



THE  
*Vampire's*  
MELODY

—  
SWEET NIGHTMARES  
—

SOPHIE STERN

# Sweet Nightmares: The Vampire's Melody

Sweet Nightmares, Volume 1

Sophie Stern

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SWEET NIGHTMARES: THE VAMPIRE'S MELODY

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Every vampire must sing its song...

I'm just walking through an abandoned house, minding my own business, when - wham! - I'm no longer alone. Instead, I'm thrust into a world I know nothing about, a world I'm not ready for, and a world filled with real, live vampires. Well, I'm not sure that they're alive, but you know what I mean.

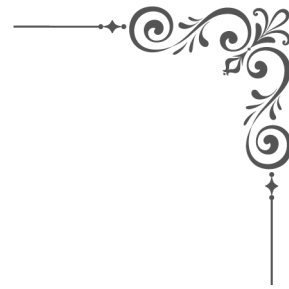
The people who live here in this house - the vamps - are older than me. They're more experienced than me. They're... broodier than me.

They also know that when this adventure is over, I'm going to have to make a very hard choice, and I'm just not sure that I'm ready.

Sweet Nightmares: The Vampire's Melody is a polyamorous, bisexual, open-door steamy book featuring vampires, biting, and lots and lots of fangs. This story includes puns, humor, joking around, pop culture references, and of course, lots of drinking blood.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It's no secret that a lot of care and love goes into creating every book a writer crafts. This one is no exception; however, this book is the first that I ran a Kickstarter for, which means I have some unique acknowledgements to make.

The Kickstarter for this book enabled me to offer hardcover editions, as well as special swag, including bookmarks and stickers I would not have otherwise been able to provide.

My backers have all been absolutely fantastic with both their emotional and financial support.

As a writer, creating worlds can be a lonely endeavor, but knowing that I have incredible readers who are rooting for me really makes all of the difference in the world.

With that, I'd like to acknowledge my Kickstarter backers and offer a very special "thank you" for helping to bring this project to life.

**Angie Johnson**

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**Farah Khan**

**Jamie Weber**

**Samantha Bosque**

**Bri Weiss**

This story is one I've wanted to tell for a long time, and I am both thrilled and honored to be able to offer this adventure to you.

I'd also like to take the time to thank *all* of my readers for taking the time to read my story. You're the reason that writers keep creating. You're the reason all of this is even possible. When I decided to write a polyamorous queer vampire story, I was blown away by the excitement and support for the project even before I actually started writing. Thank you!

With that, I present to you, SWEET NIGHTMARES: THE VAMPIRE'S MELODY.

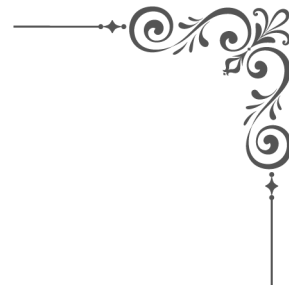
I hope that Melody's story is one you'll never forget.

Love,

Sophie Stern

*Every vampire must sing their song.*

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# 1

## Melody

Traipsing through the woods at five o'clock on a Thursday night isn't exactly my idea of fun, but this is the price I pay for friendship.

I crouch down to take a couple of pictures of a fallen log. Violet will love that shot. She's all about the scenic pictures that lead up to the buildings we explore together.

Her website, *Everything You Need to Know About Urban Exploring*, is wildly popular. In fact, it's grown so much over the last year that she's talking about bringing on an assistant or two. She doesn't have the funds for that right now, which is how I got roped into being her photographer tonight.

It's fine, though.

I can get the photo shoot done quickly and make it back to town for my seven o'clock shift at the bar I'm working at – Red's. It's a stupid name for a bar, to be sure, but Marcus Red has been running the bar since he was old enough to drink, so it's something of a town legend. He's a strict boss, despite practically being a skeleton at this point, so I can't be late.

*I won't be late.*

I take a few more pictures of the long-abandoned path I'm walking on, a couple shots of various trees and plants, and then I stop and look up at the mammoth building that rests before me.

"Found you," I whisper.

I kind of hoped I wouldn't.

The dilapidated building that stands before me is crumbling and falling apart, but I don't really care about the risks involved at this point. I'm still going in.

I have to.

I promised Violet I was going to take some incredible pictures, and it's no one's fault but mine that I'm so late the sun will be setting soon. Doing a little urban exploring in an abandoned orphanage isn't exactly something I really want to do in the dark, but I'm working all week, so it's literally now or never.

I glance at my watch.

It's only ten after five, which means I can do this fast and still get back in time for my shift at seven.

Right?

Right.

The front door to the building is hanging open. It's dusty, too. I think it's safe to say that nobody ever comes here. Despite the fact that this place was literally listed on an urban explorer's website as a place that people should check out, I don't think it actually sees a lot of foot traffic.

“Probably because everyone else comes during the day, dumbass,” I mutter to myself. With a sigh, I snap a picture of the front door before I carefully step inside. I move swiftly so that I’m not in the doorframe any longer than I have to be. This isn’t exactly the type of place that screams “you should visit.” It’s actually a little scary and kind of foreboding.

That’s the whole point, though. Right?

“Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

I take a picture of the front entrance area of the orphanage. The main hallway stretches toward the back of the building. There’s a staircase here that leads up, but there are so many holes and missing steps that I don’t think I’ll be going up there.

Rule one of urban exploring: don’t die while you’re alone.

It’s something I’m actually pretty nervous about, so I’m all about having carefully calculated risks throughout my experience here. According to the Internet, this place – Sweet’s Home for Children – was an orphanage that operated for more than a century before being shut down nearly 75 years ago because they were actually abusing children. The thought of it makes me sick.

I hate the idea that kids were being hurt. There’s a part of me that hates the idea that I’m here now, too. Isn’t it a little exploitive to be visiting a place that might literally be haunted by angry souls?

I’m not sure.

I’m just here to take pictures.

Click.

Click.

Click.

I snap a few shots of the hallway and the staircase. It's still light enough for me to get some clear photos, which is fantastic. Although I'm doing this as a favor to Violet, she's offered to buy any usable shots I bring her of this particular haunt because she wants to sell them to an urban explorer's magazine. This is awesome because I could definitely use the money.

Losing my last job – the one that actually paid decently - wasn't exactly on my to-do list, but what am I going to do?

Walk around an old orphanage, apparently.

Working at Red's is just a temporary thing until I find real, proper office work. In the meantime, I'm snapping pictures for Violet and...I don't know. Reevaluating my life choices, I guess.

The first floor is really creepy. There are dusty papers and notebooks littered on the floor. It's kind of strange because usually, places that make it onto urban explorer websites tend to be kind of picked over. Even though there's a policy of "take only pictures and leave only footprints," not everyone follows those rules. It's kind of disappointing since that means they're going to be ruining things for everyone.

After a few minutes of walking around, I can't really take the silence of this place. It's making me nervous. I know that I'm alone, though, so I decide to pop in my earbuds and play



some music. I realize that this isn't very safe but listening to music while I snap photos for Violet is going to make me feel a lot better.

I find myself swaying to the music as I leave the front hallway and head into what appears to be a living room of sorts. There's some old furniture that's really dusty. A couch is knocked over. I feel a little bad about this. Once upon a time, this place was probably pretty nice and really beautiful. On a whim, I push the sofa back up in place.

"There," I say.

I snap a picture.

It definitely looks like I posed the furniture because the dust is still sort of billowing everywhere, but it does look a little bit better. I feel a deep sense of satisfaction as I continue walking throughout the first floor.

I snap a picture of a cool painting that's still hanging on the wall somehow. That's one I'm surprised no one has stolen. It looks really beautiful. It's a painting of the orphanage itself, and although there are a couple of drops of blood on it – which is kind of weird – it seems to be in pretty good shape altogether.

I explore the kitchen, the dining room, and what appears to be some sort of classroom or meeting room. I'm definitely not going upstairs on those rickety-ass steps, although I'm sure that's where the bedrooms are. I think I've mostly seen everything there is to see until I notice a narrow door by the kitchen that's closed over, but not shut completely.

At first glance, I assumed it was a closet of sorts, but now that I'm looking at it, I wonder if it's a basement. Violet said this place didn't have a basement. That's what the website I found said, too. Apparently, everyone who has ever explored this place advises everyone to only go during the day and only to stay for a few minutes. Everyone seems to find this place creepy, but now that I've kind of gotten my bearings, it really doesn't seem so bad.

The orphanage itself is in the middle of some trees. I'm hesitant to call it a "forest" even though it actually is. Westbridge Forest is actually a pretty famous place, but it's also filled with lots of mysterious events and weird happenings.

But honestly, the trees are kind of straggly and sad, and the nearest town isn't terribly far – it's just several miles down the road. I parked in an abandoned parking lot and then walked over today. My car is only about twenty-five or thirty minutes from here on foot if I need to make a hasty escape.

Not that I'm planning on encountering any goblins or ghouls in the basement.

Reaching for the door, I see that it actually *is* concealing some stairs.

It's darker now. The sun is setting fast, and the interior of the house is no longer as bright as it was earlier. My music is still loud enough to cover the sound of my beating heart. For just a moment, I think about turning it off, but I don't really want to.

There's just something about this band that makes me feel safe and comfortable. *Sweet Nightmares* is one of the weirdest albums I've ever heard. It's by this band I love called Vampire's Shadow. I've always thought they would be cooler if they spelled their name with a "z." *Vampirez Shadow* sounds a little more badass to me.

Still, it doesn't matter because they're the best. Their music is so weird and sad and wonderful that it makes me feel so many different things all at once. I can't really describe it.

Pulling out my flashlight, I start walking down the stairs. There's a railing that feels sturdier than it looks, and I take the first few steps carefully. I wave the flashlight around, but I still can't see the bottom of the stairs yet. This staircase is longer than usual. It feels like it goes down more than one story. I count thirty stairs. Then the staircase veers to the left, turning sharply, and I count another 30.

I know this is a bad idea.

I realize I should shoot Violet a text just in case, but when I pull my phone out of my pocket, there are no bars down here. Awesome. I can keep going down or I can go back up, and I don't want to go back up. I'm scared out of my mind right now. What if there are spiders or rats down here? This definitely seems like the kind of creepy-ass space spiders would live.

Surprisingly, I haven't seen a single web, though. This part of the orphanage seems strangely cleaner than the upper level.

Weird.

A few more minutes and I'm finally at the bottom of the stairs. It's not an open basement. Instead, it's like there's a little landing and then a single door. There's about five feet from the last stair to the door, and I wonder whether I should try to open it or if I should turn around and go back upstairs.

This is the part of the horror movie where the too-brave heroine's friends all tell her to go back, but she doesn't listen, and she's the first kill.

*That won't be me.*

The hair on the back of my neck seems to prick up. I reach for my phone and pull it out. I turn off the music and pull my earbuds out. The phone goes into my back pocket and the earbuds go into my front right pocket. My keys are in the front left. Everything seems to be eerily silent now as I stand there with my flashlight staring at the door.

This is the kind of moment where things feel super surreal and then someone murders you.

I look around, but I'm alone. There's no hidden camera. There's no extra secret door. I don't think there are any secret passageways here.

It's just me and the door in front of me.

It feels like turning around and running away would be a total waste. Wouldn't I always regret it? I get the feeling that I'd spend the rest of my life wondering *what if*.

*What if there was something incredible behind the door?*

*What if I found a treasure?*

*What if there was an answer as to what happened here so long ago?*

So, I reach for the brass doorknob and I turn.

I'm a little surprised to find that it's unlocked. I'm not really sure why. It's just that there is a keyhole – an old one, like that requires a skeleton key – and it's a lone door at the bottom of a creepy staircase in an abandoned orphanage in the woods.

Why would someone leave this door unlocked?

I know the story of the orphanage. I know that it was shut down quite literally in the middle of the night. Everyone fled the premises and it was years before anyone went back. As far as I know, the staff members weren't even allowed to collect the belongings of the children who lived there. Everyone just left with the clothes they were wearing in their sleep. This is one of the reasons that this particular place is so interesting to visit.

At least, that's what Violet tells me.

I know she's never been to the orphanage. It's on her to-visit list, but her list has actually gotten pretty long, which is why I'm helping her out. Now that she's so focused on expanding her website and building her brand, her list just keeps getting longer and longer.

I push open the door and shine my flashlight down a hallway. It's a very narrow sort of hallway, but it also seems like the ceiling is higher than usual. This doesn't feel like a basement so much as it feels like a secret passageway. There

are candleholders that line the walls of the hallway, but they aren't lit. Obviously, they haven't been lit in a long time.

Probably about 75 years, I'd say.

I'm fascinated as I stand in the entrance to the hallway. I almost forget about taking pictures, but luckily, I remember before I start walking down the hallway. The flash on my phone is pretty good, so I get a couple of clear pictures. First, I take a few of the hallway. Then I get some up-close pictures of the candlestick holders. A couple of them still have candles in them that have burned low. A few have candles that appear to be unused. It's sort of strange, but that's how everything in this place seems to be.

Making my way down the hallway, I swing my flashlight around at the walls. The floor in the hallway is covered with thick carpet. It looks burgundy. It's got little gold flowers that swirl around in an ornate pattern. The walls are mostly empty, but there are a couple of empty picture frames that look like they used to have paintings.

This part of the orphanage isn't dusty, either.

Did someone come clean here?

Shouldn't there be spiders?

Bugs?

There are no rats.

I keep walking until I finally reach another door. Unlike the first one, this appears to be locked. I walk a little bit more. There's another door. This one is also locked. Okay, weird. It's like a hallway of doors and they're all locked. What's even

weirder is that unlike the first floor of the building, the basement isn't completely falling apart.

It's like this portion of the orphanage was somehow protected from the passing of time. I kind of like it, actually. If Violet includes my pictures in her magazine submissions or on her website, I'm almost worried because this place looks like, sort of magical.

It's a bit weird.

I finally reach the end of the hall. I guess that's all there is to this place. I turn around in a circle, swinging the flashlight around, and I start taking pictures.

Okay, so that was easier than I thought it was going to be, right?

It wasn't that weird at all.

And that's when I hear voices.

No – singing.

Someone is singing.

It's subtle at first, but I know the distinct sounds of my favorite song from my favorite band.

*You and me together. You wished it was forever. Well, now it is. Now it is.*

It's a song about a vampire claiming his chosen bride, and it's really weird and edgy and haunting. It's beautiful, if you ask me.

Violet doesn't like it. She doesn't like anything about my favorite band at all, but that's her problem. She's got bad taste,

and she's going to have to deal with it. I'll try my best to help her, but I can't help her if she doesn't want help.

The song, though.

Did I accidentally hit a button on my phone? Maybe it started playing again through my earbuds and I've just got the volume turned up so I can hear them from my pocket.

Only, when I check my phone, it's not playing anything.

My music app isn't even open right now.

So, where's the music coming from?

Hanging out in the basement of an abandoned and possibly haunted orphanage should probably scare me, but right now, I feel more excited than scared. Are there other people exploring down here? Are they hanging out in one of the locked rooms?

And why the hell are the rooms locked?

I realize that I didn't keep checking all of the doors. Maybe one of them is open. Could that be where the music is coming from? I only checked the first three or four doors, so I start backtracking my steps until, sure enough, one of the doors in the very center of the hallway is unlocked.

I turn the knob.

There's another hallway here. This one is just as long as the first one, but unlike the first one, the candles here are lit.

"What the fuck?" I whisper this out loud even though it's insane. Okay, so note to self: this place isn't nearly as abandoned as Violet said it was. Well, Violet and the entire



Internet. What the hell? Why would this place be listed on an urban exploration website when it's obviously in use?

Not only is it in use, but it's like, *actively* being used.

Those candles couldn't have lit themselves and judging by the fact that they're no more than half-burned, I'd say they were only lit an hour or two ago.

So, someone could still be down here.

It could be a cult or a murderer, or possibly just a friendly ghost. Every nerve in my body should be telling me to run away, but suddenly, I'm more excited than scared.

Someone is here.

I guess that's why the space is so clean.

Like the first hallway, this one has a lot of doors. Once again, most of them are locked. Soon enough, though, I find one that's unlocked. I think it's also the door where the music is coming from. I pause for a moment and take a deep breath before pushing the door open.

Then I step inside.

The room is dark, but there's a stage in the center of it. There are four sections of chairs - one section on every single side of the stage. It looks like there's a band playing in the center. A Vampire's Shadow cover band, maybe? Stepping inside quickly, I close the door silently behind me and take a seat in the last row of the first section of chairs.

The audience is empty, and nobody on stage seems to notice me.

The band plays on. They're hitting every note so perfectly. There are four band members and they're doing such a damn good job with hitting the notes that I barely notice when they transition from one song to another. I realize that they're facing the set of chairs to the right of this one, so carefully, I stand up and make my way over. I stay in the shadows – not that there's much light in this room at all – and take a seat in the back row once again.

Now I can see the band playing. They're doing such a good job. There aren't four people up there, though. There are three. Whoever is supposed to have the guitarist's role isn't there for some reason, but there is a guitar resting on a stand somewhat close to the drums.

The lead singer is hitting every note perfectly and I'm sitting there singing along and enjoying the music. I close my eyes as I let the music wash over me. Sooner or later, they're going to notice that I'm here and probably kick me out. I have no idea what kind of weirdos practice music in an abandoned orphanage, but I'm so into this that I can't walk away.

I'm also relieved that they aren't, in fact, some sort of cult.

They're just nerds who love music.

Like me.

There's just something mesmerizing about the music, about the songs, about the way these people hold their instruments. It's hauntingly beautiful and I don't want to leave.

There are candles lining the walls and that's the only light in this place. There's a glow cast on the singers, but I don't

really understand how they're able to see their instruments well enough to play or how they're able to stay so in sync in the dark. Maybe they're wearing night vision goggles.

I can't tell because it's too damn dark.

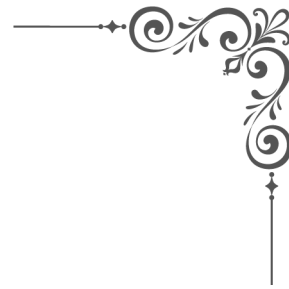
And that's when I feel a hand clasped over my mouth and another one on my throat.

Someone has come up from behind me and grabbed me.

Someone has caught me.

“Little girl, you've wandered into the lion's den.”

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## 2

### Melody

**I**t's a man.

The person who has grabbed me is a man.

He's got a deep, bass-y rumble that washes over me like water. Like heaven. Instantly, I feel aroused, and I wonder if there's any chance of me walking out of this situation unscathed. This guy could murder me easily, but what I want is for him to fuck me, and I hate that he's having this effect on me.

Damn Violet and her stupid website.

I should have made her come and take the pictures herself.

Throwing my body forward, I try to break out of the man's grasp, but he just chuckles and says, "No."

The man is directly behind me. I'm in the last row of seats, so unless he brought his own, he's bending over or crouching down to be able to grip me at this angle. I wish I could see him more clearly.

He loops a hand around my chest, holding me in place against the back of my chair. His arm rests just above my breasts. Just a little bit lower, and he'd be touching me there.

I'm not sure whether I want to scream or cry, but the band plays on. They don't seem to notice me.

Or maybe they haven't *stopped* noticing me.

"Little girl, you've wandered into the lion's den," the man says again, and I realize that this is a test somehow.

That's a line from a wonderful song on the Sweet Nightmares album. I've got it memorized, just like I have every other song memorized from Vampire's Shadow. There's not a single song they've publicly released that I don't know all the words to. There isn't a single fact about the band I don't know. I'm what some people might call a *superfan*, which is an embarrassing way to say "nerd."

My captor releases his hand from my mouth but says nothing.

I don't scream.

I've seen enough movies to know that if you scream and you anger the person who has you trapped, you're as good as dead.

Instead, I have to play his game, and I'm already quite sure I understand the rules.

I whisper the line I know he's waiting for me to say. I know that this is some sort of test because the only thing the voice has said to me – aside from "no" – is a line from a song. It's a song Vampire's Shadow wrote about a girl who goes into this vampire nest and who is completely consumed by what she finds there.

Some might describe it as a horror song, but I've always felt like it was actually quite lovely.

"Don't know if you'll ever make it home again," I whisper.

There's a pause.

Is he surprised I know the song?

Maybe he is.

Maybe not.

He still has one hand wrapped tightly around my chest. The other one reaches for my throat and holds me in place. I can practically *feel* him.

And he smells like a mocha.

"I promise to make it hurt. I promise to make you bleed," I whisper.

Still, he says nothing.

I swallow hard and then I whisper the rest of the lines.

"I promise to push you down so I can see you on your knees."

The music hasn't stopped.

Hasn't slowed.

It's still going at the exact same pace, but I'm pretty sure the band just restarted the same song over again. I don't know what's going on or where I've wandered, but I do have a feeling that I might be *slightly* in over my head.

"Who are you?"

It's the first time he's spoken for real.

I don't really understand how I can hear him so clearly over the music. I definitely don't understand how he can hear me. This guy must have supersonic hearing.

"I...uh...Melody Hawk."

Why am I being honest?

No fucking clue.

If I live to tell this story to Violet, she's either going to say that I'm lying or that I'm simply too stupid to live.

I can hear her voice now, "You idiot! You never tell them your real name! Now he knows where you live."

Except for the fact that I rent a damn apartment, so no, he doesn't know where I live.

*Take that, Violet.*

The man is silent for a long time. We just sit there with me staring at the band and my unknown captor standing right behind me. Or maybe he's sitting. I don't know. It's completely impossible for me to know because he's not exactly moving. He's just staying in place. Maybe that's a good thing.

I don't really know.

"Melody Hawk, why are you here?"

