then Lily catches her arm and Bette stumbles to a halt, sobbing in fear.

"Great tattoo," Lily says. Her hands are holding Bette's arm too tightly, squeezing to bruise, and then she pulls so fast that Bette cries out in surprise at the same second that Lily sinks her teeth in.

Bette wants to scream properly but her throat's not working, the same way it doesn't when she needs to cry out in her nightmares. She just makes a gurgling, choking sound, and that makes Lily bite even deeper.

Bette has never felt so sad. She thought she'd be scared, or angry, or — best case scenario — sensible and clever, in the face of a life-threatening situation. She'd keep her cool about her and find a way out and survive. But now she's here and Lily is gnawing and slurping at her arm, ripping the skin open wider, and Bette just feels sick and tired and sad and wishes she could tell her mom that she loves her and see Rose and Tommy again and kiss Jay and Gretchen, oh she's so sad about Gretchen, and she never even got to be a rock star or see the school musical or anything and it's not fair and she's so tired and sad and her tattoo must be ruined now and

"Poor bird," Bette murmurs, and then everything's gone.

She wakes up aching on cold-damp cement, with a serious case of cotton-mouth. All preliminary evidence suggests that she's at Rose's place and fell asleep on the floor during a movie. When Bette opens her eyes, though, she's in the docking bay next to the grocery store. Groaning, she sits up slowly. There's something in her mouth, and she spits into her palm as she shuffles over to lean her back against the bare bricks of the wall. The little pale shapes look like teeth, the roots whiter than the lightly nicotine-stained tips, but Bette's mouth doesn't hurt any more than the rest of her and when she runs her tongue along the top row of her own teeth inside her mouth they're all there where they should be. Her incisors feel a little weird, more tender than the rest, a little longer and sharper than she re —

Fuck.

Bette stares at the teeth in her palm for a while, not thinking anything, her mind blank. Then she throws them down in disgust and skitters away a bit, shifting down the wall like she's just discovered that she's been holding a piece of human remains at a murder scene or something. Exactly like that, actually.

Bette chokes on another groan, closing her eyes and breathing in deeply so she doesn't start freaking out. She feels sick and scared but her heart rate and breath are still slow and steady, so she's not about to have a panic attack or anything. She feels strangely grateful and surprised at how reassuring the feel of her heartbeat against her palm is. If she's still got a heartbeat, maybe being a vampire's not the end of the world.

Bette's next groan is mostly a sob.

Okay. Not time for a freak out. She needs to call somebody to come help her. Her legs won't hold her steady, she knows that without trying. She's got no energy at all. Rose. She'll call Rose.

The thought of Rose makes something greedy and ravenous flare up inside Bette, some new part of her brain that was lying dormant as she woke. She thinks of Rose's basement-pale skin and the coarse tangle of Rose's hair, imagines pushing that hair away from Rose's throat and leaning into the soft warm human smell and then biting and then drinking and drinking, and how Rose would try to fight and how Bette could hold Rose's arms down at her sides so easily and stop her struggling while Bette drank and drank and drank until there was nothing left.

Now Bette's heart rate has perked up a little.

Okay, so calling Rose is a really bad idea. Even if she really, really wants to, the new and snarling bit of her brain waiting eagerly for the rest of her to stop resisting.

Bette pulls her phone out of her jeans and stares down at the numbers. Rose wouldn't even demand to know what was wrong, she'd just come as quick as she could if Bette said she needed her. Maybe she'd bring Tommy, too. Bette wonders how similar the blood of fraternal twins tastes.

Rose's phone is turned off when Bette tries to call. For a second she's thankful, but then the predator-part of her takes over again and she knows that there's no way Tommy's phone will be off; he'll answer for sure.

She scrolls down to T. Above Tommy's number is one Bette can't remember adding: Timothy. Timothy was the name of Jay's friend. The vampire. She hits 'call' before she lets herself reconsider.

It takes four rings for Timothy to answer. "Elizabeth?"

"Bette," she answers out of pure habit. Thank god she hasn't developed that weirdo love of full names vampires have. "I'm next to a grocery store near that mall we went to. Do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember. What's wrong? Are you all right?"