This time, there's a slight edge to his voice. He's angry with me for some reason, but I don't know why. I know I'm trespassing, but I doubt that this dude, whoever he is, somehow happens to be a property owner. He can't be much

older than me. I can't see the band clearly, but nobody over the age of 30 or 35 at the very latest would be playing music in the basement of an orphanage.

It's really fucking weird and it's definitely something a young person would be doing.

Honestly, it's the kind of thing I'd expect from teenagers.

Even me being an urban explorer at 30 years old is probably pushing the age of this kind of behavior being socially acceptable. I know that my mother would be pissed beyond recognition if she knew where I was right now. She'd completely panic and then she'd just scream.

"I'm here to take pictures.

Honesty has to be better than lying, right?

Only, the guy behind me doesn't seem to think this is true. He grips me a little bit tighter, tugging me even tighter back against the chair. It's a wooden chair with a soft cushion on the seat portion. There's also a cushion behind my back. That doesn't seem to matter with him gripping me so hard, though. The way he's holding me makes it hard to move or to breathe.

"Try again."

"I'm telling you the truth."

"Why would you take pictures of this place? How did you know we were here?"

I sigh.

"Listen, dumbass, I didn't know you were here. That's the whole point. Haven't you heard of UE?"



“UE?”

“Urban exploring. It’s when people go explore abandoned buildings that exist in cities or sometimes out in the woods, like this place.”

“Urban exploring?”

“Yeah.” Even though my back is to him, I nod. He’ll see my hair bouncing and know that I’m not totally crazy. His next question, though, surprises me.

“Why?”

“Why would someone go urban exploring? Because it’s fun and we’re bored.”

I mean, what else is to it? Urban exploring lets you go into a place you would otherwise never get to experience. It’s totally illegal and it’s not entirely safe, but...

Well, here I am.

“And my friend is building up her website. She’s probably going to write a book at some point, too,” I add. “I’m taking pictures for her.”

You know, in case he decides to believe the taking-pictures thing.

“Taking pictures?”

I sigh. This conversation is really getting nowhere fast. At least the cover band has moved onto something new. It’s from the band’s latest album, the one that came out ten years ago. Vampire’s Shadow hasn’t produced anything in ages which is probably why most people my age no longer listen to them. A

lot of people think they were great to listen to when we were teenagers, but the idea of listening to them now kind of irritates them.

Not me.

I love them so much.

I'm *never* going to stop listening to this band.

"Yeah, taking pictures. By the way, who is this?" I try to awkwardly point to the stage. "Is this like a cover band? Why do you practice in the basement?"

The man doesn't say anything, and for a second, I think I must have pissed him off.

"Excuse me. I'm talking to you."

Once again, he grips me a little more tightly.

"You're being rude," he tells me. "I don't like rudeness."

"I'm not being rude."

"You don't have permission to be here."

"Neither do you."

"This is my property," he tells me.

"We both know that nobody our age owns property," I point out. "So, if you're going to tell me a lie, you should at least make it convincing. Try telling me that it's your uncle's orphanage and he's out of town or something like that."

To my surprise, the man doesn't say anything. Instead, he *slices* the front of my t-shirt so it falls open, revealing my bra-covered breasts.

This guy has a fucking knife!

“What the fuck?”

He slaps my cheek.

“Language.”

“How did you do that? Do you have a knife?”

I don't see one. It's too dark.

“Don't talk back. Don't be rude. Those are my rules for while you are here.”

I'm already getting tired of it. Well, tired and excited. Who knew that danger could be such a turn-on? I guess all those romance authors were right.

Being scared *does* make you horny.

I can already feel myself starting to get a little bit anxious, but in a good way. It's been a long time, I suppose, since anyone made me feel this excited. I'm not a virgin or anything, but I am the type of person who is a little bit picky about my sexual partners, so I don't sleep around too much.

“I didn't agree to rules.”

“I didn't ask if you did.”

“Why don't you just let me go?” I ask gently, wondering if there's any chance at all I'll make it to Red's in time for my shift. That dude will definitely be firing me if I'm not there in time, and I need money until I can find a better job. “I need to get back to my friend. I won't mention that you hang out down here. Nobody needs to know.”

He leans down so that he's closer to me. I can feel this guy's lips pressing against my ear. I still haven't seen his face, but that doesn't really matter because I can picture what it looks like. I've already formed this idea that he's beautiful, but in a monstrous sort of way. He's a beautiful monster. At least, that's what I've worked up in my head about him.

"You already told me your friend knows about this place. Tell me why I shouldn't kill you both."

I think this is the moment I finally realize that I'm actually in trouble. I'm in more trouble than I could have ever thought possible. Suddenly, the fact that I don't have cell service and that I didn't bring any friends actually seems like more than a slight oversight. It actually seems like I've made a really, really big mistake.

"I don't think killing me is a good idea," I finally say. "This place was listed on the Internet, anyway."

"I know," he says carefully, "but there are no pictures."

Wait a minute, he knows?

He knows about this place being listed online?

"I thought you didn't know about urban exploring."

"I didn't say I didn't know about it," he tells me carefully.

I realize suddenly that it's true. He repeated the words, but he didn't say he didn't know. That was my own interpretation of what was happening.

The cover band is now playing another song. This one I don't recognize, but it's definitely a song from Vampire's

Shadow. It's their distinct sound, and it's got this hauntingly horrifying quality that only my very favorite band could produce.

"What song is this?"

"What?"

"What song?"

"It's called *Bride*."

"What album is it from?"

"Excuse me?"

"What album is it from?" I ask. "It's not from anything that's already been published. Is this one of their new songs? How did this band learn it?"

The man seems slightly surprised by my questions, I realize. It's like he doesn't know what to do with someone who actually knows about the band.

"Look, do you know anything about Vampire's Shadow or not?" I ask. "Because if you don't, let me go so I can ask the vocalist. He probably knows what he's doing. I bet he'll tell me."

The man behind me growls. Heads turn on stage, and that's when I realize that they all know I'm here. They all know I'm here, and for some reason, despite the super dim candles lighting the room, they can all see me.

This means they can see my breasts. Yeah, I'm wearing a bra, but it's a lacey one, so it's barely covering anything anyway. If they can actually see me, then they can probably

see the outline of my dark brown nipples. For some reason, this makes them harden. Why am I getting excited about this?

“Why did you growl?”

“Why are you asking so many questions?”

“Because I’m a person who is being held against my will in a weird basement with some guy who hasn’t even shown me his face,” I say simply. Then I add, “and who doesn’t seem to know very much about the greatest band in the world.”

He’s silent for a moment.

“Say that again.”

“I said you suck at music.”

He tightens his grip.

“The other part. The part about Vampire’s Shadow.”

I try to remember what exactly I just said.

“Oh...that they’re the greatest band in the world?”

“That part.”

“Well, they are. I don’t know why you don’t see it.”

“I see it.”

“Then how come you didn’t know what album their song is from? It’s unreleased, you know. The song *Bride* has never appeared on any Vampire’s Shadow album for the last fifty years.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know everything about them.”

My only real regret in life is that I was born too late to ever attend any of their concerts live. Vampire's Shadow really peaked in the 70s and 80s. They haven't made any public appearances since 1988, when they played their last public concert in front of a crowd of less than a thousand people. It wasn't because people didn't want to go, either. It was because people wanted to go *so* badly. Tickets were over a thousand dollars each. I have no idea how they managed to get people to pay that, especially back in the 80s, but apparently, they did.

Then they just went quiet.

"They haven't appeared in public since '88," I say. Is it my imagination, or is his grip loosening? "Despite the fact that they release albums, on average, every five years, they haven't made another public appearance. Nobody knows why. Their last album came out ten years ago, though. They didn't make a release five years ago and they didn't release anything this year, but their website is still active, and they even have a social media presence. It's just that they don't post pictures anymore."

And they don't respond to fans anymore.

I've been trying for years to get them to send me an autographed poster, but their only real mailing address is a PO box in the middle of nowhere that I'm not even convinced they check. I've thought about going to Hamprantion, wherever the hell that is, and just camping out at the post office to see who picks up the mail at their box.

I haven't, though.

I'm not *that* obsessed.

“You don’t know what you think you know,” he says.  
“Now keep your eyes on the band.”

I don’t know why I want to obey this guy. He’s a man. I haven’t seen his face. He’s being bossy and mean and he might actually murder me at some point, but it’s just so damn dangerous and sexy, and there’s something really smooth about his voice. Plus, he kind of smells like coffee, and I might be slightly obsessed with coffee.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Whatever I want,” he murmurs, and he presses a kiss to my cheek before sliding his tongue across my skin and nipping at my ear.

And to my utter horror, I moan.

I actually fucking moan.

Instantly, I regret making this sound because the band stops playing again and everyone turns to stare at me once more.

Yeah, they’re definitely all staring at me.

How the hell are they hearing me so well? I can barely hear myself think, yet they all seem to have no problem picking up on all of the little sounds I’m making.

“Play,” the man behind me says, and the band starts up again. They launch into a slightly sped-up version of *The Human Who Remains*, which is a song – once again – about vampires who fall for humans. Vampire’s Shadow has a theme, and it’s death and humans.



Well, that or sex and humans.

It's kind of debatable sometimes which topic is the most prevalent in their work.

"How did you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Make them obey."

"I'm in charge," he says quietly.

"Is that the reason you noticed when I came in the room?"

I thought I was being sneaky and quiet.

"I noticed you long before you came in the room, dear."

Dear.

He called me *dear*.

He knows my name because I told him. He called me *dear* though, and weirdly, I don't actually hate it. It's not like when my grandmother calls me dear or when the lady at the store gives me my change and says, "Have a nice day, dear."

No, this is different.

When this dude calls me *dear*, I'm pretty sure it's because he wants to fuck me.

And I don't think I would hate that.

How messed up is that?

"Watch the band," he tells me.

"I'm watching."

“They’re watching you, too, Melody. They’re thinking about how gorgeous you are.”

My pussy tightens involuntarily. Shit. How is this guy doing this? He’s making me so excited, and he hasn’t even really touched me. He’s making me feel like the world is my oyster. He’s making me feel like no matter what happens, I’m going to be better than fine because it’s going to end in sex.

And possibly my murder, but definitely sex.

“Pull your tits out, Melody.”

I stiffen.

“What?”

“Pull them out. Flash the band. Show them how much you want them.”

“I…”

“Don’t be shy, princess,” he says.

And suddenly, I feel like I can’t breathe.

“Give them a show they’ll never forget.”

I bite my lips and close my eyes.

I want to.

I want to do all of these deliciously dirty things he’s telling me to.

“You love their music, Melody. Show them.”

He’s right. I know that this is just a cover band, but I really do love Vampire’s Shadow. They’re the greatest musical influence to ever impact gothic music. They’ve changed the

world, and my biggest regret in life is never getting to see them play. Somehow, seeing this cover band makes me feel really alive. It's like, almost as good as the real thing.

Almost.

And I'm never going to get to see the real thing.

And I'm probably never going to get to the surface of the world again, so I might as well have some fun, right?

"It's not the type of thing I usually do," I whisper.

"Why not?" He doesn't struggle to hear my words even when they're practically silent. When he speaks back to me, it's almost like I can hear him speaking directly to my soul. I don't really know how to explain it. It's just that I can hear him *inside* of me.

He loosens his grip on my chest and instead of having one arm wrapped across my front, he now holds both of my shoulders with his hands. My ripped t-shirt is hanging open with my bra-clad breasts in front of me.

I know that no matter what happens next, my entire world is about to be completely rocked.

"Because it's not proper?"

"Are you asking me whether showing your tits to strangers is proper?"

"No. Yes. I don't know."

"Then why isn't this the type of thing you usually do? You're gorgeous."

This guy is telling me that I'm gorgeous like it's totally matter-of-fact. It's like, this isn't up for debate. He doesn't seem to be sharing this like it's his own personal opinion or anything. He just wants me to know that this is how it is.

I'm pretty.

He thinks I'm pretty.

He thinks I'm *gorgeous*, and he thinks that the band wants to see my breasts.

For some reason, this is enough of an incentive for me to reach for the clasp in front of my bra and open it. It falls open, revealing my breasts, and I know that even in the darkness, the band can see everything.

I'm not surprised when the man behind me slides his hands down my shoulders and over to my nipples. He doesn't completely palm my breasts at first. Instead, he just traces little circles over my nipples. They somehow get even harder.

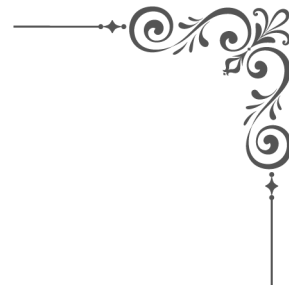
“What did I tell you? Gorgeous.”

“I don't even know your name,” I whisper.

“Is that important?”

I've never let anyone feel me up who didn't know my name. Then again, I'm not really sure if I'm letting this man do anything. He kind of seems to just be doing what he wants.

And I seem to be okay with this.



### 3

## Melody

I sit there watching as the cover band plays song after song. They've played three different songs which means I've been here around ten or eleven minutes. The entire time, the man behind me has been touching me. I've been eating it all up, too. I *love* the way he's playing with me, teasing me like it doesn't matter. He's giving me everything I could ever ask for and more.

He's acting like this is just a normal day, but it's not.

My body is starting to ache - not with pain, but with need.

Having my nipples and breasts played with for ten minutes is an eternity. It's not something I'm used to and it's also not something I think I can handle for much longer. I need to leave, I realize. I need to leave before I get sucked into whatever sort of weird experience this place is offering.

Suddenly, a thought strikes me.

Will I even be allowed to go?

I pull forward suddenly, and something about my fast movement must surprise the man behind me because he

hesitates for a second before he grabs my shoulders and tugs me back into place.

“I need to go,” I tell him firmly. I don’t turn around. I don’t look at him. I don’t know what he looks like and I don’t really want to know. If I happen to find out what his face looks like, then my chances for survival will drop. If he’s some sort of weird murderer or serial killer, he’s going to want to make sure that I don’t have a way to report him to the authorities.

That’s how these things work, right?

I’ve seen enough True Crime shows to know that there are several things you can do to increase your chances of being left alive. One of those is never seeing the person’s face. If you see their face, you’re basically done for.

That’s not going to be me.

His nails dig into my skin. That must be how he sliced off my clothing so fast. It wasn’t a knife: it was his damn hands. I’ve never met anyone with such claw-like nails. Maybe he’s wearing some sort of gloves or something.

The band is still playing, but I think they’re watching me. Maybe they want to know what’s going to happen next or perhaps they just want to kill me.

There’s really no way for me to tell.

Then he speaks. It’s just one word and it lets me know everything that I need to know about the situation I’ve found myself in.

“No.”

That's it.

There's no room for negotiation in this man's tone of voice. He doesn't want to let me go. He's *refusing* to let me go. I've wandered into a situation I can't escape from and now my only option is to...what? Sit around and let this guy torture and murder me?

I don't think so.

I lean forward again, once more trying to get away from his grip, but his nails dig into my skin. This time, he draws a little bit of blood.

"What the fuck, man? You cut my skin." I jump forward, and the movement must confuse or surprise him because his grip loosens again, and I leap away from him and to my feet. I turn around instead of running away. I turn to him and look at him. He's still cloaked in shadows, so I can't see his face, but I don't care. I'm *pissed*.

Anger rushes through me as I stare at the man in the darkness.

"Why would you cut me?" I'm so angry that I feel like I might die. I shouldn't even be here today. That's obvious. I don't know who these freaks are or why they practice down here in this shady-ass mansion basement, but I know that I don't want to be here with them any longer than I have to be.

I need to find a way to get back, to escape to the real world before it's too late for me.

Shit.

Violet is going to have some good gossip for her site if I actually make it out of here alive. My friend is a quiet, gentle spirit. She's over-the-top brave and over-the-top kind, but she's also really, really busy. She overcommits. That's how I managed to get roped into helping her out. She's just got so much going on that she needs someone to help her. I thought I'd do her a solid and come take pictures of this stupid place for her.

It was stupid.

"You need to get your manners in check," the man says.

"And you need to stop hurting people who are lost," I counter. "I'm not afraid of you," I add bravely, jutting my chin out. I don't know if me saying I'm not scared is going to change anything.

"Really?" I can't see his face clearly, but there's a tone of amusement in his voice. "You aren't afraid of me? Is that so?"

"It's so," I nod. "I'm not sure why I'd be afraid of someone as antagonistic as you," I add. "You think you can sit around in basements scaring women."

"Yes, I do think that. Although, to be fair, most people don't trespass quite as carelessly as you do."

I gulp. I can't help it.

"You mean other people trespass here?"

Of course, they do. It's an urban explorer's haven. This place is beautiful, abandoned, and hard to get to. If anyone actually wandered out here, they'd have to park in a random place just like I did. I walked for a good half hour before I



even got *close* to the mansion, which means that if this band actually hangs out here and murders the strays who wander in, there will be nobody to stop them.

And nobody to link them to the murders.

I start thinking about all of the unexplained deaths in the area over the last year. There have been five that I know of. Well, “deaths” isn’t really fair. There haven’t been any bodies found. Not that I know of. There have been vanishings, though. Disappearances. Violet is constantly warning me to be careful and to “stay vigilant.” That’s what she always says. Vigilant, like she’s some sort of saint.

Do these people have something to do with that?

A cover band is a pretty good, uh, *cover* for murder. Right? I mean, they can travel around. They can perform. They can be around different people all of the time and nobody is ever the wiser. Or, they could do what it seems like they do, and just sit and wait.

“What concern is it of yours?” The man’s voice is thick. Heavy. I wonder if he got turned on when he was touching me. He probably did, right? Like, that’s the whole reason he was touching me. Suddenly, I’m very aware of the fact that I’m nearly naked, and I reach around until I gather my torn clothes. How the hell am I supposed to get back to my car? If anyone sees me, I can’t exactly explain away the fact that I’m now topless.

*Oh, sorry, I was just exploring this abandoned house without any clothes on.*

“I suppose it’s not my concern,” I finally answer honestly.  
“But I’d like to know.”

If I’m going to die, I’d like to know if I’m the first one. In a way, what I’m really asking is if I’m special. Is there anything unique about me? Anything wonderful? Am I going to be killed in a special way or will I just be another throwaway?

The door isn’t very far from where I’m standing, but I’m starting to realize that I am very, very outnumbered. If I try to get away from this group of people – wannabe rockstars or whatever – then there’s a chance they’re going to hurt me even more.

Now is the moment where I get to decide if I’m going to go quietly into the night or if I’m going to fight my fate.

Will I accept being killed by them?

Or am I going to run?

The man seems to think that my answer is strange or surprisingly because he’s silent for a moment.

“You want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to know if there are other trespassers?”

“Yeah.”

“There are,” he finally says.

“And do you murder them as a group, or do you take turns?”

I'm snarky. I'm being snarky and I shouldn't be. I know that this is wrong and weird and messed up in so many ways, but I can't tone it down. There's something wrong with me, I guess. When I get nervous, I start babbling.

One of the band members on stage laughs. He actually laughs. I realize now that the music has completely stopped. Okay, so this is obviously part of their murder plan, right? They lure someone here, they get them interested in the music, and then wham! They're dead!

I look over to see the group holding their instruments. What is it that they're doing down here, anyway? If they aren't actually here to murder people, then why are they here? And how do they have electricity for their equipment? I definitely thought this place was like *super* abandoned, but it seems like there's still power. Maybe there are even still lights.

The man stays in the shadows, but he speaks again. His next words go right to my heart because he's quoting one of the best Vampire's Shadow songs I've ever heard. Oh, who am I kidding? They're all the best songs I've ever heard.

“There once was a man who didn't know his own name.”

The man stares at me. It's one of those songs that's so hauntingly beautiful that it always makes me cry. Right now, I'm not moving. I'm not inching away toward the door even though I should be. I'm also not as scared about the idea of dying as I should be. Maybe it's because I'm still feeling a little horny or a little excited about the way this dude was looking at me and touching me. I'm not completely sure.

I take a deep breath, and then I speak the next line.

“It was lost to him long, long ago.”

“For fuck’s sake,” one of the band members says from the stage. “She knows all of the fucking words, doesn’t she?”

I don’t say anything. The same person calls out again.

“How do you know Vampire’s Shadow, darling? How do you know all of the songs?”

“They’re the best band in the universe,” I say. I keep looking at the man in front of me, though. I don’t turn toward the band.

“Close your eyes.”

I don’t know why I’m listening to the man in the darkness. I don’t know why I’m doing what he says. For some reason, I feel like he *knows* me. He knows more about me than he should, at least. I can’t really explain exactly what I mean, but there’s just this sort of raw familiarity.

So, I close my eyes. I’m still holding my shredded clothing over my chest in an attempt to hide my body. I know logically that it doesn’t matter. They’ve all seen me, anyway. They all know what I look like and it doesn’t really matter. They’re just boobs, right? At least, that’s what I try to convince myself of. I’m trying to convince myself that they were looking at me because they think I’m pretty and not because they like embarrassing the young women who come wandering down this rabbit hole.

“Good girl.”

I bite my lip.

Shit.

If I were to admit to having a specific weakness when it comes to men or – who am I kidding? – women, then being called a good girl would be at the top of my list.

A moment later, I feel the air around me shift. He's moving closer to me. I can feel it. His hand is on my arm, and then he guides me out of the row of chairs where I'm standing. A second later, he turns me, but he keeps his hands on my shoulders. His fingernails don't seem so long anymore. Maybe he really was using some sort of glove or tool to tear my clothes off. I'll never know.

And then he pulls me close to him.

I gasp as he tugs me close to his body, but I don't open my eyes. I don't breathe. I don't speak. My hands are still holding my clothes in front of me. Now they're sort of squished between both of our bodies. Naturally, I lower my hands so that it's just my breasts pressing against his shirt.

All I can say is *wow*. This guy is fit. Toned. His muscles feel hard against my breasts as I stand here against him.

“What are you doing?” I whisper my question.

“I'm touching you.”

“Why?”

“I do as I please.”

“Do you always play with your women before you kill them?” I can't resist asking the question. I know it's a jab. I

know perfectly well that it's a *total* jab, but I spit the words out before I can convince myself that I'm making a mistake.

Instantly, his hands are in my hair and he's jerking my head back.

“Ouch!”

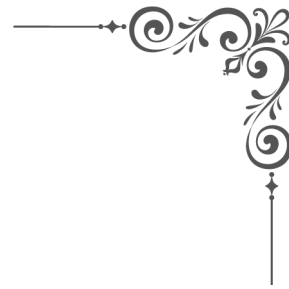
I cry out, making a weird sort of sound, but I manage to keep my eyes shut somehow. He's hurting me, but he doesn't care. At the same time, he pulls my head back, I feel his other hand on my breast. He reaches for my nipple and pinches, tightening his fingers over it. The double sensation with pain coming from two different parts of my body is overwhelming, and my eyes fly open.

And then my jaw drops.

Standing there before me, somehow in the flesh and looking the same age he did when he disappeared, is the lead guitarist for my favorite band in the world. As I stare at him, trying to believe what I'm actually seeing, I whisper his name out loud.

“Paul.”

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## 4

### Melody

He stares at me. He looks so angry. This isn't the Paul I remember from Vampire's Shadow.

Of course, it can't actually be him, anyway.

Nobody has seen any of the band members in public in years. They vanished. Disappeared. They went away and never explained why and nobody ever found them.

Have I found them?

I take a step back. He releases my nipple and my hair at the same time, and then I turn toward the stage. The band is still standing there. I walk closer to them, forgetting that I'm still not wearing a shirt. I don't care about that anymore. Right now, the only thing I care about is getting answers.

Sure enough, as I near the stage and everyone's faces come into focus, I see them all.

There's the keyboardist and bassist, Gerald. He looks exactly the same as I thought he would. He has dark brown skin and long braids that hang past his shoulders.

Liam is here, too. The drummer looks just as cool as he always has. He's from Ireland, and his accent is thick as he

waves and says, “Hello, love.” His red hair hangs long and loose. When he drums, I know that it bounces around.

Then, of course, there’s the lead vocalist, Rose. She’s holding a guitar, and she’s looking at me like she can’t believe I’m here. I’ve always thought she was super cool. She’s Black, like me, but she keeps her hair shaved short. Sometimes she wears different wigs for performances, and she’s most known for wearing this chin-length bright red one. It’s pretty cool, only...

I can’t believe *they’re* here.

I can’t believe I’m here.

I turn back to Paul. He’s the only man with short hair. He’s American, I think. White. Brown hair. Slightly crooked smile.

And he’s staring at me like he doesn’t know what to do with me.

“What is going on?” I whisper.

I don’t want to say what I’m thinking. I don’t want to tell them that this is really a sick joke. If this is their idea of a complete prank, then it’s screwed up.

“Are you cosplayers?” I ask, desperate for answers.

“We’re not cosplayers,” says “Rose.” I look over at her big smile. She’s got on bright red lipstick. She’s always been beautiful. In my opinion, Rose is the real glue that holds the band together, but this woman...she *can’t* be Rose. She looks like the Rose I knew who disappeared all of those years ago. The “real” Rose must be 50 years older than this Rose. The real Rose must be close to death.



“Actors?” I ask, still trying to wrap my brain around what’s happening.

“For fuck’s sake,” Gerald jumps down from the stage and pulls off his shirt. It’s a plain black tee that has nothing special about it except for the fact that it’s his. He holds it out to me, dangling it to me like a lifeline. I stare at the shirt for a very long time, but I finally grab it and tug it over my head.

“Thanks,” I whisper, embarrassed. They’ve all seen me topless: this group of strangers. They’ve all seen me totally into “Paul.” They’ve all seen the fact that I’m a complete loser who still doesn’t know what’s going on. I feel like I walked into a random friend group that’s known each other for a million years and that has all of these special secrets and ideas. It’s like I’m suddenly surrounded by people who don’t have room for a new person in their lives. I’m the outsider.

Again.

Like always.

I take a step toward the door. Paul holds a hand out and I think he’s going to come grab me and stop me for a minute, but he doesn’t. None of them try to stop me. Instead, they just stare as I slowly back up toward the door.

I move again. And again. Slowly. I’m trying not to make any sudden movements, but I don’t know why. It’s just that they’re all standing here watching me. I still don’t have any answers.

“I don’t know what you’re doing,” I say. “And I don’t want to know.”

That's a total lie. I do want to know. I'm still not convinced that they aren't going to murder me, but it seems like they're going to give me some sort of weird head start.

"Paul?" Rose looks toward the guitarist. I've always thought that Paul was kind of the leader of the band. This version of Rose seems to feel the same way. I'm not sure how long they've been a cover band or how long they've been dressing up like this group, but they're doing a really, really good job of it.

"She knows the songs," he says. There's almost a sadness to his voice. "She's the first one who has known the songs."

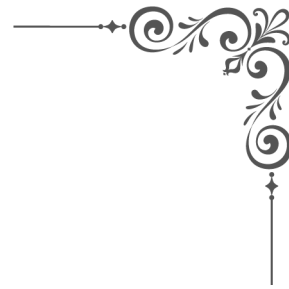
"So, what? You want to keep her?" Rose asks. Her jaw drops open.

"I don't want to keep her," he says, but he's staring at me and I think that he *does* want to keep me. What does that even mean – keeping me? Like, as a servant? As a victim? Is he going to keep me around and toy with me until he murders me? What does he *mean*?

"I don't want to be *kept* by anyone," I point out.

Only, before I can say anything else, Gerald walks over to the door I came through and closes it. When he turns back to me, his voice is firm.

"We want to keep you."



## 5

### Paul

She shouldn't be here.

This isn't right.

There's something so very *wrong* about the fact that a *fan* of ours wandered into our space at all, but much less into the quiet lair of our basement.

Rose seems to be thinking the same thing because she turns to Melody. She eyes her up and down, not for the first time, and presses her lips together tightly. Rose doesn't get attached to people very easily, but once she sets her sights on someone, they're hers for life.

"How did you find this room?" Rose asks her.

"What do you mean?"

"Most of the time, people who come here stay upstairs," Gerald explains gently.

"I mean..." Melody looks from Rose to Gerald to Liam before finally turning back to me. "It was unlocked."

"What?" Liam's jaw drops.

“The doors were all unlocked,” Melody says. “I mean, if this is actually your idea of a super-secret hideout, you kind of did a bad job. The doors were pretty tempting, and since most of them were unlocked, I just came on down. She glares at us and adds, “It’s not like I thought anyone was going to be playing music in the basement.”

She’s scared and she’s angry, but she’s probably also frustrated because she didn’t get to come when she was touching herself for the band.

Liam realizes this, too, and he smirks at her.

“Aw, is the lass pissy because she didn’t get her climax?”

He crosses his arms over his broad chest and looks at her like he wants to eat her up.

Melody’s jaw drops.

“What?”

“You didn’t get to come, princess,” I say, silently moving until I’m right behind her again. “Shall we change that?”

“I…”

“She’s scared,” Gerald says, cocking his head. “Why is she scared? We aren’t going to kill you.”

“Yet,” Rose mutters, but I shoot her a nasty look.

I don’t think that I do want to kill Melody. Not yet, of course, but probably not at all. No, I’m much more interested in making love to her with my companions. I’m *much* more interested in tasting her damn blood.

Melody is still wearing Gerald's shirt, but I haven't missed the way she's eyeing his abs. She smells like a mixture of fear and sadness and excitement, and I'm more than ready to exploit all three.

"I'm not scared," Melody says, but we all know it's a lie.

Luckily, we have a lot more patience than we did in the past, and something like a little white lie isn't going to piss us off the way it would have long ago.

"If you aren't scared, then take off the shirt," Rose says.

"Rose," Gerald looks at her sharply. "Don't push her." He's usually hard. Strong. Today he's being gentle with the human and I'm not sure why.

That's a lie.

He's *curious* about her, just as I am.

When was the last time we met a fan in the wild?

It's been decades.

"Why not?" Rose asks, stepping forward. She gets closer to Melody, invading her space. "You *want* me to push you, Melody. Don't you?"

"I...um...no..."

Rose smiles, shaking her head.

"You humans are all the same.

That catches Melody's attention.

"Humans?"

Rose smiles, and for the first time, Melody catches a glimpse of the fangs that are hanging down from Rose's mouth. Most of the time, we keep our fangs tucked away, but when we're overly excited, or – in this case – overly horny, they tend to come out.

“Oh darling,” Rose grins even more. “Haven't you figured it out?”

She stares at us. Melody looks from Rose to Gerald to Liam and finally turns around to stare up at me.

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?” I ask her.

I want her to say it.

No – I *need* her to say it.

This is her story, after all. Where's the fun in her being so damn sexy if she doesn't actually know what we are?

She bites her lips so hard they're about to start bleeding.

Good.

I hope they do.

If her lips bleed, I'll lean down and lick up the blood. I want to taste everything about her. Today won't be the only time I taste sweet Melody.

Oh no, I plan to be tasting her for a long, long time.

“Go ahead,” Gerald tells her.

Rose and Liam echo him, nodding.

“Do it.”

She needs to say the words in order to believe it.

We swarm Melody, completely surrounding her. I'm in front of her now with my hands on her hips. Rose is pressed up against her back and Gerald is on her left side. Liam's at her right.

Every single one of us can smell her arousal, and every single one of us is craving that.

We all want to touch her.

Every last one of us wants to feel her fall apart just for us.

We want to *keep* her, and this is a dangerous thought.

You don't get to be part of a secret vampire rock band for more than 50 years by taking chances, but Melody isn't like most of the humans we've found or met over the years.

Most of the time, when a human wanders into our lair, which isn't often, they're scared.

They reek of fear and while that adds a fun flavor to their blood that resembles spice, arousal offers an even more intoxicating taste.

"You're vampires," she finally says. "That's how you've been down here for so long. That's how you aren't dead."

"We are dead," Gerald says seriously.

"You know what I mean," Melody whispers.

She's looking up at me, staring at me like she wants to drop to her damn knees and suck my cock, and I'm okay with that. I'm *completely* okay with it. In fact, I'm counting on it.

“I know what you mean,” Rose says. She reaches for Melody’s hair and tugs, pulling her head back. Now her neck is clear and open, just begging to be bitten, but none of us moves. Rose looks up at me and nods to Melody. “She’s pretty, isn’t she?”

Oh yes, she’s very pretty.

She’ll look even better on her knees as she worships us.

That’s what I really want more than anything else. I want to watch her kneel before us and to take turns making us fall apart. I want her to lick us. Taste us. Devour us.

And then we’ll do the same to her.

“Very pretty,” I murmur.

As Melody gasps for breath, uncomfortable because Rose is pulling her hair and tugging her backward, I lean forward and claim her mouth in a kiss.

It’s hot and passionate and filled with the best sort of need.

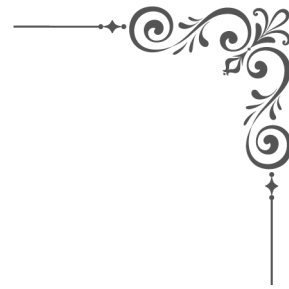
And I want more.

I realize instantly that I don’t want this to end.

I, too, want to keep her.

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## 6

### Rose

She's pretty, and I like her.

It's been so long since I've tasted any woman, much less a human, but Melody is positively intoxicating.

Vampire's Shadow is more than just a band. We're in relationships with each other. Every single one of us dates every single one of the others. There are no hard and fast couples. We're just *all* the couple.

It's been this way for almost as long as I can remember.

And I love this about us.

I love the fact that every single one of us is crazy about the others. I love that we're all bitey and needy and wild when it comes to the others.

But they're all men.

And I've missed the touch of a woman.

Have we shared women over the years?

Yes, of course.

Absolutely, we have.

This is different, though.

Not only is Melody gorgeous and obviously aroused by having us surrounding her like this, but she's a fan of our band.

We've had people wander into the mansion over the years – urban explorers, of course – and sometimes we snatch them up and eat them.

None of them have ever been excited by us.

None of them have ever wandered into the basement.

And none of them have ever known who we were.

So, yes, something is different this time.

I'm not really sure what it means, but I can tell that Paul is already thinking about keeping her. Liam and Gerald probably aren't very far behind as far as that line of thought goes.

And me...

Well, I'd love to keep her.

Paul finally pulls back from kissing Melody and grins. His fangs are hanging low. He can't keep them hidden when he's this damn horny, and I don't blame him at all. I feel the same way constantly. The more excited I am, the harder it is for me to control my vampire features, subtle as they may be.

"My turn," I declare, and I spin Melody around so she's facing me.

I grab her and pull her close, kissing her myself, and it takes everything within me not to groan at the sensation.

Melody is...

Well, she's delightful.

She's positively, absolutely delightful.

The way she melts beneath me makes me want to tear all of her stupid clothes off.

Then I realize that there's nothing stopping me, so that's exactly what I do. I reach for the shirt that Gerald gave her, and extending my finger toward her, I focus hard to turn the end of my finger into a long, sharp claw.

It's hard enough that it completely shreds her shirt as I reach for her, ripping it straight down.

"What are you doing?" Melody squeaks out, but I kiss her again before she can finish complaining, and I drown out her words.

The men just laugh. They're used to me being aggressive and taking charge. I'm a woman who knows what she wants and who isn't afraid to just go for it. They aren't going to stop me, and more importantly, they don't want to.

When I do finally pull away, it's with total reluctance.

I don't want to stop kissing her.

I don't want to stop touching this beautiful woman in front of me who is making me feel like the whole damn world is on fire – but in a good way.

Not in a "let's light the vampire on fire and kill them" sort of way.

“Wow,” she whispers as I look at her. Her eyes flutter open, and she looks up at me like she can’t quite believe that the two of us were just making out in front of everyone else.

Wait until she realizes that the boys and I are perfectly happy sharing.

In fact, we prefer it.

“You’re very pretty, Melody,” I murmur, running the tips of my fingers down her cheek. It’s a strange, intimate sort of gesture, but I want her to know that I’m the one in charge here.

We all are.

The boys haven’t said anything out loud yet, but I know them well enough to know that they’re already thinking about keeping her. They’re thinking about claiming her as a mate and bringing her into our weird, fucked-up little family, and I would be lying if I said I didn’t want that.

Melody is hot as hell, and it’s really, really weird and wonderful that she’s already a fan of our music.

We’ve shared women before.

We’ve shared men, too.

We’ve shared fans and strangers and people you might never expect, but we’ve never shared someone like Melody, and that’s when I realize the difference.

She’s not scared.

Most of the time, when my clanmates and I share someone, there’s an element of fear present. This is good

because it gives their blood this insane taste. It's like vodka, but in their blood. It's absolutely fantastic.

Melody doesn't have that, though. She doesn't smell afraid. Not of us.

She seems *excited*.

And there's a part of me that realizes this could be even more intoxicating than drinking from someone who is afraid. This could feel even more powerful, even more delicious.

And there's another part of me that wonders whether any of us are going to make it out of this situation unscathed.

We all know the score here.

We know how this thing works.

We share someone's blood. We fuck them, usually. Then they have to die.

That's how it goes.

Very rarely do we let people leave after we've slept with them.

And we've never *kept* anyone.

Still, it's one of those things I've heard about. I was already a vampire when I met Paul and Gerald. It was the three of us for a very long time before we connected with Liam, who was a fresh, idiotic vampire who should have died.

Only, we'd wanted him.

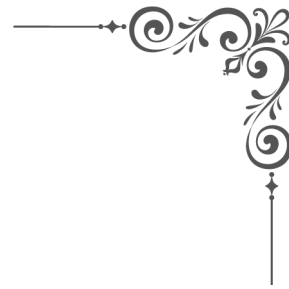
And we'd saved him.

But that was different.

We've all had lovers over the years – some shared, some not. In the end, though, it's always been the four of us, but now...

Now I think all of that is about to change.

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## 7

### Melody

I really feel like I'm floating.

I shouldn't be feeling this way considering the fact that I'm surrounded by a group of dangerous vampires.

I shouldn't feel so damn horny that one more touch and I'm going to burst into orgasm right here.

Only, I do feel like this.

I feel like the entire world is going to fall apart if they don't keep touching me.

Liam and Gerald are the two who haven't kissed me yet, and I really do want them to. It seems as though this group here isn't particularly jealous when it comes to people touching each other.

They don't seem to mind the fact that Paul and Rose have both touched me.

Nobody seems to mind the fact that I liked it.

I've heard about people like them before – people who share their partners.

There's a word for it, even, but I never really suspected that the members of my favorite band were either vampires or that they were polyamorous, so I suppose this is my own problem to work through.

You really can't make assumptions about people, can you?

I know that I've messed up by doing just that. I've always sort of assumed that my favorite band had secret lovers or partners that the public never knew about. There have been rumors circulating online for years that each of them has someone they love and that they basically drifted out of the public eye because they wanted more time to raise kids and stuff.

Now I'm starting to see that this isn't true at all.

They drifted out of the public eye because they're fucking *vampires* and people would start to question that if none of them ever aged.

How messed up is that, by the way?

How crazy is it that I'm actually hanging out in a vampire lair and I don't even feel scared?

I think that's the weirdest thing for me.

I should be afraid.

I should be terrified.

Instead, I'm only turned on.

I turn to my left and then my right. Liam and Gerald haven't tried to kiss me yet, but I don't know why. Nobody



here seems to have a problem with bluntness and being honest, so I decide to just ask.

“Why haven’t either of you kissed me?”

Instantly, Rose and Paul step away. At the same time, Gerald and Liam step forward, locking me between them. They’re standing on either side of me, but they’re both facing me, pressing their bodies against me. Liam reaches out and started rubbing one of my breasts. Gerald does the same with the other one.

“All you had to do was ask, little human,” Liam murmurs quietly.

My panties passed “wet” a long time ago. We’re in “soaked” territory now. I’ve never been quite so turned on before, and I’m no longer worried that I’m going to get fired from my crappy job. I’m no longer concerned about getting back to my friend before I head in for my shift. I’m not worried about getting these pictures edited.

I’m only worried about the two men on either side of me and how they’re going to make me feel.

“Have you fantasized about us?” Gerald asks me. He leans down and slides his tongue across my neck. I close my eyes, but Liam laughs and pinches my nipple through the thin fabric of the shirt he gave me – the one I’m still wearing.

“Eyes open, darling,” he says. “I want you to see us.”

Because he wants me to be afraid, I think.

That’s what he really wants, isn’t it?

I try to remember the legends and rumors I've heard about vampires. I'm not an idiot. I've read romance books about monsters before. I know that the way vampires seem in real life is probably pretty different from how they actually are.

Then again, I never thought vampires were actually real.

And now that I'm faced with them, I'm strangely accepting of the fact that they are.

"Why?" I ask.

"I think you know the answer," Liam says.

Rose and Paul are silent. I'm not even sure whether they're in front of me or behind me. All I know is that they're still here because I can *feel* them. I can't see them because right now, I'm far too enamored with the men on either side of me.

As a curvy girl, I like my body. I feel *good* in my body. It's bigger than some bodies, but I've never cared about that. In my experience, it's always other people who have the problem with the way that I look.

Liam and Gerald don't seem to have that issue.

Gerald is completely fascinated by my breasts, and Liam is now nibbling on my ear.

I realize with a strange, embarrassing sort of feeling, that I want more from them.

I realize that they actually *are* vampires, and what are vampires known for?

Biting.

And that's what I want.

I want them to bite me.

I'm not under any sort of impression that I will be leaving this place alive. I think that I basically sealed my own fate when I took the door from the kitchen to the basement. If there was any chance at all of me staying alive, I tossed it away when I came here.

And now I'm stuck.

Now I'm here.

Now I'm...

Well, now I need to make the most of this moment.

Any of these vampires might fuck me now that I'm here. In fact, they all might. And I'm starting to pick up on the fact that the four of them seem to be somewhat involved with each other. I don't think it's just one or two of them who are involved with the others, though. I think it's all of them.

That's when I register that Paul and Rose have gone back to the stage and they're having sex there now. My jaw drops as I realize he's lying on the stage and she's riding his cock like a damn porn star.

Gerald notices me watching and whispers in my ear.

"They look sexy as hell, don't they?"

"Yes," I say. There's no point in lying. I'm trying to mentally run through some of the things I've heard vampires can do:

- Run so fast that they blur
- Drink blood

- Turn into bats
- Read minds
- Hypnotize people

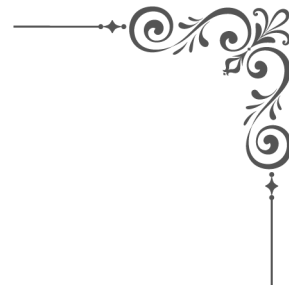
Which of these are things that *my* vampires can do?

And why am I suddenly viewing them as my own?

If anyone here can read my mind, then I'm not interested in lying. I know what I'm doing – watching two rockstars make love – is pretty voyeuristic, but I also kind of...like it.

And that's when I see Paul grab Rose's neck and tug her down toward him. Then he sinks his fangs into her neck, and I jump back in surprise.

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## 8

### Melody

Liam and Gerald make the mistake of thinking I'm going to bolt, and they each grab me so hard that I'm pretty sure I'm going to start bleeding.

"He's hurting her," I protest, trying to escape, but Liam grabs me harder, pulls me from Gerald, and yanks me against his chest. My back is to his front, and I've now got a picture-perfect view of Rose and Paul.

"Look at them," Liam says.