Bette takes a deep, shuddering breath. He sounds so kind. She didn't realize how alone she felt until she heard someone kind. Maybe, if she asks, he'll bring Jay with him. Bette remembers Jay's



blood, the warm slick of it against her lip, the feel of his body against her in her bed. She ends the call before she can let herself beg Timothy for Jay.

She throws the phone away from her, as far as she can, and curls her face down against her knees. She's shuddering, but she doesn't cry. She's too tired to cry, and the night is loud around her.

# JAY

The concrete ground around the grocery store is already stained with the drips and splotches and marks any outdoor ground like that gets — gum, fuel drops, grease. In the late-night puddles of streetlight yellow the blood doesn't look all that different to the other marks, just another dark smear of something soaked into the parking lot.

Bette is curled up against the wall, rocking back and forth and making choked, whimpery noises, like a baby animal in pain. Her arms are crossed over her knees and Jay can see her tattoo on the bare, blood-smearred skin. There's a long, ragged scar slicing through the ink, already healed and white and flat. It makes one wing skew badly, like the hollow bone of it's been broken, and that throws the whole tattoo off-balance and makes it strange.

"Bette?" Timothy asks, touching her shoulder. Her head snaps up, expression wary. Her eyes are wide and catch the light like a cat's. She looks at Timothy for a second before shifting her focus to Jay. Jay's seen that look on her face before, that wild-with-wanting expression, but never so bare and uncomplicated.

"You should run," she tells him in a bleak voice, dropping her head down against her knees again. "I'll kill you if you don't run."

"No you won't." Jay steps away from Blake and Alexander, who are watching everything with their careful sharp eyes, and over to where Timothy and Bette are against the wall. "You're my friend."

"Am I?" Bette asks her knees. Jay doesn't know if she means that she didn't know that they've been friends for ages, that Jay doesn't go around joining bands and sharing secrets with just anyone, or if she means that she doesn't know if their old friendship still counts now that she wants to tear him apart and gulp at the wounds. Either way, Jay's answer is the same.

"Yes," he says, and crouches beside her. Jay gives Timothy a look, hoping it conveys 'seriously, you'd better not let her kill me, okay?' clearly enough, and holds his wrist out. "You are."

There's nothing human about the hungry, desperate noise Bette makes as she bites through the vein. Jay's used to the feeling it causes, and can push the promise of oblivion away with only a bit of effort. He squeezes Bette's knee with his free hand, but doubts she notices.

Jay expects the others to react badly, instinct telling them to fight anyone outside the pack showing interest in his blood, but when he looks over at Timothy there's a strange calm look on Timothy's face, almost serene but more like awe. It makes Jay think of Linda's face when she had the baby in her arms. Timothy reaches out to stroke Bette's hair and she leans instinctively into the touch, making a wordless contented sound against Jay's skin.

"It must have been that hunter of yours," Jay hears Alexander say to Blake.

"Lillian," Blake confirms.

Alexander's tone is dry. "I'm too old to share a home with this many teenagers. They'll want to watch their rock music videos at all hours and play those computer games that encourage sex and violence."

"Heavens. We'll have to start setting a good example for them," Blake replies, equally deadpan. Jay takes his hand off Bette's knee long enough to flip them off, then leans in close to Bette's bent head.

"You're part of their family now. They'll take care of you," he promises her, even though he's absolutely sure that this is by far the most fucked up clusterfuck in the history of clusterfucks and is probably going to lead to deep, deep shit for everyone involved. God, vampires are all such fucking idiots.

"All right, stop now," Timothy orders Bette, prying her off Jay's arm and helping her to stand up. She looks completely wrecked. Jay can sympathize. Alexander guides Jay to his feet and lets him lean his weight against him.

"Come on," Blake says, leading the way back to where the car is parked. "Let's get home before first light."

# Info & Credits

Mary Borsellino is an Australian writer in her thirties. She has a bunch of tattoos and a tendency to get passionately involved in things. Discover more of her writing at <http://maryborsellino.com/books.html> or email [mizmary@gmail.com](mailto:mizmary@gmail.com).

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