I struggle, trying to get away from Liam, but he's somehow managed to pin my arms behind me. He's restraining me with his arm over my chest, and even though I consider myself to be strong, I realize pretty fast that he's stronger.

"*Look* at them," he repeats.

And so, I look.

Rose is watching me, but her eyes look hazy and glazed over. Paul is behind her, holding her body down so she's standing at a slightly-contorted angle. She's in his arms, I

realize. Then, all of a sudden, she relaxes entirely and he's holding her up carefully.

Rose is everything to me in this moment.

She's sexy and beautiful and luscious. Paul is drinking from her, but I realize that he, too, is watching me.

Are they showing off for me?

Or are they wondering what the hell I'm thinking right now?

"He's not hurting her," Gerald murmurs. He strokes my shoulders and then my arms. "He's enjoying her."

"So he is," I say dully because I can't really believe it.

There are so many different emotions swirling around my head right now. I have thought after thought pounding inside of me.

*Who are they, really?*

*Does anyone else know they're vampires?*

*Have they always been like this?*

*Why didn't I know?*

*Are they going to keep me here?*

That last question is the one that's at the forefront of my mind. There's a little part of me that knows I need to leave and go to work. I'm going to be late if I don't leave soon, or maybe I'm already late.

I don't know if I *want* to stay here with a group of polyamorous vampires. At least, I'm not sure in my head.

My heart, and my body, are both quite sure.

*Stay*, my heart calls to me. *Have an adventure.*

I've never really had one before.

My entire life growing up was strict. My parents were strict and religious and determined to make sure I was a good girl for them. They wanted to make sure that I didn't misbehave in any way. They wanted me wholesome and *pure*.

They don't know the truth about me.

They don't know that I'm the type of girl who wanders into a vampire's lair and likes it.

They have no clue that I'm the type of woman who could even *consider* letting four vampires play with me in the most delightfully sexual way.

These are things my parents will never know.

These are things that haunt me.

And delight me.

"We could enjoy you, too, Melody." It's Gerald talking now. That sweet, silky voice of him is shooting through my veins. I already know that I'm going to develop a fast addiction to them if I'm not careful.

But I can't be here.

There's a little voice at the back of my head telling me that I need to leave.

This is all a dream and soon I'm going to wake up, right?

I have to wake up eventually.

Only, I don't want to.

"We could do so many wonderful things to you," Liam agrees.

They're both kissing my neck now. I'm pretty sure I'm feeling Liam's fangs scraping against my skin. Is it terrible that I want him to sink those fangs deep into me?

Is it horrible that I want to feel him drink from me?

"I...I need to go," I manage to say, and just like that, the spell is broken.

Suddenly, all four of them are surrounding me, and Rose has me by the throat. To be honest, I didn't think she had it in her. I kind of figured Rose was a softie, but she's not. She might be submissive and playful with Paul, but she's certainly not that way with me.

No, with me, she's dominating.

Controlling.

She's absolutely, totally in charge, and I have to be ready for that.

"You aren't going anywhere, Melody," she tells me.

"But..."

"No buts," she says.

Then her eyes narrow as she looks at me so deeply that I'm pretty sure she can see all the way to my soul, and she offers me a command.

"Sleep."



I stare at her, blinking.

She frowns, shakes her head, and tries again.

“Sleep.”

Still nothing.

“What the fuck?” Liam says, pushing Rose out of the way. He stands in front of me now, cups my face, and stares at me. It would be easy to lose myself in his eyes. “Sleep,” he says.

“Look, um, I’m not really tired,” I tell him. “I guess y’all want me to take a nap or something, but I don’t think that’s possible.” I take a step backwards. “And I really should be going.”

I look around, and they’re all staring at me.

“It didn’t work,” Gerald says. He’s staring at me, but he’s talking to the other vampires.

“Why the fuck didn’t it work?” Paul asks, rubbing his jaw. He speaks to me now. “Have you cast a spell?”

“No.”

“Are you a witch?” Liam wants to know.

“No.”

“Are you human?” Rose asks.

“She smells like a human,” Liam nods.

“Definitely human,” Gerald agrees.

Still, I do feel the need to answer their question right now.

“Um, yeah,” I nod. “I’m a human.”

At least, the last time I checked, I was.

“Well, shit,” Paul says. He shakes his head. “Sorry, Melody. We were going to try to do this the easy way, but it looks like that won’t be happening.”

I still as I realize that they’re going to do something very bad to me. They’re going to do something to make me stay and I don’t want to stay. At least, the logical part of me doesn’t want to. I need to get out of here because whatever’s happening is fucked up beyond reason.

Maybe I’m hallucinating.

That’s it.

This is all a dream and I’m back at my home and I’m sleeping on my couch.

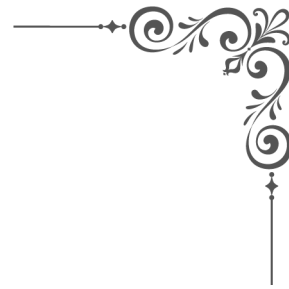
Yep.

That’s it.

Only, Gerald disappears for just a second and comes back holding a little carved stone that’s shaped like a heart.

“We don’t bop pretty girls over the head to make them go to sleep,” he murmurs as he presses the stone against my neck. Is it some sort of magic rock? “Usually, the mind control works.”

“Not on you, though,” Rose adds as I start to slip into unconsciousness. “Not on you.”



## 9

### Melody

When I wake up, my head hurts. I sit up too fast and instantly regret this decision. I reach for my forehead, rubbing it. Whatever happened to me was super unfair and definitely illegal. I need to get out of here.

I remember perfectly well what happened. I remember wandering into the abandoned house and taking pictures. I remember my venture down the basement stairs.

I remember finding out that my very favorite band isn't exactly human.

They aren't human at all.

And now I'm here.

*Where the hell is this?*

I open my eyes and look around the room. It looks like a castle bedroom from some fairytale story. I watched a lot of cartoons as a kid and this is looking pretty damn familiar, in my opinion.

I'm sitting on a huge four-poster bed that has curtains. No, it's called a canopy. Is it both? Either way, the bedding is all white.

Virginal.

Weird.

I'm underneath the covers, like someone has tucked me in, and as soon as I realize this, I practically jump out of the bed. I try to be quiet, but if the vampires are nearby, chances are that they'll either hear me moving around or they'll hear me breathing.

I'm not really sure which of those choices would be better or worse.

"Calm down, Melody," I whisper to myself. I try to reach for my cell phone, but obviously, that's long gone. So are my clothes, which I remember the vampires basically shredding in their weird seductive haze.

I'm wearing something I don't recognize. It's a simple black dress that clings to me. I can't tell whether it's supposed to be a nightgown or someone's oversized t-shirt, but I don't really care. I just want to get out of here.

It's *got* to be a nightgown, though, I realize, touching the fabric. It really is completely melting against me, and a t-shirt would be looser. Breezier.

I need to escape.

I look around the room and take stock of what's around me. There's the bed, of course. It faces a huge doorway that's also this heavy wood. It looks polished and pretty. Nobody ever accused vampires of being messy, I suppose. They've got all the damn time in the world, and apparently, they use that time to polish their doorframes.

I shiver.

If I ever end up as a vampire, I silently vow never to spend more time cleaning than is necessary.

There are a couple of dressers in here, a large wooden wardrobe that reminds me of the entrance to Narnia, an upright piano, and a huge window.

That's it, I realize.

The window.

Won't that be the perfect way to escape?

I hurry over to it and pull back the curtains only to find that the window has been completely boarded over.

Because they're vampires.

And I am, in fact, in a vampire house.

These creatures exist in the darkness. They live at night. That's when they come alive. I don't know which rumors about vampires are true and which ones are fake, but I do know without a doubt that vampires can't go into the sunlight.

That's something that no vampire could survive.

"Shit," I mutter. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell am I supposed to do? I glance around the room, but I don't see anything else here that could be useful. I run my hands along the walls, feeling for secret passageways.

Who am I kidding?

I don't know what a damn secret passageway looks like. I don't know what they feel like. The only thing I *know* is that I

need to get out of here because...

Because why?

I cringe as doubts start to flood my mind. What am I really running back to? What is it that I'm *really* running away from here?

The truth is that I don't really have a lot going for me back in the "real" world. I can pretend, of course. I can pretend that my life is great and that my job is normal and that things are totally, completely fine, but they aren't.

Things aren't fine, and they aren't okay, and I'm actually kind of a huge loser.

*They don't know that.*

The vampires who live here don't know that I'm lame, and honestly, unless someone tells them, they don't have to know.

I finish looking around the room. There's nothing under the bed. The wardrobe and dresser are both empty. There's a bathroom here, too, but even that is empty. Still, I use it quickly and help myself to one of the shrink wrapped toothbrushes I find in a little basket on the sink.

Who wants to escape with stinky breath?

Not me.

When I go back into the room, I decide that I'm ready. I reach for the knob to the bedroom door and turn it. I'm honestly expecting it to be locked, but it's not. Okay, so maybe these vampires aren't as smart as I gave them credit for.

Yanking open the door, I step into the hallway and I don't wait.

I just start running, scurrying down the hall.

The faster I run, the faster I can get away from here.

My friend is probably freaking the fuck out. I'm absolutely certain that she's sitting around worrying about me, and I can't have that. I can't let her worry. So, I run to the very end of the hall and turn to keep on going, but that's when I run straight into the wall.

Damn it.

I fall back, landing hard on my ass, and I groan as pain shoots down both of my legs and up to my shoulders. Who decided that hardwood floors were a *thing*? Wouldn't it be a better world if everyone had carpet?

I groan as I try to stand up, and then I look right ahead of me and see that it wasn't a wall at all.

It was one of the vampires – Liam - and he's staring at me like he's completely unbothered that I'm trying to make an escape. I consider the situation for a moment. I just need to run in the other direction. That's it. I can definitely outrun this dude, so I turn and start to run in the direction I came from, but Liam grabs my arm and shakes his head.

“No, darling, I think you've done enough running for one day.”

“You can't keep me here.” It's illegal.

“I’m afraid I can do whatever I like.” His fingers dig into my skin just a little bit more. “Are you ready to go back to your room?”

“No.”

“Are you ready to talk about your future here?”

“No.”

“Are you ready to tell me where you were going?”

“No.”

He laughs and reaches for me. There’s absolutely no damn way this *man* can pick me up, so I don’t even try to wiggle away as he grabs me, but then, to my absolute shock, he *does* grab me. He lifts me up, hauling me up over his shoulder, and then he starts walking back to the room.

Now I *do* protest.

“Help!” I cry out, trying to wiggle away. “Help!”

He smacks my ass, instantly silencing me.

“Don’t do that, Melody. You’ll upset the others. You don’t want them to be upset with you. Do you?”

“No,” I whisper.

“Then be a good girl and close your mouth, darling. I’d hate to have to shove my cock in it to make you quiet.”

I gulp, hoping that vampires can’t smell arousal because all of a sudden, I’m very, very turned on at the idea of being on my knees in front of Liam and *sucking* his dick.



Yeah, that idea does a lot of wonderfully nasty things to my insides and judging by the way he chuckles as he walks down the hall and turns into the bedroom, I'm pretty sure he's figured it out.

He closes the door behind us and walks forward, dropping me down on the bed. I bounce a little as I land, and his eyes go right to my breasts.

I do have to admit that being trapped in a house with vampires is actually pretty good for my self-confidence. If I'd grown up hanging out with vampires, maybe I wouldn't have spent so much damn time worrying about my hair being curly while all of the hot girls had straight blonde hair. Maybe I wouldn't have worried about being chubby when the pretty girls were sticks.

If I'd had people looking at me my entire life the way that Liam is looking at me right now, maybe everything would be different.

Maybe.

He crosses the room to the windows and closes the curtains. It's not like the windows are open or anything. Nobody can see out or in. There's nothing to be able to see. Still, it's this proper sort of gesture, and it kind of catches me off-guard.

He turns back to me.

I stand, straightening my dress, and I stare at him.

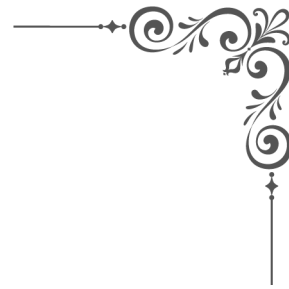
I need to make a choice.

Do I want to return to the human world and go back to my monotonous life?

Or do I want to stay here with the vampires as some sort of consort to them?

The choice is harder than it should be, and I suddenly hate myself for being scared.

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## 10

### Liam

She really is a lovely thing: soft, pliable, curvy.

I'd love to just sink my fangs into her neck and lose myself in that sweet body of hers.

Melody is damn gorgeous.

It's a bit cliché, but I'd go so far as to say she has no idea how pretty she is. She definitely doesn't know how appealing she is to a group of lonely vampire rockers who haven't felt the love of a human woman in far too damn long.

She stares at me now.

She's scared.

"Tell me what you're thinking," I say. I want to take a step toward her, but I don't. Instead, I hold back just a little bit as I wait for her. She probably thinks I'm soft, and compared to Paul and Gerald, I absolutely am. That's only because I believe that if you're going to abduct a beautiful human, you'd better have a good reason for it.

"I don't want to tell you," she whispers.

"Tell me."

“Can’t you just...you know, read my mind?”

I shake my head. That’s not something I can do. I’ve heard legends and rumors of vampires who can not only read someone’s mind but control it. That’s not a power I’m interested in.

“Paul has a theory about that,” I tell her.

“He does?” Melody seems suddenly curious. I smile. I know she’s attracted to Paul. I also know that she’s attracted to all of us. This is good. We’re a group, which means we bond as a group and if we ever take a mate – which I suspect the others are already considering – we will do that as a group, too.

“He thinks that it’s the vampires who have been around the longest who are able to develop that mind control ability.”

“So, can you do anything with your mind?”

“Are you asking if I can compel lonely humans to do my bidding?”

She nods. Melody isn’t moving. She’s standing perfectly still by the door. I know that she wants to leave. She’s thinking about it even if she’s not ready to admit it.

*Come on, I silently think to myself. Come to me.*

I can’t compel her. I can’t manipulate her. I can’t trick her into walking toward me, but I want her.

I want this sweet, luscious woman to come to me because she wants to. Then I want her to wrap her arms around my neck, push up on her toes, and kiss me because she wants to.

That's what I want.

I want the sultry. I want the sensual. I want the goddess that is Melody.

I want the desire and the excitement and the passion.

"I can't," I tell her. "Trust me, darling, if I could, you'd already be on your knees in front of me."

She bites her bottom lip. The idea doesn't scare her, but she still thinks it's improper. She's sweeter than she should be. She's definitely a good girl who wants to be bad. She just needs a little bit of encouragement.

"Have you thought about that before?"

"What?"

Instantly, I'm on her in a flash. No more waiting for her to come to me. I blur across the room, moving so fast that I'm practically invisible, and I wrap my fingers around her chin, forcing her to look at me.

"Don't play coy, little girl."

"I'm not a girl," she whispers.

"You could have fooled me. You're scared."

"I'm not."

"Prove it," I tell her. "Answer the question, Melody. Have you thought about sliding your hands down the front of my pants, dropping to your knees before me, and begging to taste my dick?"

She stares at me. I can't tell whether she's about to come or cry, but she swallows hard as she considers what she's going to do – what she's going to say.

I know that for Melody, this is a huge decision. She's being forced to decide whether to keep her modesty or whether to be honest, but oh, if she can just be honest with me, I'll make this so worth her while.

“Yes,” she whispers. Her voice is shaking just a little bit. She's quivering. She's scared as hell, but that's okay.

I like her scared.

“Tell me.”

“I've thought about it a lot,” she whispers. “I've thought about all of you.”

“There we go.” I release her chin and start stroking her cheek. “That wasn't so bad. Was it?”

“No.”

“Tell me something, love. Have you thought about taking all of us together or one at a time?”

“Both,” Melody admits, and that just *does* something for me. Somethings twists deep inside of me. It's like there's this little part of me that's been waiting for her for so very long. I feel *satisfied* with her answer. That's definitely not something I expected to feel. Not today.

Why is it that Melody has this effect on me?

Paul and Gerald are the ones who are always talking about true love and finding a mate. They're the ones who have

always dreamed of adding a human to our mix, but not me. Not Rose, either. The two of us are realists. We understand that you can't always have what you want. Sometimes you have to take what you can get and just be happy with that.

Her hands come up to my chest and she rests them there. If I had a heartbeat, she'd be able to feel exactly how excited this gesture makes me. My heart would be racing.

I don't have a heartbeat, though.

I have nothing.

"I think that all of you are very exciting," Melody whispers, looking up at me bravely. "But I need to go home."

"That can't happen."

Not just yet. Not until we've had time to convince her to stay.

Melody isn't a prisoner here. Not really. She can leave. She can go home. She can go wherever she wants to. It's just that we need a little bit of time to help her know just how good things can be if she'll stay.

If she'll stay with us, we can make her fall in love over and over again.

If she'll stay, we can make her entire future one orgasm after another.

"Why not?"

"They've chosen you. We all have."

She frowns, shaking her head.

“What if I don’t want to be chosen, Liam?”

It’s an interesting question, isn’t it?

It’s something I’ve wrestled with for the last half-century. I’m not as old as the other vampires. Not as aged or perhaps not as mature. There are parts of the vampire world I still have yet to explore – experiences I’ve yet to enjoy.

And I didn’t choose this world, this unlife, as it were.

I didn’t choose to be turned.

That decision, that autonomy, was taken from me.

That’s the reason I’ve never turned someone else into a vampire. I could, if I wanted to. I could do it right here and now. If I really wanted to force Melody to stay here, I could sink my fangs into her and make her stay with us forever.

Only, I don’t want to do that.

I don’t want to be that man.

A woman should have a choice in her immortality, and if Melody wants to go back to working at the bar, maybe we should let her.

Only, the truth of the matter is that Paul, Rose, Gerald, and I are a team. A group. We’re mates. And if we’ve collectively decided that Melody is ours to keep, then I can’t just send her on her way without their consent. It has to be everyone’s decision, and they need a chance to say goodbye to her.

“You don’t get to choose whether you’re chosen,” I finally say.

“Seems unfair.”



“Life isn’t always fair, darling.”

She frowns. Her hands ball into little fists for just a moment, but then she presses them flat to my chest once more.

“What’s it like?”

“What?”

“Being a vampire.”

“What a silly question,” I shake my head. I don’t want to answer it.

“That’s not very nice.”

“I never promised I was nice,” I tell her.

Only, for Melody, I kind of want to be. I kind of do want to be nice. There’s a little part of me that wants to shed the harsh, cruel exterior and just be kind to her, but that’s not a vampire’s way. It’s certainly not *my* way.

She considers this and shakes her head.

“You’re kind of a dick, Liam.” She pushes me away. “Then again, that’s the whole point, right? You make people fall in love with your music and then you capture them. It’s got to be a pretty good trick. Right?” She raises an eyebrow as she turns and starts pacing.

She’s like a rat in a cage as she struggles to find her escape, but she won’t find it.

Not here.

Not ever.

I sigh. This isn't really going the way I thought it would. I'm supposed to keep her calm and comfortable, so she starts to feel like accepting her fate, but she's not feeling either of those things, and strangely enough, she doesn't seem to be accepting her fate.

"That's not really the way this works." Everyone thinks we're dead or old. That's the beauty of the music business. My companions and I have been discussing our next move for years. We've talked before about the possibility of moving on to something else.

What if we started a new band under new names?

There's a part of me that thinks we'll need to wait another fifty years to be able to pull that off, especially with Rose, whose voice is very, very distinctive.

"No? Then how does it work?" Melody stops in front of the door and looks over her shoulder at me. There's so much emotion in her eyes right now: fear, sadness, disappointment.

Excitement.

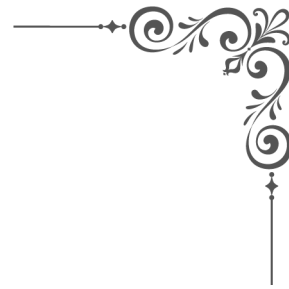
Arousal.

She can be as mad or as hurt as she likes, but her eyes are telling me everything I need to know.

She really does want us.

She just thinks that it's wrong.

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## 11

### Gerald

“We need to convince her to stay,” Paul says. He’s pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace, which has a real, actual fire blazing in it. Personally, I think he’s an idiot for having a fire going, especially when he’s so upset and emotional, but Paul has always fancied himself the leader of our group, so he does what he likes.

He’s not the leader.

That’s the whole point of being a band, of being a vampire clan.

Our entire *thing* is that we’re together.

We’re supposed to be close to each other – and we are. We’re supposed to stand by each other – and we do.

But we’re also supposed to have this thing between us be passionate and obsessive and wonderful. The entire purpose of our collaborative relationship is that we all depend on each other and one person doesn’t have to be in charge.

But Paul is wound tight as fuck, and he needs some release.

He's worried about more than just Melody, and it's starting to show. Paul has demons in his past. We all do. It's just that Paul's demons tend to be other vampires, and one in particular has been hunting him for years.

I *know* why Paul is so upset tonight.

He likes Melody.

A lot.

He likes her, and he's worried that a certain undead *creature* named Timothy Sweet is going to try to take her away from us.

That's never going to happen.

Personally, I won't let it.

Still, I know that he needs to calm down. I know he needs someone to help him, and I'm going to be that someone. I stand up and stride over to him. I don't bother taking my time to cross the room, and I certainly don't try to look sultry as I walk. It's just the two of us. Liam is with Melody and Rose is...

Well, I'm not really sure what Rose is doing, and right now, I don't care. The only thing I want right now is Paul. The only thing I *need* is Paul, and I'm quite sure that he needs me, too: probably more than he knows.

Stepping before him, I place my hands on his chest.

He seems a little surprised, but he stops pacing and looks at me. His eyes search mine, and then he shakes his head.

“You’re going to tell me we need to say goodbye to her,” he says.

“I’m not saying anything just yet.” But yes, I am going to say that. We might be vampires, and we might be these callous monsters, but I’m not sure if I’m okay with us trying to keep her here. Not if what she wants is a human life.

“I’ve known you a long time,” he murmurs.

“Feels like forever.”

“It hasn’t been forever,” he whispers, but it will be. That’s the whole point.

It’s been over 200 years since I was turned into a vampire, and Paul doesn’t have much more time in the vampire world than I do. He was turned just three years before me. We wandered alone for such a long time before fate drew us together.

When the two of us met each other much, much later, back in 1950, we instantly clung to one another – and Rose. The three of us met on the same rainy night, and we never let each other go.

Back then, people weren’t as open-minded as they are now. We had to be quiet, and we had to be careful. We were “roommates” for many years before we added anyone else to our clan.

But we kept each other in one piece, and we kept each other safe, and we managed to do whatever it took to make our eternities bearable together.

“Get on your knees, Paul,” I tell him, reaching for the laces of my leather pants. I start to untie them. I’m already hard, already ready for his mouth on me.

Paul and I know each other so well that we rarely even have to use words to communicate with each other. Time really does make a difference when it comes to your relationship with someone. Then again, that’s part of the reason that the entire polyamory thing has always been a part of our relationship.

Of course, back when we got together, we didn’t call it that.

There wasn’t a word for what we were.

Our group wasn’t exactly able to be as open as people are now. We couldn’t promise people we were doing things *ethically* or *with permission*.

Instead, everything had to be done privately, but it was easier than we thought to keep things behind closed doors.

The beauty of living in the before-time is that people back then only saw what they wanted to see.

There were plenty of ways to avoid arousing suspicion.

But right now, I’m not worried about arousing suspicion. I’m not nervous or anxious or uncomfortable with the idea that someone might look at us and think that we’re being immoral because it’s just us here. It’s us and the people we care about, so even if Rose wandered in, she wouldn’t panic. She’d join us or she’d take a seat and enjoy the show.

Paul looks at me. Anyone else might think he was about to fight me for dominance in this moment, but I know Paul pretty damn well, so I know perfectly well that he's going to do what I tell him to do.

And he does.

He drops down before me and grips my ankles. He leans his mouth forward, rubbing his face against my crotch. Right now, Paul isn't worried about Melody or Rose or Liam. He's not worried about whether we've found our forever mate. He's *only* worried about making me happy, and that alone *does* make me happy.

He uses his tongue and teeth to finish unlacing my pants. Then he slides his hands up and reaches for the top of the leather. As he pulls my pants, tugging them down, he licks his lips and leans forward, ready to accept everything I'm offering him.

And I am offering him everything.

For us, sex isn't just a power exchange, and most of the time, it's not something we do because we're in love or because we're crazy about each other.

We are, but that's not the only reason.

For most of us vampires, sex is one of the only times we're able to remember what it feels like to be human because the rest of the time, the world is so damn cold we lose ourselves in it.

I close my eyes as Paul takes his time teasing me. He works me over, moving in all of the very best ways until I'm

coming in his mouth. He swallows, easily handling everything I have to offer him, and then he leans back on his heels and looks up at me. He licks his lips, and I reach for him, pulling him up into my arms.

I don't return the favor. I don't get him off, too. That will come later. Right now, though, I kiss him like I need him, because I do.

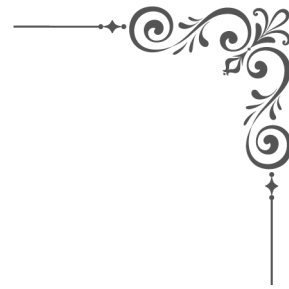
I kiss him like I'm crazy about him, because I am.

When we pull apart from one another, he nods.

"We need to get Rose," he says. "And then we'll go talk to our girl."

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## 12

# Melody



“WHAT EXACTLY IS IT that you all want from me?”

“Right now,” Liam says, gesturing at the bed, “I want you to get naked and spread yourself out like a Thanksgiving feast.”

“Are you serious right now?”

“Dead serious.” His eyes practically sparkle. Yeah, I know he made a stupid joke. Ha-ha. He’s dead and he’s serious. Got it.

Frowning, I turn to look at the bed.

Why does he want me naked on it?

And am I going to let my curiosity win me over?

Turning back to him, I ask an important question.

“Am I trapped here?”

“No.”

“Can I leave if I want to?”

“Yes.”

“Then why did you pick me up?”

“Because if you’re going to leave, you at least need to know what you’re walking away from.”

“You used a magic rock to knock me unconscious,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “What the hell was that about?”

“We needed time to talk to you. You were going to run away.”

“Look,” I tell him firmly. I’m trying really, really hard to stay focused on what’s happening with my entire future and not picturing myself actually giving in to him. “Look. Look.”

“I’m looking.”

“Look,” I say again. My mouth seems to be stuck on an infinite time loop. “Look. It’s like this.”

“Like what?” Liam looks amused.

“I only came out into the woods to take some pictures for my friend,” I tell him.

“And I’m sure she’s very appreciative.”

“I didn’t plan to explore that abandoned building.”

“It was an orphanage.”

“I get that. And while I definitely did think I’d take pictures of it, I only thought part of the building would be accessible.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that I wasn’t looking for vampires, okay?”

“Well, you found us, Melody, now take off your clothes.”

“No,” I say firmly, jutting my chin forward. Everything inside of me is screaming that I’m being an idiot. How many girls have a chance to fuck a real-life vampire? Let alone *four* of them.

Something tells me that every damn person in this vampire clan is really, really good at what they do, too.

But it would really be wrong.

And I’m not a *wrong* type of girl.

If goody-two-shoes had a human form, it would be me. That’s me. I’m the goody-two-shoes. I always brush my teeth, I dental floss every day, I *always* drink ten glasses of water each day, and I never speed.

*Boring.*

The word floats through my mind.

And just when I’m eyeing the door once more, ready to run, it opens and Rose, Paul, and Gerald all step into the room. Paul is wearing leather pants and nothing else. His toenails are painted a bright red. Gerald is also wearing leather pants. He smirks as he walks into the room. He definitely looks like he just got laid. Then there’s Rose: beautiful, gorgeous Rose. She’s wearing a leather bra and a matching miniskirt. Unlike the guys, she’s wearing shoes. They’re boots that come up to her knees. They’re bright red.

“Make a wish on a shooting star,” Liam whispers, quietly singing. Then, he raises his voice to a normal level. “You never know what might happen.”

I close my eyes.

I know what he's doing.

He's trying to seduce me with music and it'll definitely work. I *know* that it'll work. The song that he's singing is one I've heard a million times. It's called The Vampire's Melody and it's about someone missing the girl of their dreams. The singer is trying to find her through any means necessary, and he's going to tear apart the whole world to get her back.

Then the others join in.

"Once upon a midnight hope," Rose sings. Our eyes lock as the music connects us in this moment. Suddenly, all I want to do is grab every single one of them and pull them close, embracing them.

Right now, all I want is to feel close to them.

Gerald's voice comes next.

"The skies broke," he sings. "For you."

Then Paul comes in.

"And for me."

They all stare at me and I lick my lips as I finish the last line.

"Locked together in eternity."

Is that what they want?

They want us to be locked together?

I don't know whether this little singing extravaganza was something that happened because they want me to stay or

because they just felt like it, but for the first time in a very long time, I suddenly feel like I have somewhere that I belong.

And there's a part of me that really hates it.

"You know the words," Rose whispers.

"Of course, I know the words." Because I'm a superfan.

I'm a huge nerd and I am, in fact, obsessed with music.

No, that's not quite right.

I'm obsessed with *their* music.

"We like you, Melody," Liam says. Together, they all step closer. I don't move or run as they surround me because suddenly, I don't feel scared.

I feel protected.

And *that* is a feeling I haven't felt in a very, very long time.

And that is a feeling I don't know if I'm even supposed to be feeling.

"What am I doing here?" I whisper. "Really?"

"We want you to stay with us," Paul says. There's a finality in his voice. A firmness. He's used to being the one in charge. He's used to being the person that people listen to.

"Shouldn't you be asleep right now?" I ask him. I'm pretty sure that it's daytime now. I feel pretty well-rested, so I think that I slept all night. I thought vampires were incapacitated during the day, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

Either that, or maybe no time at all has passed.

Maybe I was only passed out for like half an hour.

I don't know where we are now, but I know it's not the basement where I found them.

"We can control when we sleep," Rose says. She seems to take pity on me and the fact that I can't seem to focus.

"How long was I asleep for?" I ask, suddenly worried.  
"Has it been a day?"

They're silent, and I start to panic.

"Has it been longer? A week? Oh, damn," I mutter. So much for my job.

"For fuck's sake," Liam frowns. "You've been asleep all of half an hour, darling. We moved you from the basement to our actual residence. We have tunnels beneath the forest, so we can move around as we like."

"Way to give away all of our vampire secrets," Paul snaps.

"You want her to stay with us," Liam points out. "If you want her to stay with us, she's going to learn all of the vampire secrets, and then more."

"That's true," I nod. "I'm pretty good at figuring out secrets."

They all turn to look at me like they can't really believe what I said, and suddenly, I wonder whether I'm being really smart or really dumb right now.

"Well, I am," I shrug. At least, that's what I'm telling myself. I want myself to believe that I'm good at this. I want myself to believe that I'm good *enough*.

There are a lot of terrible things in the world, but today doesn't have to be one of them.

"You didn't figure out that we were vampires," Rose says.

"A lot of people think you're vampires," I retort. "There are entire message boards dedicated to the theory."

"Really?" Rose seems intrigued by this.

"It's true," Liam nods. When Paul and Gerald give him confused looks, he shrugs. "I get curious and bored sometimes."

"So you look yourself up online?"

"Like you've never done it," he mutters.

"Look," I say, trying to take control of the situation. Sometimes it seems like the only thing I'm capable of is trying to make plans. I'm sure that my weird childhood has something to do with my incessant need to be in control at all times, but who knows? "I just want to know how to get out of here."

It's a lie.

What I really want to know is what it feels like to have all of them touching me all at once.

What I really want to know is what my chances are of being able to be intimate with all of them.

"Why are you in such a hurry to leave?" Paul asks.

"She's scared of us," Gerald tells him.

"I think she's definitely afraid of us," Rose agrees.

“I don’t know. She seems a little brave to me,” Liam adds.

They’re talking about me in *front* of me like I can’t hear them, but I can. They’re talking about me as though I don’t know what they’re doing, and this entire process kind of turns me on a little bit.

It’s weird, really, how this works.

“I can hear you,” I say.

“What are we going to do with her?” Liam asks, looking at Paul.

“We could toss her on the bed and tie her up,” he answers, baring his fangs a little bit. Are his fangs always extended or do they slide down the way vampire fangs in movies always do? I stare, trying not to let nervousness wash over me.

“I think that’s a delightful idea,” Liam chuckles.

“We could feed from her,” Rose says. “I’ve been dying to taste the blood of a human.”

Human.

I don’t usually think of myself as human.

Correction: I *never* think of myself as a human.

Ever.

In the course of my daily activities, not once do I pause and ask myself, “Ah, do I feel human today?”

But around them...

Well, yeah, I feel pretty damn human.



More than that, I feel weak and lost. I feel a little bit scared. It's kind of intimidating to be around people who are so big in so many ways.

Rose is a vampire queen, in my opinion. She's so beautiful and sexy and confident. And I don't have any doubts that if we ever actually *do* sleep together, it's going to be something that changes everything.

Then there's Paul. The leader. Or at least, he comes across like the leader. He's gorgeous, too, and confident, but there's a layer of sadness behind his eyes that I really can't place entirely.

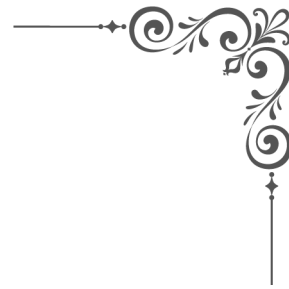
Something tells me that if I did decide to stay – and I'm not convinced that I will – that my entire world will change and be completely irreversible.

If I decide to stay with them, I'm never going to want to leave.

They'll wrap themselves around me like a blanket, enveloping me, and they'll make me feel like I'm the only girl in the world. To them, I will be.

Is this really what I want?

But then Rose steps even closer to me, reaches for me, and starts kissing me, and I realize, all of a sudden, that yes, this is definitely what I want.



## 13

### Rose

She tastes good.

Sweet.

Innocent.

She's not, of course. No one gets to be her age and is still innocent. She might be a little naïve, but she's not innocent.

I saw the way her eyes flared with lust when she looked at me and then at the boys. She's been thinking about us, the little minx, and I'm damn happy about it.

When I was turned into a vampire, I thought I was losing everything that made me *me*. I imagined that I was going to live a long, isolated future that would be completely devoid of any type of passion or joy or happiness.

That's not what happened.

Instead, I met my friend. My partners. My *loves*.

I do love them.

Each and every one of them is special for a different reason.

There's Paul, with his oh-so-serious attitude. He's the one who plans everything. He's the take-charge, obsessive kind of Alpha that every group needs. He's bossy, but he's secretly got this gooey heart of gold that just melts whenever someone needs him.

Gerald is tough. Really tough. He's the fighter. He's strong and determined and he, too, is pretty bossy. He loves to have fun, though, and he loves to laugh. I think that's my favorite thing about him. I love the way he laughs.

And of course, there's Liam. The softie. The sweet boy. Liam comes across as the protector, but I've known him long enough to know that he, too, can be vicious. He can be violent and wild and cruel.

And that's okay.

We all have our little roles that we play.

And of course, we have Melody now.

I kiss her like my life depends on it even though I'm no longer alive. I don't have *life*. I have this moment, though, and it's something I vow to myself that I'll never forget.

I'll never forget the way she melts against me.

I'll never forget the way my hands start playing with the hem of her dress.

I'll never forget the way it slides up just a little bit more.

She groans as I kiss her, exploring her mouth. I know that Liam, Paul, and Gerald are all enjoying the show in front of them because they're moving closer to us, and a moment later,

they're touching us, too. I can hear the sounds of them kissing each other even as their hands start roaming my body, as well as Melody's.

Only, I'm not paying attention to any of them.

I'm just thinking about her.

Does Melody know just how pretty she is?

How beautiful?

Does she have any inkling of just how magical she is?

She's the kind of woman who could have anyone, anything.

And yet...

Well, she's here.

With us.

The guys might feel hopeful that she's going to want to stay forever here, but I'm not quite so optimistic. I think that a woman like Melody probably has a lot to return home to. She's probably cultivated a life that she likes very much.

*We could keep her,* a little voice whispers to me. *We could be so happy.*

It's Paul. Nobody else knows that the two of us can communicate telepathically. It's something that started a few months ago. Neither one of us realized it was happening at first, which was weird because I definitely thought I was going crazy, and I'm pretty sure he thought the same thing.

Eventually, we figured it out and we've been able to use this to stay totally in sync with each other.

Yeah, our lovemaking has become next-level insane.

Only, we haven't told the others yet, and I honestly feel a little bad for it because it's not like us to keep secrets here in the house. Our band has always prided itself on openness and honesty, and we've always done whatever we could to make sure that the others involved feel as good and as wholesome and as pure as they're supposed to.

There's a part of me that wants to let Gerald and Liam in on this little secret, but there's another part of me – a dark and twisted part – that loves having something I don't share with them.

After so damn long as a vampire, it's nice to know that I can still learn new things, still find surprises, and still have moments that I can keep to myself.

It's nice to know that there are things here just for me.

It's nice to know I don't have to share *everything*.

Melody, on the other hand, is something I don't mind sharing, so as her hands begin to wander on my own body, I pull my mouth away from her. Paul instantly takes my place kissing Melody, while Liam claims my mouth for his own.

He chuckles: a sound that is low and rumbly.

“Having fun?”

I nod.

He knows that I am.

And it'll be fun to have another girl around, even if it's only for a little while. Melody is everything I could possibly want in a woman and more. She's curvy and soft. Pliable. Her dress is up to her waist now and I'm pretty sure it's Gerald's hand that's rubbing between her legs.

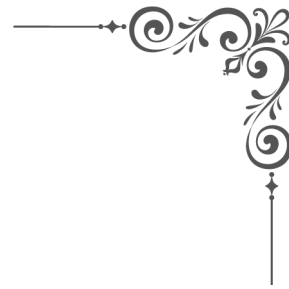
He's going to try to make her come for us even before any of us take things farther.

Good.

Just in case we really do only get one night with Melody, I want it to be a night that feels like it's lasting forever.

I want it to be a night we're never going to forget.

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## 14

### Liam

Rose melts beneath my lips.

Her hands are still on Melody's breasts. She's massaging them, and each time her hands move, Melody shudders with delight. It's hot as hell to see the two women pressed up against each other.

It's even hotter to watch Melody kissing Paul and having Rose kissing me.

Gerald slips behind me and starts kissing my neck as I'm touching Rose. I groan at the sensation. Yeah, Gerald is a lot of fun. They all are, and one of my favorite things about this clan is that we can pretty much do whatever we want together.

There are no limitations.

As we kiss and touch, the sound of our pleasure fills the room. Melody is groaning so loudly. I don't even think she realizes she's making noise at all. Then there's Rose, who is just radiating happiness in this moment.

It's not surprising – after all, we've never shared someone like Melody before.

Pulling away from Rose, I slide my eyes toward the bed.

“Put Melody in the center of the bed,” I demand, and just like that, it happens. Gerald and Paul lift her up easily, carrying her to the bed. They spread her out for our viewing pleasure. Rose looks up at me.

“Who gets to eat first?” The little vampire licks her lips, and I reach for her throat, pulling her toward me.

“Gerald,” I say.

“Aw, I wanted to lick her first,” Rose protests, but I shake my head.

“I have other plans for you, vampiress,” I chuckle.

“That’s not a real word, you know.”

“It is today. You’re like a vampire princess. A vampiress.”

“I’m not a princess.”

“You are to me.”

Then I kiss her again, and Rose finally shuts up. I hear Paul chuckle as Gerald settles between Melody’s legs and starts tasting her. I’m busy with Rose, though, so I’m missing part of the show. That’s okay. If we do a good job today, then maybe we’ll be able to convince her to stay.

Or maybe we won’t bother convincing her.

Maybe we’ll just keep her.

Would that really be so bad?

“You’re a bad girl,” I hear Paul growling at Melody. “Tell me you’re a bad girl.”



Rose groans against my mouth as we eavesdrop on the conversation happening just mere feet away. Melody doesn't want to talk dirty for Paul, but every damn one of us knows that Paul has ways of getting what he wants out of people.

If he wants her to say that she's a dirty little lollipop, she'll say it.

He can be very convincing when he wants to.

And I've learned that something like talking dirty can be just what someone like Melody – or anyone – needs to get in the mood.

I'm kissing Rose, so I don't see what Gerald and Paul do to Melody, but eventually I hear her crying out.

"I'm bad," she tells them. Rose and I both look over in time to see her first orgasm of the night. She arches her back. Gerald is still in between her legs, and Paul is rubbing his cock as he watches them. She groans, moaning as she lets the waves of pleasure wash over her.

Rose pushes me away with a sexy little laugh and scurries over to the bed. She's naked before she reaches it and climbs up over Melody's body, settling herself on Melody's face.

Then she drops down.

Melody doesn't hesitate.

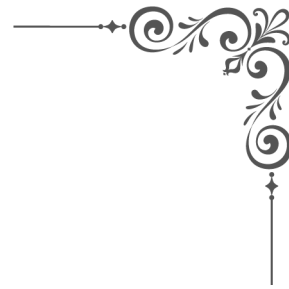
She starts licking at Rose, giving it everything she's got. It really is the hottest damn thing I've ever seen.

"What do you think?" Gerald asks, looking over at me and Paul. "Does the little human need a vampire cock inside of

her?”

“Yes,” Melody calls out from her position beneath Rose. “I do.”

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## 15

### Melody

It's the hottest thing I've ever done and it's not even half over.

The orgasm they gave me is something I don't think I'll ever be able to get over. It was like thunder and lightning and magic all at once.

It was like heaven.

And now I'm doing something I've been fantasizing about since I was a damn teenager. I'm literally *tasting* the rockstar I've had a crush on for ages, and she's grinding against my face like nothing else matters except me getting her off.

And I'm going to.

I have to.

As I taste her, I feel two different mouths on my legs. I can't see who it is, but one vampire is grazing their fangs against one thigh, and someone is grazing their fangs against my other thigh. I'm not sure how they're coordinating this effort, but they both bite me at the same time, but I cry out against Rose's pussy as the two vamps start drinking from me.

“Good girl,” Rose says. “You can take them. You can handle them biting you.”

I’m not sure that I can, though.

I hear a chuckle.

Paul.

“She’s a very good girl,” he agrees.

Okay, so that means it’s Gerald and Liam who are drinking from me, only I’m not as scared as I think that I should be.

“It probably hurts a little bit,” Paul says. I can’t say anything back. I’m too busy tasting Rose, too busy enjoying the way she’s melting against my damn mouth. “That’s normal. The first time always hurts the most,” he continues. “But you should know that the orgasm you just had makes your blood taste so deliciously sweet, Melody. It tastes *so* good to them. They’re devouring every bit of you, savoring everything that makes you *you*.”

And then they pull away.

I feel them licking my skin. Are they sealing up the wounds? I imagine that vampires must be able to do that. I read a story about it once. It means that they can drink from the same source over and over again, I think.

At least, I’m pretty sure that’s what it means.

I feel like I’m floating.

I feel like my entire mind is falling apart as the vampires play these little games with my body.

When I've slept with people before, it's only ever been me with one other person. I've never been with a *group* of people.

I've certainly never been the center of attention.

Soon I realize that Rose is getting close, and I dig my fingers into her thighs as I hold onto her. I wonder if she, too, feels like she's going to float away.

"Spread your legs, little human," I hear Paul say gruffly, and I feel him position himself between my legs.

From somewhere in the distance, I hear music.

Piano.

Is Gerald...playing the piano?

I remember seeing an upright piano in the room and wondering what it was for, but now it makes perfect sense because somehow, having some live music makes this experience even stronger than I thought it was going to be.

He starts to sing as Paul slides inside of me, and suddenly, I forget about the music.

I forget about everything except the way Rose is starting to quiver on top of me as her orgasm washes over her. I feel a hand between my legs.

Liam.

Rose slides off of me and I look over to see Liam rubbing his length with one hand and touching me with the other.

He grins, a sly grin.

“Don’t hold back, pretty girl. You know what we want to see.”

Yeah.

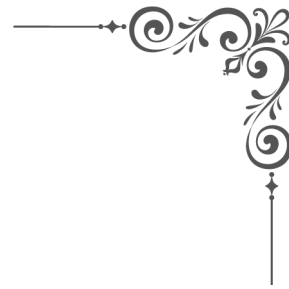
Yeah, I’m starting to get what they want to see.

Rose leans down and starts to kiss me as Paul kisses Liam.

Then, at the same time, Paul, Liam, and I each reach that magical, unquenchable peak, and Rose giggles against my lips as my soul feels like it’s leaving my body.

“Good girl,” she murmurs against my mouth. “You’re such a good girl.”

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## 16

### Melody

I don't really know how much time has passed since I arrived in the woods.

When I left to embark on this little adventure, I thought it would take me a couple of hours, but that quickly morphed into days, and I'm pretty sure it's now been almost a week.

Maybe more.

After that first night with the vampire band, I knew I wasn't going to be okay with just one night, so I didn't ask to leave.

And they didn't ask me to.

Every day, they talk about claiming me. Keeping me. Protecting me. I don't know what it is that they want to protect me from, but I'm sure that vampires have enemies. You can't live for hundreds of years and not collect at least a *few* villains who want to hunt you down.

And even though I know that this is real and I know that I'm still human, sometimes it's hard to wrap my head around everything that's happening.

Sometimes it really does feel like a fever dream and I'm in this lust-induced haze.

It's the middle of the day when I wake up feeling hungry. I slip out of bed. Liam and Gerald are curled up together on one side of me. Paul is on the other. Rose isn't here. She was beside Paul when we all fell asleep, but I didn't hear her leave.

Either way, I'm suddenly starving, so I leave the bed and head downstairs to the kitchen. I really have done okay getting myself acquainted with the house they live in. The only thing I haven't really done is go down to check out the tunnels that lead back to the orphanage where they found me.

Westbridge Forest isn't exactly known for it's housing options, so there really is a part of me that's surprised this incredible house is here and no one noticed.

Shouldn't someone have accidentally stumbled across it at some point?

The orphanage is clearly something of a local landmark, so it makes sense that people would claim that for urban exploring, but this house, the one that they actually live in, seems to be completely isolated from the outside world.

How many other mansions like this exist in Westbridge Forest?

Are there more vampires out there?

I kind of think that there might be.

Westbridge Forest is huge. It's hundreds of miles wide and it's filled with all sorts of scary stuff – mostly bears.



Then again, I guess vampires are probably scarier than bears to most people. My opinion is a little skewed from all of the orgasms I've been having lately. It's messing with my mind.

When I get to the kitchen, I'm only a little surprised to find Rose there. She's sitting on a stool at the counter mixing something in a bowl.

"Can't sleep?" Rose asks without looking up.

"Nah," I shake my head. She keeps kind of a weird sleep schedule, too. The other vamps tend to sleep during the day and be awake at night. Rose sort of naps and wakes randomly. She told me once the only real reason to keep a "vampire's sleep schedule" is to make sure you're never bored and awake during the day when you can't go outside. Rose considers herself something of an introvert, so that's not really a problem for her.

She looks up at me.

"Are you hungry?"

"A little."

A lot.

"Want me to make you something?"

I nod, and I settle in on a stool myself as she pushes her bowl toward me. I take over the stirring as she starts walking around the kitchen gathering different supplies.

"What's in the bowl?" I ask, eyeing it suspiciously. I think it's some sort of dough for muffins or cupcakes, judging by the

muffin pan that's out on the counter.

"Blueberry muffins," she says.

"For someone who can't eat people food, you sure bake a lot," I point out.

She laughs. It's a sound that makes me feel so happy, so complete.

"Yeah, well, we all have our little hobbies."

"Isn't that what being in the band is?" It's not really a job anymore, I suppose. They haven't performed in years, after all.

"The band is more than a hobby," Rose says. She's holding a bowl in one hand and a tea kettle in the other. I'm guessing she's going to make some sort of oatmeal, and I am completely okay with this. I've taken to allowing Rose to cook for me and every day it's something different.

I don't bother asking how the ingredients get here. For all I know, the vampires have some sort of delivery service.

What I do know is that Rose treats me like a damn queen, and I am here for it.

"It's a lifestyle," she says.

"Yeah, I get that."

She prepares a bowl of oatmeal, slices up some strawberries, and carefully spreads them around the top of the oats. We swap bowls and I sniff the oatmeal. I know it's weird, but I've always loved the smell of oatmeal.

"It smells amazing. Thank you."

“No problem.”

She keeps stirring her batter and soon starts spooning out a little bit of the mixture in even amounts into the muffin pan.

“Do you ever miss it?”

“What?”

“Eating food,” I ask.

“No,” she says.

“I think you’re lying.”

She looks up sharply.

“Big words.”

I shrug. I’m not scared of Rose. She can kill me fast if she wants to, but I’m not afraid of her. I’m perfectly aware that I should be, but I feel different now.

I’ve been here long enough that sometimes it feels like I’ve never actually been anywhere else. It’s a little scary to me just how fast I’ve adapted to life here in the vampire house.

“I think I’d miss it,” I say quietly.

“You might be surprised.”

Paul and Gerald told me that vampires *can* consume human food, but it makes them queasy. That’s why so many of them can pass as human. They can actually eat when they go out. It’s just that later, they basically get the worst possible flu-like symptoms and feel like they’re going to die.

That’s why most of them don’t take the chance.

“Is there anything else you miss?”

Rose loads the pan into the oven, closes it, and sets the timer. When she turns back around, she looks at me carefully.

“What’s with all of the questions? Are you thinking of asking us to turn you?”

“No,” I shake my head. I mean, a little. I’d be totally crazy if I spent a week making crazy passionate love with a bunch of vampires and *didn’t* think about what would happen if they turned me.

I know that things would be different.

I totally get that.

Only, I don’t know if I actually care anymore.

Would losing the ability to eat and enjoy food really be such a terrible thing? I’d still be able to enjoy blood, so it would sort-of be like swapping one type of food for another.

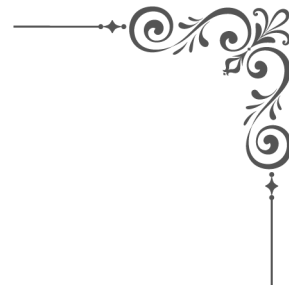
Besides, I’d get to be with all of the vampires, and that in itself would be incredible.

“Finish your oatmeal,” Rose says quietly.

“I have more questions,” I protest.

“Finish your oatmeal and go back to bed,” she tells me. When she turns her back to me and faces the oven, I realize that our conversation really is over.

She really does want to be alone.



## 17

### Rose

I don't want a mate.

*Want* is such a silly word for what I need, what I crave.

Melody really is the most beautiful creature I've ever laid my eyes on before, and I know perfectly well that the rest of my clan feels the same way.

We're all crazy about her. Passionate. Obsessed. That's what this thing really is. It's an obsession.

And like all good obsessions, eventually we're going to burn ourselves out on her, so I think we need to let her go before any of us gets too attached.

Only, it's too late.

Liam is already writing love songs about her. Paul has been talking in his slumber about her. Even Gerald, who tends to be so stoic and cold-hearted, likes the human who wandered into the orphanage in the darkness.

Did she know what was going to happen that day when she chose to leave the path?

She's like a damn Red Riding Hood wandering into the wolf's lair.

She's like a fairy princess about to meet the big bad monster.

When she leaves the kitchen sullenly, I stay where I am. I don't follow her or comfort her even though I want to because I know what's going to happen.

I'll spend the whole damn night making love to her and pretending that the two of us can have this normal, sweet life, when we all know that's not the way of the vampire.

That's not the way any of this works.

Somehow, I finish baking the muffins. I wait silently as they cool. Then I line a little basket with a cloth and arrange them nicely. Some things never change.

I think about how proud my mother would be if she could see me taking care in my baking. She always loved baking. It was one of the things she did that made her feel *good* and happy.

She felt like baking was one of the best ways to make yourself come alive.

It was something you could do even when the rest of your soul was in pain.

When I'm done, I trod quietly upstairs past the big bedroom where I can hear the guys making love to Melody again. It's all we do these days. When we're not busy sleeping with her, we're sleeping with each other, and we're all having the best damn time of our immortal lives.

Normally, I'd join them, and there's a part of me that wants to, but I can't.

Instead, I make my way to the end of the hall to the narrow door there, and I reach for the key that hangs around my throat. It's the only key to this door, and I unlock it, step inside, and shut the door behind me. Locking it once more, I pause for a moment.

Then I turn and start walking up the spiral staircase that leads to the only tower in the house.

When I reach the top, I take in the little private library I've cultivated over the years. This tower features a round room with windows stretching from the floor to about six feet up. Above that there are bookshelves that continue for another twenty feet.

It's a haven.

The floor is covered with pillows. I love to come up here to read privately while looking out over the forest. Here I can see over the tops of the trees, but there's never anyone out here to bother me or distract me.

It's just me out here.

Just me and the world, and I love it.

Right now, the windows are covered by thick heavy curtains. I only open them at night, obviously, because I don't feel like bursting into flames. Sometimes, if I'm feeling brave, I'll take a quick peek out at the sunlight.

Melody asked if I miss the food, and I was being honest when I said I didn't.

What I really miss is the sunshine.

The beach.

Feeling my entire body be *warm*.

Those are the things I miss the most.

Now, I leap up, jumping twenty feet to the ceiling, and I cling to it for a moment before locating the book I've been reading. It's a classic written by someone who had no idea what they were talking about, but I'm loving it all the same.

Dropping back down, I lie back on the pillows and start to read.

And read.

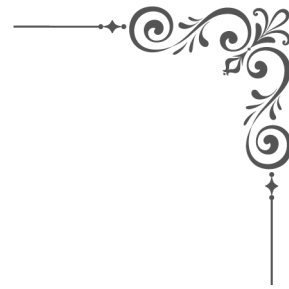
And read.

Before I know it, I'm dropping the book, closing my eyes, and slipping into slumber.

And I dream of the beautiful girl with the curvy body and the contagious laugh.

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## 18

### Paul

“It’s time for us to make a choice.”

My voice is firm and loud, but the rest of the band stares at me. One by one, everyone sets down their instruments and looks at me.

We’re in the basement of the orphanage running through a practice for our upcoming album. Melody thinks we don’t record anything new anymore, but she’s wrong. We’ve been in a bit of a slump, yeah, but our new projects are fun and dynamic and we’re keeping things interesting and exciting.

Our band’s lifetime isn’t over.

It’s only getting started.

“What are you talking about?” Liam asks.

“Should Melody be here for this discussion?” Gerald wants to know. He drops down, sitting on his ass and crossing his legs in front of himself. He looks far too comfortable for this conversation. His comfort level irritates me for some reason.

“She’s not invited.”

“She’s asleep,” Rose points out. “We can go wake her up. It sounds like she might want to know what we’re going to say.”

“We need to make a decision as to whether we keep her or not,” I say firmly. It’s actually very difficult for me to say any of this because I desperately want to keep Melody with us. I’d love nothing more than to lock her up and keep her in Rose’s little book tower.

I’d love to just make her promise to make love to us every day and do nothing else.

Feeding from her has made me feel stronger and more powerful than I’ve felt in years. It’s actually kind of annoying because I don’t know if I can ever go back to the way I felt before.

“Why?” Liam asks. “I think we’re all happy with how things are.”

“We’re all in agreement that we’re having a good time,” Gerald nods. “There’s no need to rush things or change them.”

Only, there is.

If we keep her, then I want to turn her. I want to make her into a true vampire bride. Oh, it won’t be very traditional, I suppose. She won’t be taking a vampire husband. She’ll be taking a group of us. She’ll be taking all of us, as well as any lovers she may want in the future.

We’re old enough and comfortable enough in our own skin to know that placing limitations on your partners only ever ends in heartache. If Melody agrees to be *ours*, she’ll be free

to do what she wants. If she meets some handsome young human at the bar and wants to sleep with him, she can. If she happens to meet a beautiful woman at a café who loves the same books she does, they can have a bit of fun.

That's allowed.

But what might *not* be allowed is her going back to the human world and not committing to us.

I don't know if that's something I can deal with.

Even now, with the little time that's passed, I'm completely attached to her. It's not safe for her to stay with us. After all, we're monsters.

There are other monsters out in the world, though, and now that we've got our scent all over her, they're going to be able to hunt her.

I don't want that.

Timothy Sweet is going to come back for me one day. As much as I want to hide from him and his villainous attempts on my life, I'm going to have to face him for real one day. I should have finished the job years ago, but he slipped through my fingers, and I've been pouring myself into music and trying to forget ever since.

I've never considered myself much of a hunter. When it comes to my undead life, I just want to find the peace I could never experience as a human, but there are other vampires who don't feel the same way as me.

There are other vampires who want to hurt and maim and kill.

That's not why I became a vampire.

"I believe she's our mate," I tell them.

We've all felt it. Every single one of us feels the pull of a vampire to their mate.

"I didn't know that multiple vampires could share a single mate," Liam says quietly.

"They can," Rose sighs. "I've been reading."

"What did you find in your books, Rose?" Gerald asks gently. He gestures toward his lap and Rose crosses the stage. She straddles him, sitting on his lap, and leans her head against his shoulder. He rubs her back as she sits there, snuggling against him.

"I found a lot of books that said each vampire has one true mate that's bound to them, but those were mostly fictional stories."

"But did you find anything true?" I ask, anxious for answers.

"I found one volume written in 1793," she says. "It's by a vampire called Lewis."

"And what did this Vampire Lewis have to say?" I don't make any jokes about his name. Even though Lewis seems like a bit of a silly name for a vampire, I suppose it's not any different from a vampire called Paul. I frown at the thought. My name is fine. It is.

Only, maybe I should change it.

“His book says that he is, or was, rather, a vampire mated to a human. His best friend and longtime lover was also mates with the same woman.”

“So the three of them lived in harmony,” Liam nods.  
“That’s good to know.”

“No,” Rose frowns. “Lewis killed the other man and kept the human.”

We all stare at her. She buries her head deeper against Gerald’s shoulder, as though he’s going to protect her from what she’s sharing with us.

“Explain.”

“He believed that it was definitely possible for a vampire to share a mate with another vampire, but he didn’t want anyone else touching the woman he loved.”

“Well, we aren’t like that,” Liam says. “We have no problem sharing. Do we?”

I watch the Irishman as he scoots behind Gerald. He starts rubbing Gerald’s shoulders, massaging out any tension he might be feeling. At the same time, Gerald looks over his shoulder and offers Liam a soft kiss.

Apparently, I’m the only one not being touched right now, and I do find that a bit bothersome. Only, they all seem to notice at the same time.

“Are you okay?” Rose asks. She wiggles out of Gerald’s lap and starts crawling across the stage to me, where she kneels at my feet. I look down at her, so beautiful and soft, and

I wonder – not for the first time – how I could be so damn lucky to have the chance to spend all of eternity with them.

“I’m fine,” I say gruffly.

“He’s not,” Liam shakes his head.

“You really aren’t,” Gerald agrees.

“I’m perfectly fine,” I say a little too loudly.

Only, Rose starts nuzzling her face against the front of my pants, and I realize that no, I’m not okay.

I love this.

Love her.

Love all of them.

Every damn person here is someone I could lose myself in, and I have. Many times. Here we don’t put limitations on our relationships. We all love each other – together, separately. We share.

Because here in this place, we aren’t stuck doing what society begs of us.

We aren’t forced into little boxes – not that you’d be able to fit a vampire into a box. Aside from the occasional coffin, none of us fits into a box.

I drop down in front of Rose and kiss her, losing myself in her touch.

“There we go,” I hear Liam and Gerald murmur. The two of them start touching one another as Rose runs her hands down my neck and over my chest.

“Close your eyes,” Rose tells me. “And just feel.”

And so, for a little while, I lose myself in her.

In this touch.

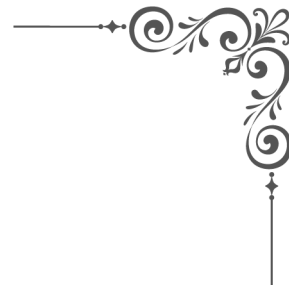
In this moment.

And for a little while, nothing else matters except the four  
of us here.

Together.

For always.

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## 19

### Melody

I wait until the vampires leave the warmth of our bed.

Once they're out of the room, I silently get up and tug on an oversized t-shirt and a pair of sweats. If you'd asked me weeks ago what I thought vampires wore, it would definitely be things like black leather and corsets.

Yet here I am: wearing sweatpants.

It's been a week.

I've been here a whole week. I'm quite sure of that, and I know that I need to make a decision. Actually, what I really need to do is go home and pick up my stuff because I think that I want to stay here.

The realization both thrills and scares me.

I want them.

All of them.

And I'm being offered the chance to keep them.

But I need to find the stuff I came here with – my phone, for one. And I need my keys. Hell, I'm sure my car has been towed by now, but I need to get back home and, at the very



least, get my stuff out of my apartment before my landlord freaks out on me.

The vampires are gone. They've disappeared down into one of the tunnels that leads beneath the mansion and that goes into the darkness of the forest.

There are dozens of them.

It's kind of weird to know that there are so many different tunnels here and different places that the vampires can go, but I can't worry about that right now.

Where would they put my stuff?

I've looked for it casually, but anytime I start trying to actually find my keys or phone, someone distracts me with sex or food and the reality is that I'm quite easily distracted. It's a real problem, actually, so this is my best bet. I know it's kind of shady to wait until they're gone, but this will give me a few hours to really look around the house.

I start with the room next to the one we sleep in, but that turns out to be a dead end. The house we're in really is an old mansion. It's got 10 bedrooms, each of which is beautifully decorated. As far as I can tell, each of the vampires has their own bedroom, plus there are rooms for guests. Only, we all kind of end up sleeping in "my" room most of the time, which I can't really complain about.

I go down the hallway, checking each room.

I go through Rose's desk and rifle through her books. She's got an incredible collection and I feel a little bad for touching

her things, but I do my best to leave everything in the same position I found it in.

Besides, I'm not being nosy.

I'm literally looking for *my* things.

I don't need to dig deep, I remind myself. Whichever one of them took my keys and phone, they wouldn't have done *too* much with it. They probably just put it in the top drawer of a desk or something.

So, I keep looking.

It's in Paul's bedroom that I finally find both my keys and my phone. Sure enough, they're both in the top drawer of his desk. It's like he set them there and just forgot about them.

When I reach for my phone, it's not dead, though. It's fully charged.

Has he been keeping my phone charged?

Has he been going through my things?

I spot a wall charger next to the desk and realize that apparently, vampires have cell phones. I cringe as I unlock my phone, wondering what kind of chaos he found when he went through it, but there's nothing.

According to the little security app I have, he only accessed my phone once, about a week ago. The phone is in airplane mode and there are no notifications, so I'm starting to think he didn't actually go through my phone.

I rifle through, touching different apps and buttons until I find out what he's done.

Paul the Vampire has listed himself as a contact, along with Gerald, Rose, and Liam.

He's listed every single one of them as Name + "The Vampire," as though I don't know who they are.

With a sigh, I reluctantly flip off the airplane mode button and wait for the barrage of texts, missed calls, and voicemails to fall through, but to my surprise, there are only a few.

Strange.

Nobody seems particularly worried about me.

Really?

I've been missing for a week and nobody cares?

I look through my texts, but there's nothing really strange aside from a text from Violet that says, "I miss you so much! Let me know when you're back."

When I'm back?

How would she know that I'm safely gone?

Suspicion threatens to wash over me as I keep going through my texts. There's nothing here. Nothing strange.

So, how would she know that I'm gone?

I don't have visual voicemail programming on my phone because I'm lazy. Instead, I have to do the tried-and-true practice of calling my actual voicemail number and putting in my PIN.

Sure enough, there's one from my boss, letting me know that I'm fired. I suppose that's to be expected. Then there's

another one from him letting me know that I'm not fired, and he's sorry for the trouble, and I can take as much time as I need for my "family" issues before I come back to work.

What the hell?

The same thing happens with Violet.

There's a voicemail from her. It sounds worried, but then there's another one talking about how she hopes I have fun on my "new job" and she can't wait to see me when I "get back."

What the hell?

Something is seriously strange.

I feel like Paul has meddled in my life somehow, but I have no real proof of any of that. Did he go through my phone and call my loved ones to let them know I'm okay? Did he come up with an excuse as to where I am?

And why does this make me feel protected instead of afraid?

If he's texted or called anyone, the records are gone. He doesn't seem particularly tech-savvy, but maybe I'm not giving him enough of a chance. He could have deleted all of those things. Right? He might know enough to cover his tracks.

But does he know enough to change my phone records?

I pull up my cell phone bill and check when my last phone calls and texts were sent. Sure enough, they're all from the day after I found the vampires. The day after I met them, "I" sent a bunch of texts to both Violet and my boss.

How would Paul even have known who to call?

Then I cringe.

My boss, Marcus, is in my phone as “Boss.”

Violet is my most frequently texted number, so of course, that’s how she’d be notified.

I slump down on the floor and hold my phone in one hand and my keys in the other. Paul’s planned this whole thing. He went out of his way to make sure that nobody would miss me so they wouldn’t come looking for me. I should be honored, but I also find this kind of scary. He didn’t know my voicemail PIN, so he couldn’t delete those messages, but he went to the trouble of making sure people thought I was safe and alive and okay.

And why did my boss sound so weird?

I glance toward the door, but there’s no one there. I have plenty of time before the vampires return from their band practice or human hunting or whatever it is that they went to do. I click over to my “contacts” and decide to give Marcus a call.

He answers on the first ring.

“She still has her job,” he says hastily. “I didn’t fire her. She’s fine.”

“Marcus?”

Silence.

Then, his voice quivers a bit when he speaks again.

“Melody, is that you?”

“Yeah. It’s me.”

“Are you all right?”

Marcus sounds more worried about me than he ever has before, which is kind of weird because he’s not the type of man who worries.

“I’m fine. Marcus, why did you say you didn’t fire me?”  
By all accounts, I should definitely be fired.

“Are you alone?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re safe?”

“Marcus, I’m fine. What’s going on?”

He hesitates.

“I don’t know what’s going on, Melody, but when you didn’t show up for your shift last month, I had to let you go. I’ve got a business to run, you know. Then a man called me from your phone and threatened me. I told him to shove it up his ass, but then he came into the damn bar and he *bit* one of my patrons. It got messy. He did something to make her forget because she swears up and down it didn’t happen, but I saw it, Melody. I saw him bite her. Melody, are you hanging out with vampires?”

Hearing someone say it out loud makes me want to be honest. For some reason, I’m not surprised that Marcus Red believes in vampires. He’s been around a long damn time, and it makes sense that he would know this.

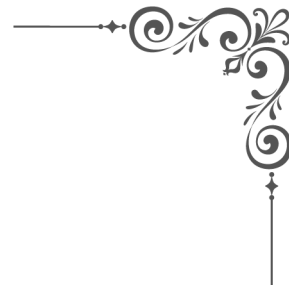
Only, I’m caught up on something else he said.

“Last month? Marcus, my shift was for Thursday night.”

He’s quiet again for a moment, and then he says.

“Melody, you’ve been gone five weeks.”

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## 20

### Melody

What?

How is this possible?

“What are you talking about, Marcus?”

Make it make sense, I silently beg.

“That Thursday night shift was five weeks ago, Melody. You’ve been gone a long time. You’re with them, aren’t you? You’re with the vampires.”

I close my eyes and rub my forehead.

On a whim, I decide to just be honest. Marcus obviously isn’t firing me, and although he’s the hero in no one’s story, he isn’t really a terrible person. He’s just old and strict.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m with the vampires.”

“You need to be careful,” he says. “They aren’t like us, Melody. They don’t think the same way. They don’t feel the same way.”

“What do you mean, Marcus? How do you know all of this?”



The truth is that Marcus is starting to scare me a little bit. I'm not sure how I feel about all of this stuff he's saying to me.

All of this stuff about vampires and the things they do...

And I'm not sure how I feel about the fact that Paul went to Red's, didn't tell me, and then *bit* someone.

I'm not...jealous.

It's not that.

I'm more...confused.

Actually, I'm not really sure how I feel. My stomach twists as I think about what Marcus is really saying.

How is it possible that I've already been here for five weeks?

When I think back on my time here, it only seems like it's been a couple of days, except that there are flashes of memories where I've been with different vampires.

I've made love to Rose in her private tower library. I've kissed Gerald on his bed while we listened to music so loudly that it made my ears hurt. I've been with Paul outside in the grass. Then there's Liam, who once claimed me in the claw-footed bathtub in his private bathroom.

These experiences couldn't have logically happened in just a day, so why is it that I'm just now realizing what's happened to me?

It scares me a little, this understanding.

This knowledge.

It kind of freaks me out.

And I hate that I didn't think about it before I talked to Marcus.

"How do you even know any of this?" I repeat my question, but Marcus has gone silent. I can still hear him breathing.

"I've said too much," he says. "Just be careful."

Then the line goes dead.

"Melody, who was that?"

I hear a firm voice and I turn around to see Paul standing there. Gerald is beside him. The two men are side-by-side and they have their arms crossed over their broad chests.

"What?" I whisper.

Gerald is on me in a flash. His hand grips my throat and he shoves me back against a wall, pinning me there. Instantly, I'm wet and excited, hot and aroused.

How does he have this effect on me?

It's like no matter what I'm feeling, my body responds to him over and over again. It's like I can't seem to get away from the way he makes me feel even though I desperately want him to.

"Answer the question," Paul says, walking over. He has the audacity to look a little bored while Gerald is choking me.

"Why did you call my boss?" I ask, glaring at Paul. I ignore the pressure on my neck, as well as the heat warming my thighs. I will *not* get turned on right now. I won't. I'm not

going to get aroused. I'm not going to get excited. I'm not doing *any* of that.

Instead, I'm just going to take this opportunity to ask him questions I should have asked weeks ago, apparently.

"Because I didn't want anyone reporting you as a missing person," Paul says. He speaks simply and evenly, as though this is the most logical thing in the world to him.

When you take a human to live with you, you don't want her friends reporting her as missing.

Fair.

"And did you bite someone at his bar?"

"No."

"You bit someone," I say, irritated. "Marcus told me. You bit her and then made her forget."

"I can't compel anyone to do anything for me," Paul lowers his voice. "That includes twisting their memories or understanding of what's happening."

I feel Gerald's hand loosen just the slightest bit, and my eyes swivel to his, locking.

That's when I realize. It all hits me at once. Paul can't compel people, and neither can Liam.

Can Gerald?

"It was you," I whisper.

He's silent.

"You bit someone at the bar?"

He bares his fangs a little bit, and I instantly think of all the times he's fed from me in the weeks that I've been here. He's drank from my neck and from my thighs. He's made love to me while drinking from me, and he's cuddled me while drinking from me, but I never thought of him drinking from another person.

"Does that bother you?" Gerald asks.

"No."

"Then why are you angry?"

"I'm not jealous, if that's what you mean."

He loosens his hand even more and finally releases me. I rub my neck dramatically, acting like it's sore but it's not. Gerald doesn't actually hurt me. He's a little rough with me, but only in ways that I actually like and enjoy.

"Why did you change her memory? Why did you make her forget?"

"I can't erase someone's memory," he says. "Only a very powerful vampire can do that."

"What do you mean? Aren't you all pretty powerful?" They both laugh, and I realize that there's a lot I don't know.

Apparently, I should have been actually asking questions about vampires instead of just sleeping with them.

Go me.

Nobody ever accused me of being the smartest person in the room. Then again, I don't really feel dumb right now. It's

not like this is something I could have learned about in school or in books.

Unless I was being classically trained by a vampire professor, I don't think I could have possibly had any sort of clue what was happening until I actually came to stay here.

"Then what did you do?"

"Your boss was being annoying. He called a lot. I went to speak to him and told him to leave you alone and to keep your job for you."

"That's it?"

"Then I had a taste of one of the women at the bar," Gerald shrugs. "I didn't hypnotize her, but she was already drunk when I tasted her."

"Marcus said she couldn't remember what happened."

"It's possible, but that had nothing to do with me. When someone is drinking, their memories naturally fade a little, right?"

I nod.

"Imagine losing blood while you're tipsy. It just blurs things even more. It has nothing to do with vampire powers, love. I didn't go erase her memories."

Somehow, this makes me feel a little better even though I don't think that it should.

I don't think that what he's saying is wrong, necessarily, but it also...

“Why didn’t you tell me I’ve been here so long?” I blurt out.

They both stare at me, surprised.

“We assumed you knew, Melody.”

“I thought it had only been days.”

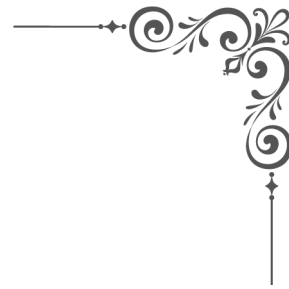
Gerald and Paul look at me, confused. Then they look at each other. They really do seem surprised about this.

“Why did you think it had been days, Melody? We’ve made love to you constantly since you arrived. We’ve been feeding from you every damn day. Hell, we’ve been baking and cooking for you like nobody’s business.” Paul frowns, concerned. He knows something is wrong, just like I do.

When you go live with vampires, time isn’t supposed to stand still.

Is it?

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## 21

### Melody

**A**nother day passes.

Then again, maybe it's a week or two.

I can't really tell, and I've given up on all of that. Instead of worrying, I immerse myself in the stories that the vampires tell me.

We're all gathered in the living room on the first floor of the mansion. It's a cozy sort of place with couches and these big velvet armchairs and huge, fluffy rugs.

I love it.

I love everything about this place, and yet...

I'm starting to wonder if Marcus is right. Maybe I do need to be careful. Maybe I've been hasty.

They took me here without permission, but they aren't stopping me from leaving. They also haven't really asked me to stay. We're all just sort of this in this weird, honeymoon sort of limbo.

After my talk with Paul and Gerald, I pocketed my phone and keys. Neither one of them said anything, but I think the

gesture worried them. Now I'm leaning against one of the armchairs as I listen to Rose singing softly, and I'm scrolling through a social media site I always say that I hate, yet I can't ever seem to get enough of.

And that's when I see all of the people I know living their lives.

There's my cousin Wendy, who just baked a loaf of bread and shared pictures of the entire process.

Then there's a lady I used to work with who is currently on vacation with her husband and two kids. They're posting pictures from the beaches and all of the restaurants that they're trying.

One of my neighbors has a set of pictures of her cats. Each of them is wearing a little bowtie and she's asked the question, "Aren't they so cute?"

*Yes*, I think to myself as I "like" the pictures.

And I wonder what I'm really doing here.

I'm hanging out.

I'm listening to old stories.

And I'm sucking off my favorite band in the world, but...

But I don't belong here.

The realization hits me like a ton of rocks. I look up sharply, but no one seems to notice the inner-turmoil I'm feeling.

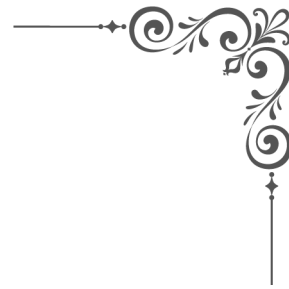
Liam and Gerald are making out on the couch, Rose is still singing, and Paul is staring at the fire like he's looking for



answers, too.

And I realize that not only do I not belong, but that I'm never, ever going to belong.

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## 22

### Rose

We're going to ask her.

Tonight's the night that we're going to ask her to be our mate forever. This may or may not include turning Melody into a vampire, but I'm pretty sure that it does. We won't turn her if she doesn't want it, if she's not ready for the risks that come with such an effort, but...

But I want her.

Need her.

Crave her.

There's a longing that's been building up inside of me for years. I love Gerald and Liam and Paul. I do. Each and every one of us has a magical, special relationship that's totally unique, but there's always been just a little sliver missing.

Melody is that missing something.

When she first came to us, we were all caught off guard. Not a single one of us knew what to do with her, but now...

Now I'm ready.

I stop singing and look over at her. She's on her phone, which is fine. She didn't seem to miss it or want it the first month or so she was here, but Paul and Gerald told me she didn't even realize she'd been here so long.

How the hell do you not realize it?

Only, I know that the longer I live, the less I pay attention to the passing of time.

Things like the seasons changing no longer excites or bothers me. Whether there's snow or rain or nothing at all, I'm ambivalent. I'm completely uncaring because it just doesn't matter.

Only, Melody excites me.

She makes me feel like life might be worth living again.

She makes me feel like the world might not be as terrible as I seem to think it is all of the time.

Melody looks up at me and smiles. I stand up slowly and walk across the room to where she is. Then I kneel in front of her chair and place my hands on her thighs. She seems surprised but doesn't say anything. Instead, she sets her phone down and she reaches for my hands and holds them in her own.

"Rose," she murmurs, bringing one of my hands to her lips. "Sweet, beautiful Rose."

I don't know if I'm sweet and I've never felt particularly beautiful, but I'm ready to ask her. The boys seem to notice what I'm preparing to do because they, too, start to pay attention.

I open my mouth.

“Melody, we love having you here,” I start. It’s a weak start. It sounds like I’m going to break up with her.

Melody grins, though, and smiles.

“Yeah, it’s really crazy,” she whispers. “Who knew that I’d get to meet my favorite rockstars?”

“You’ve done a bit more than meet us, love,” Liam calls out, and Melody’s smile just gets even bigger.

“Yeah, yeah,” she laughs. “Tease me all you like.”

“I’d love to tease you,” Liam chuckles. “I’d love to make you quiver, lass. Don’t tempt me. I’ll do it.”

She bites her lip, suddenly shy, and I reach for her neck and tug her down to me. Kissing her, I lose myself in the moment, but I quickly pull back because I need to ask her.

I need to say this out loud.

“We want you,” I blurt out.

It doesn’t sound as profound or as beautiful as it did in my head.

“I want you, too.”

“No, I mean...we want to keep you,” I say, trying to explain this.

“What are you talking about?”

“We want you to be our mate,” Gerald tells her.

Suddenly, we’re all surrounding her. She doesn’t seem scared, though. She’s not afraid. Melody is used to us

surrounding her like this now. She's gotten used to having our hands on her and our mouths on her and our fangs deep inside of her soft, beautiful skin.

“Your mate?”

We all nod at the same time. We've been talking about it, and we've all been quite sure that she's *the one*.

We all feel it.

And despite the weird book we found that seems to think vampires can't fall in love with the same person and be happy indefinitely, we all seem to believe that it will be possible with her.

We'll do anything.

For her.

“What does a vampire mate even do?” Melody whispers.

And for the first time, I feel nervous.

What if she doesn't want this?

What if she doesn't actually want to stay with us?

I know that Liam, Gerald, and Paul have all gotten their hopes up, and that's saying a lot for a group of weirdo vampires who live in the darkness of the forest.

When you've been alive as long as we have, you stop feeling excited about things. It's like the world ceases to be surprising, and so it stops being interesting.

“You'd stay here,” Paul says.

“I got that bit. But I mean...would I just be like, your blood doll?”

“No,” I say quickly. “You’d be so much more than that.”

“Would I be your equal?”

“You’d be our beloved,” Paul says. I can tell that he’s very emotional right now because he never uses words like that unless he’s actively upset. In fact, I’m pretty sure he’s never said the word *beloved* in his life.

“So, I’d be like, your wife. I’d be like, everyone’s wife?”

We nod. We really should have thought up how to explain this in a better way, in a way that was easier to understand because somehow, calling her our *wife* doesn’t really seem to be strong enough to express what we mean.

It’s Gerald who speaks up next, trying to explain.

“There is a legend that every vampire has a mate,” he says.

“I’ve heard stories like that. It’s like any sort of paranormal creature has one person they’re destined to be with.”

Hearing her refer to us as “paranormal creatures” is slightly delightful, if not a little weird, but I accept this.

“Well, we share everything.”

“I’m starting to understand that,” Melody whispers. “You know, before I came here, I didn’t know that people...shared.”

“You didn’t have any polyamorous friends?”

“No.”

“Well, some humans can be a bit...”

“Intense?”

“Possessive,” I say. “Not us.”

“So, if I become your mate,” Melody says slowly, as though she’s still trying to wrap her mind around this whole thing, “then what happens after? Does it mean that I’m like, bound to you?”

“It means that you’ll live here, and you’ll love us and be loved by us.”

“It doesn’t mean you’re trapped.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t leave.”

“Will it be safe for me to leave?” Melody wants to know.

I don’t know. Maybe. We have enemies, but we stay to ourselves so much that it doesn’t generally become much of an issue. Paul glances at me in a worried way, but he doesn’t say anything telepathically. He doesn’t mention his own hunter – the man who has been looking for him for a very long time. Paul has basically been hiding in plain sight close to the orphanage for all of these years, but the man looking for him hasn’t returned to fight him to the death.

I don’t say anything to Paul.

That’s his villain to tell Melody about when he’s ready.

It’s not my secret to share.

Melody looks at each of us in turn.

“Will it be safe for me to leave?” Melody asks once more.

We're all surprised by these questions. I think we all expected her to jump into our arms and kiss us and tell us that she wants to become a vampire and be our vampire lover.

That's not what she's doing, though.

"Are you asking us if the forest is safe?" Paul asks.

"I guess what I want to know is what my life would be like," she says slowly. "I mean, this has been great, but eventually I'm going to need to go back to my real life," she says. "I'm not a musician. I can't join the band or anything like that. I don't play. I'm just...me. And I'm a human. I'm a person. It's not really emotionally healthy for someone to just hang out at an old creepy mansion in the woods for her entire life, you know?"

And instantly, my heart is crushed.

My heart starts to shatter as I realize that she's not saying yes.

Oh, she's not saying no.

Not yet.

Not really.

But she's *really* not saying yes.

We all seem to feel the same way because we stare as Melody shifts uncomfortably. She avoids looking at any of us and instead stares at the floor, which is dumb because I know for a fact that our floor is not that interesting to look at.

"Um," she whispers. "I need to go to the bathroom. I'll be right back."



She slips off of the chair and scurries out of the room before any of us can protest. As soon as she's gone, Paul and Liam and Gerald all start talking at once.

“What happened?”

“That went so much worse than I thought.”

“She's not going to stay.”

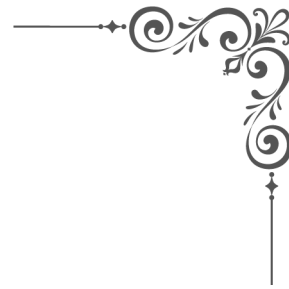
“She doesn't want us.”

“We should have promised to turn her. Maybe she wants us to turn her.”

I let all of the sounds of their voice fade away as I realize that Melody didn't just jump up and go to the bathroom. She took her phone, too. I rise slowly and walk toward the door. My feet seem to move on their own as I reach the hallway and turn, walking down it until I reach the first-floor bathroom, but the door isn't even closed. She's not even pretending to be in there.

Melody is gone.

We've lost her.



## 23

### Melody

There are way more tunnels than any normal person should have, but I've been to enough band practices that I know exactly how to get back to the orphanage, Sweet's Home for Children. That's where I first met the vampires, so that's where I'm going to run away from them.

I reach the basement where I first wandered into band practice, and I keep moving. My feet carry me through the hallway, up the stairs, and into the kitchen.

I can practically taste my freedom.

Tearing through the dusty, dilapidated building, I race out the front door and start booking it through the woods.

I don't hold back.

And in minutes, I'm completely out of breath and realize that I'm in much worse shape than I thought I was.

Damn.

Okay, so it's probably a bad idea for me to be doing this, but I really, really need to get out of here. I need to escape from the vampires, and I need to escape from Westbridge Forest.

Not that I'm trapped.

It's just...

I need Violet.

I need to go back to my shitty apartment and call my bestie and drink cheap wine and just talk about everything that's happened because I don't really know what to do.

I wanted to stay with them. I really did. I wanted them more than anything, but that was before they actually started acting like vampires and being all controlling and bossy and broody.

*They've been vampires the whole time.*

The thought comes to me out of nowhere, and I know that it's true. They've always been vampires. They've always been fierce monsters of the darkness. It's me who is different.

I'm the one that's changed.

And I'm the one who has to make a decision that's much too big for one person to handle.

When I reach the edge of the woods, I keep going. I try to find my car, but of course, it's gone. I keep looking over my shoulder like the vampires are going to be *there*, but it's daytime.

They can't follow me now.

Pulling out my phone, I dial Violet. She answers on the first ring.

"Bitch," she says playfully. "Where are you?"

“I need a ride,” I say. Something in my tone must let her know that I’m scared and panicking and I don’t really know what to do because instantly, her mood changes.

“Oh shit. Where are you?”

I give her directions and she tells me to sit tight, which I do. She’s probably only a half an hour away, yet the wait for Violet feels like it takes forever, and there’s a part of me that’s already second-guessing my decision to leave.

That’s the problem with the situation I’m in right now.

I don’t know if it would be crazier to stay or go, but I can’t turn back now. By this point, they’ve probably realized that I’ve left.

Right?

Like, they have to realize that I’m gone.

And I hate the way I’m picturing Rose’s face falling as she realizes I’m not in the bathroom at all.

That I’ve run away.

And I hate the way my stomach twists when I think about Gerald and Paul and Liam who have done nothing except make me feel completely adored and worshipped and just *loved*.

But I can’t do this.

Right?

I can’t.

Soon Violet pulls up in her rusty Honda and I hop in the passenger seat before she even comes to a complete stop.

“Drive,” I say before she can comment on my appearance or the fact that I’ve been missing.

She starts to drive.

We’re ten minutes down the road when she finally dares to speak.

“All right, Mel. It’s been a little while, yeah? What the hell happened to you out in the woods? Why you were out in the woods, Mel?”

“What did I say to you when I texted you?”

She’s silent for a moment, but I actually want to know.

“It wasn’t you that texted me. Was it?”

“No.”

“Do we need to go to the police?”

“No.”

“Where am I taking you?”

“Home,” I whisper. Then I realize I’ve been gone over a month. “Shit. Have I been evicted?”

“No.”

“How is that possible?”

“Wow, guess it really wasn’t you,” she says.

“What are you talking about?”

“I got a text from your phone that said you were going to take a random job you’d heard about. It seemed pretty fucking crazy, but then ‘you,’” she uses air quotes, “wired me some cash, told me to pay your rent and keep the change. So, I did.”

“That didn’t seem weird to you?”

“It definitely seemed really weird, but Mel, we’ve been friends a long time. I know you get kind of weird sometimes.”

“And that didn’t scare you?”

“Again, I assumed that you were being honest. Why don’t you fill me in on what really happened? I can still head toward the police station,” she offers again.

“No,” I repeat. I don’t want to go to the cops. I don’t think they’re going to help me. The cops have never been my favorite people exactly, but I certainly can’t imagine them feeling the need to assist me with a vampire problem.

They’d have me absolutely committed.

“What happened to my car?” I ask.

“Again,” she looks over and shakes her head, “I am in shock, really, that it wasn’t you messaging me. I’m feeling a bit dumb,” she laughs awkwardly.

“Tell me what happened.”

“You asked me to pick up the spare key and move the car before it got towed.”

“Shit,” I mutter, shaking my head. “I am in so much trouble.”

“Did you get raped?”

“What? No!”

“Assaulted?”

“No.”

“Kidnapped?”

I’m silent.

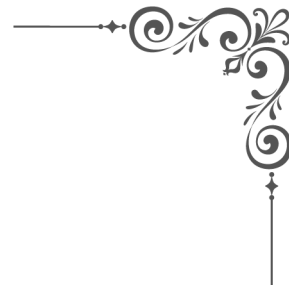
“You got kidnapped?”

“Not exactly.”

“Oh, come on. Dude. We’re almost back. Just tell me.”

“Once we’re inside,” I tell her. “I’ll tell you everything.”

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## 24

### Liam

We were all stupid for thinking she'd stay.

It was a dumb little game we played, trying to get the human girl to fall in love with us. Asking a human to love one vampire was stupid enough, but asking someone to accept four?

That was idiotic of all of us.

We really should have known better.

It took a little while because apparently, being undead has made us all really damn stupid, but we finally realized she was gone. Rose was the one who figured it out first, but she didn't say anything. She just let the girl run.

And now we're all standing in the basement of the orphanage where Paul was once an orphan being housed by people who hated children, and we're looking up toward the kitchen where the door is ajar.

A stream of sunlight floats in.

"We could go after her," Rose says. "After dark."

"We don't know where's she gone," I point out.



“That’s not exactly true,” Paul says.

“We know her address,” Gerald adds. “We looked her up.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t call him out for being creepy and I don’t accuse him of being weird because I do the same thing, so I don’t really feel like I have a right to do that at this moment.

“I don’t think that she wants to be found,” I say firmly. We can want her. We can crave her. We can need her.

We *can’t* force her.

We’re not those people.

“Vampires have a horrible reputation as being creatures who eat people,” I point out. “Let’s not make things worse by chasing her down and hunting her.”

“I want her,” Paul says.

“You sound like a petulant child,” I snap.

“And you sound like an uncaring asshole,” Gerald glares at me.

“The only one here who’s an asshole is you,” I snap. My accent gets stronger when I’m mad or upset, and right now, I’m both.

Right now, it’s all I can do to keep myself from going crazy because it’s been like, an hour, and already, I miss her.

Already, I feel lonely without her.

Rose turns and trudges back down the hallway to the entrance of the tunnel. She opens the secret door and starts

walking back toward the house. Gerald follows, but Paul and I stay where we are.

“You miss her,” he says quietly.

“We’re going to be broken without her,” I tell him. “That’s my biggest fear, you know. We all felt complete with her.”

“Maybe it just wasn’t meant to be.”

“Or maybe we fucked up.”

The two of us turn, but instead of going back to the house, we make our way into the practice room. It’s the room where we first met her, the room where we first tasted her. It’s the room where we had to decide whether we were going to kill her or keep her, and we chose to keep her.

That’s the problem with pets, though. They’re wild. You can love someone with your entire damn heart, but eventually, if you’re not careful, you’ll lose it.

I sit down at my drums and Paul picks up his guitar, and without a word, the two of us start playing.

And playing.

And playing.

Soon I’ve got tears in my eyes and I fucking hate it because I don’t want to be sad over a human.

I don’t want to be sad that she didn’t even say goodbye to us.

I don’t want to be sad.

Only, I'm not the only one who's sad because a second later, Paul lets out a long, feral scream and he throws his guitar at full force across the room. I blur over to it and catch it out of the air before it can connect with the wall and shatter into a million pieces.

It's a guitar he's had for 50 years, so I'm not going to let him destroy it over a woman.

"Let it go," Paul says.

"No."

"Drop it."

"I won't."

"I want to break it," he snaps.

"You can't."

"I want to break you," he tells me, glaring.

"I'd love to see you try."

Paul leaps into the air and lands in front of me. His hand comes out, connecting with my throat, but he's not angry with me.

He's angry with himself.

I've known Paul long enough to understand how he acts in the midst of being totally, completely self-loathing, and that's what he's doing right now.

What he's doing is pretending like he's fine when he's not.

What he's doing is acting like he's going to be okay when we all know that he's breaking for her.

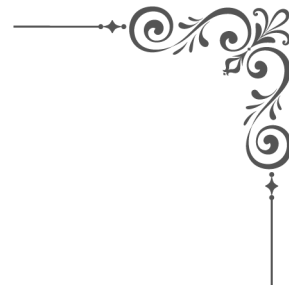
“Kiss me or fight me,” I tell him, and I really do think he’s going to slug me.

He doesn’t, though. He brings his lips toward mine, smashing them against me. The kiss is so hard that our teeth hit each other, but I don’t care. I grab his hair and pull him closer, desperate to lose myself in my lover for a little while.

I need to fuck Melody out of my mind.

And Paul is the perfect one to help me.

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## 25

### Melody

“So,” Violet says, dropping onto my bed. “Let me get this straight.”

“Okay.”

“There are four vampires in a rock band.”

“Yes.”

“And they’re your favorite band.”

“Yes.”

“And they’re actually vampires.”

“Yes.”

“And they bit you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And they fucked you.”

“Yes.”

“All at once.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“And also separately.”

“I don’t really want to talk about this anymore,” I whisper.

“I’ve got to get the details,” she tells me.

“I don’t...”

I don’t want to share them because these memories filling my head are *mine*. Somehow, what happened between me and the vampires was precious. And yeah, I’m home now, sitting in my little apartment and wishing I had something to fill the void in my heart, but I don’t.

I just have...

I’ve got nothing.

Violet considers me. I’m pacing back and forth and I know she wishes I’d sit down, but I can’t.

“Let’s consider that I believe you.”

“You should. I’m being honest.”

“Well, let’s say for argument’s sake that I believe you.”

“Again, you should.”

“Well, whatever. Let’s just say it’s true.”

I let her ramble.

“Which one of them did you like most?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“No? You didn’t have a favorite?”

“No. We all...we were all into each other,” I tell her.

“Sexually?”

“In every way. Paul is the leader of the group. At least, he tries to be. Pretends to be. Sometimes he needs someone else to take over, though, and there’s always someone. Then there’s Gerald, who’s the tough one, and Liam, the gentle one. And of course, there’s Rose.”

Fucking gorgeous Rose who always has to just get me.

“What do they look like?”

“What?”

“You know,” she waves to her own body. “Are they... pretty?”

It’s a weird question, I suppose.

Are vampires pretty?

Only, they kind of are.

“Rose is black. Short hair. She’s got this killer alt vibe. You’d love her. She wears crazy boots and lots of chains and necklaces. She looks damn good in a choker.”

Violet grins. Yeah, Rose would be exactly her type.

“Then Liam. He’s Irish. Pale skin. Long-ass red hair.” I shake my head. “He’s like, my leprechaun.”

“Did you look for his pot of gold?”

“If by his ‘pot of gold’ you mean his dick, then yes.” I laugh. Liam and I had a lot of fun together.

“How red is his hair?” Violet holds out a few of her own red strands. “Redder than mine?”

“Somehow, yes.”

“Two down,” Violet says. “Two more to go.”

“Gerald has this gorgeous umber skin. He’s got a few tattoos. His hair is long. Braided. Beautiful.”

“And the last guy?”

“Short hair,” I say. “But I bet he’d look good with long hair. Paul is cute. White. Has lots of scars.”

“Well, damn,” Violet leans back, sprawling out on my collection of pillows. I’m very much into spoiling myself. “How’d you make this happen?”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t even get *a* partner, yet here you are finding the damn holy grail of beautiful people who also seem to be pretty funny and cool.”

“And yet I ran away,” I whisper.

“I’m sure you had a good reason.”

“I just...I don’t know if I’m ready,” I tell her. Violet is the one person I can tell anything to. She’s never going to judge me. She’s not going to get scared and run off. That’s really not her style.

“You’re not ready for the commitment? Or you’re not ready to let them love you?”

“It’s not like that.”

“No? Tell me how it’s not. Please. I’m very interested in hearing this.”



I frown at Violet. I love her to bits, but she really is insane sometimes. She also tends to call me out on my crap even when there's not much to say.

"It's just that they're..."

"They're what, Mel? Perfect? Into you? Polyamorous so you never have to choose just one? *Please* tell me how this is a problem. I'm really dying to know."

"They're vampires," I remind her. "They drink blood."

"And probably kill people," she shrugs. "Cool. If they get bored and need ideas of people to kill, I've built up quite a list."

Ah yes, Violet's list. It's kind of a weird thing, but she actually does have a list of people she hopes will die. It's weird because normally, Violet is such a softspoken and sweet person, yet she's also really vicious in a weird way.

"I don't think I can have them start going down your list," I tell her honestly. "It's not really what they do."

"Then what *do* they do?"

They play music.

They fuck.

They live.

For people who are literally dead, they seem more alive than anyone else I've met, and even though I just got here, I'm already wondering if I made the wrong choice in leaving.

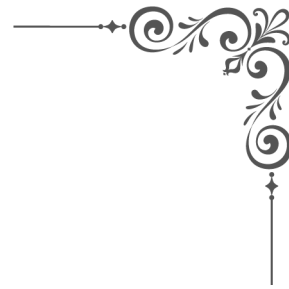
Did I just throw away the first good thing to ever happen to me?

Did I just ruin everything?

I got scared, but I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

And I don't know what I'm supposed to do now because I don't know if I can ever actually return to normal after meeting the four vampires who make me feel complete.

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## 26

### Melody

I need to be normal.

I need to be an ordinary person.

A regular person.

*I need to be normal.*

So, I go to work.

And then I go home.

And then I watch a show, play a video game, and go to sleep.

Then I wake up and do it all over again.

And again.

And somehow, no matter how many times I do this, nothing is enough to get them out of my head.

“What is wrong with me?” I ask Violet. It’s been three weeks since I left the vampires. Three weeks since I came back, and three weeks that I’ve spent moping around trying to find any sort of meaning in my life.

“You’re in love,” she says, shoving a huge handful of popcorn in her mouth. We’re having a girl’s night at my place. We’re sitting side-by-side on the couch, and my coffee table is absolutely covered in snacks ranging from popcorn to candy to pizza. Violet’s having a great time, but I’ve lost my appetite. Even my favorite things to eat no longer seem fun.

The thought of food makes me sick.

The thought of anything but *them* makes me sick.

“This doesn’t feel like love.”

“That’s because you’ve basically broken up,” she tells me.

“That’s not true.”

“It is,” she insists. “You were basically completely in love with them when you came out of the woods.”

“It wasn’t love.”

“It was something.”

“Not love,” I say once more. I’m not sure why I’m being so insistent on this, but it couldn’t have been love.

How can you fall in love with four different people all at once?

And how can you fall in love with *vampires*?

“You don’t know what it was like,” I tell her.

“So tell me about it.”

“What?”

“If you’re so sure I won’t understand, then try me. Tell me all about it, Mel. I’m listening.”

Violet narrows her eyes as she speaks. I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm being a terrible person for what I'm doing, and honestly, I kind of think I'm being terrible, too.

When I was with the vampires, I felt safe.

Accepted.

Desired.

I felt passion and heat and wonder, and when I left, all of that kind of disappeared.

Now I'm caught in this whirlwind life, but everything is monotonous.

Everything is boring.

"When I was there..." I start slowly. "In the house..."

"In the *mansion*."

"Yeah, in the mansion... Everything just felt *right*."

"What about it felt right? Have you fantasized about orgies before?"

"It wasn't about that," I say, even though it kind of was. The sex was great. Passionate. Hot as hell.

It wasn't just the sex, though.

It was the way they talked to me.

The way they talked to each other.

It was the way they took care of one another as though nothing else mattered.

And it was the way they *loved* each other like crazy.

I think for me, that was the best thing.

“They made me feel safe.”

“Which is crazy since they could have killed you in a heartbeat.”

“But they didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, count yourself lucky,” Violet shrugs. “I mean, I honestly feel a little bad for asking you to go out there, anyway. I’m happy to talk about all sorts of places for explorers to go, but Sweet’s probably wasn’t a good assignment. There’s a reason most urban explorers stay away from that place.”

“What?”

“Sweet’s Home for Children,” she says. “I mean, aside from the torrid history, there’s the more recent history, as well.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You looked it up online before you went out there, right?”

“Only briefly.” The stuff I saw about the orphanage being shut down was sad. When I was walking through the building, I could practically feel the pain that was experienced there once upon a time. It’s not often that a building makes me feel sad or uncomfortable, but Sweet’s Home for Children had that effect on me.

“Well, the orphanage was actually started in the early 1800s. Like, 1802 or something,” she says, reaching once more for the snacks. I have no idea how she can talk about sad

stuff and still be able to eat. It's like this special talent she has that I severely lack.

My stomach twists.

When was Paul born again?

Someone said something about him being there for a little while.

Was he a lost little boy who had nowhere else to be?

Was that sad building his home?

*Is that why he's so broody now?*

"It started as an ordinary, run-of-the-mill orphanage, but the guy who ran it died mysteriously after like 30 years."

So, around the time Paul became a vampire.

What happened?

Why would the guy die mysteriously?

And could it have anything to do with him?

"Tell me more," I say, wishing I'd looked this up on my own.

"It's all on my website," Violet says, waving her arm. "I've got pictures, too. There are a lot of conspiracy theories, you know. The different people who ran the orphanage for the next fifty or sixty years all looked pretty similar. Then one day, it was just someone else running it."

Strange.

Did Paul run the orphanage?

And if he did, why would he have stopped?

As far as I know, Sweet's was open until 75 years ago when it was shut down for child abuse.

Could there be more to the story here?

And why is it suddenly so important to me to know?

"I have to pee," I say, standing up. I step carefully to avoid our mess of drinks and food, and I head down the hallway. Violet isn't paying attention, so I don't bother pretending to actually go into the bathroom. Instead, I slip into my bedroom and go to my desk. Then I open my laptop and pull up her website.

Violet is smart.

She's one of the smartest people I've ever met, and she's wildly underestimated. Nobody takes her seriously enough, in my opinion. She's the kind of woman who seems to have this incredible grasp on the world, and she's gone above and beyond making sure that people have the information they need to make good choices, too.

Her urban exploring website probably sounds kind of crazy, but she provides pictures and information so people can use the resources for free. That way they don't have to actually do any urban exploring themselves, especially considering that in most cases, it's not only unsafe, but also illegal.

When I pull up her website, I navigate to the section on Sweet's, and I start reading.

ONCE A BEAUTIFUL home for unlucky children, Sweet's now rests in ruins. Thanks to the photography skills of



my personal bestie (who shall remain nameless – she knows who she is), we’re now able to share these pictures of the lovely and mysterious Sweet’s Home for Children.

Most urban explorers wouldn’t dare go to a place like Sweet’s, and for good reason: it’s definitely haunted.

I roll my eyes.

Violet has always had a flare for the dramatic. I mean, she’s not *entirely* wrong on the whole “haunted” thing. I did happen to meet some vampires there, so some people would say that warrants being careful.

Sweet’s Home for Children was started in 1802 by a man named Franklin Sweet. He was a widower who had one child of his own. Unfortunately, his little boy, Timothy, died tragically in a fire shortly after Mrs. Sweet passed away.

Franklin was devastated.

He opened Sweet’s Home for Children shortly after his son’s death as a way to spread some joy in the world, and at first, he did.

There’s a picture here that I look at carefully for a few minutes before I realize it’s not a photograph at all. It’s a very detailed drawing of the exterior of the building, as well as Mr. Sweet with a group of five little kids. There are boys and girls in the drawing, and I wonder who drew it and where it’s from. There’s a link to the resource where Violet pulled it, and I click on it.

The website she linked has a history of abandoned buildings. I don’t know if it’s reputable or not, but it seems

acceptable enough for what basically equates to a goofball website that can't really be taken *too* seriously.

I click back over to Violet's page.

Mr. Sweet took care of children for the next 32 years. In 1834, he died under mysterious circumstances and a new gentleman called Raymond Paulson took his place. Paulson was a former orphan who had lived in the house with Mr. Sweet, so he understood how everything should be run. For the next twenty years, Paulson ran the home. He was followed by his brother, and later his cousin.

There are more pictures here. There are two paintings that look remarkably similar in nature. Of course, I'm certain that "Paulson" and "Paulson's brother" are both Paul. My vampire. There's a painting of the cousin, too, and he also looks pretty similar. I look a bit closer, and I'm almost completely certain that every one of these paintings is just Paul.

"Who are you?" I whisper at the screen. Why did Paul leave the orphanage? More importantly, why did he come back? What did Mr. Sweet do that was so terrible Paul had to kill him? I've been with Paul enough to know that he definitely killed this guy and took over the orphanage. It's pretty obvious to me, but there's something else here... something I'm not understanding just yet.

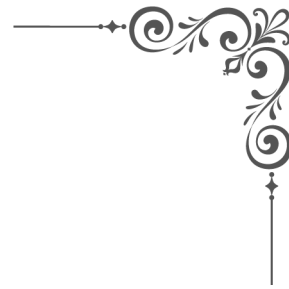
What is it that I've missed?

Something led me to the vampires. I just know it. It might have been fate or it might have been something else, but there's a weird link between them and Sweet's that I

desperately need to understand if I'm ever going to start moving on.

I just have to.

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## 27

### Melody

I pour myself into work, picking up extra shifts whenever I can and applying for other positions. I get a few call backs, but nothing much. I don't worry too much about it, though, because I'm really looking for more information about my vampires.

I'm looking for their secrets.

Why do they practice their music in the basement of an abandoned children's home?

What really happened when the entire structure was brought down?

And what does Paul have to do with all of this?

Over the next few weeks, I become an expert in all things Sweet's. I learn the entire history of the building, starting with every single headmaster or headmistress who ran the house. The only strange bit is that the very last headmaster, T.S. Montgomery, doesn't seem to have any pictures available.

Anywhere.

It takes me weeks of digging through old newspaper articles and books and journals, but I finally find something

that makes my blood run cold. I copy the picture I find on the copier at the library and run to Violet's place immediately.

"You aren't going to believe it," I say, slapping the picture down on the table.

She glances over at it.

"Sweet? Yeah, he was a handsome guy, wasn't he?"

"Not Sweet."

"It obviously is."

"Nope," I shake my head. "That's T.S. Montgomery."

"The final headmaster of Sweet's Home for Children?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get this?" Violet jumps over and looks at the zoomed-in picture.

"There was a church picnic in Riversdale two years before the orphanage closed. Someone took a picture."

"And you found it in a newspaper?" Violet looks at me for the first time, and her jaw drops. "Melody, what the hell is going on?"

I know what she means.

I've been showering, but that's about it. I'm not wearing makeup. I haven't really styled my hair in weeks. My eyes definitely look super tired, and I probably wore this outfit yesterday at work.

I've been throwing myself completely into my work, coupled with figuring out what the hell happened with the

orphanage, and I think I've finally found answers.

I finally know what happened.

"Okay, so hear me out," I tell her.

"Okay, but you need to shower while we talk."

"Fine."

I march into her bathroom and strip down. She stands in the doorway and watches. I reach into the shower and start the water so it can warm up, and then I launch into my story.

"Franklin Sweet had a kid."

"Right. Timothy died in a fire."

"Right. Only, he *didn't* die."

"No?"

"Something else happened to him. Back then, here in town, widowers didn't always raise kids on their own. Sometimes there was like, a stigma associated with it."

"Because the children needed a mother," she whispers.

"Yeah, well," I shake my head and tap the picture. "It looks like he didn't actually die. His dad kept him and pretended he was just another one of the orphans. He grew up in that house. Later, his dad died, and Paul-the-Vampire took over running the orphanage for an unknown number of years."

"Paulson," she whispers.

"Yeah. Him. His 'brother.' His 'cousin.' It's all the same man."

A man I've fallen for.

A man I can't stop thinking about.

And a man I want to run back to.

Only, it's not just him. It's all of them. They have these beautifully wonderful, mysterious lives, and I want to know what happened to them. I want to know where they came from.

I want to know who they are and why they exist...and I want to love them.

But I need answers first.

I think the vampires are in danger. They have to be. There's a reason they didn't chase after me, and I don't think it has anything to do with them not wanting me or not loving me. There has to be more of a threat because otherwise, they would have.

"I don't think it's that simple," she says, looking at me, and I realize I said that last bit out loud. "Mel, not everyone is a good fit. And not every relationship is meant to last forever."

"This relationship was," I inform her.

It was meant to last forever.

We were meant to last.

I *know* that I messed up.

I *know* that I was the one who chose to run away.

But I also know them.

Every one of them.

“They wouldn’t have let me go unless they were worried,”  
I tell her.

“Then prove it.”

I tap the picture.

“T.S. Montgomery.”

“Timothy Sweet Montgomery,” she whispers.

“His mother’s maiden name was Montgomery. He was the  
one running the orphanage when it was closed.”

“It couldn’t be the same boy. He must have died by then.”

Only, what if he didn’t?

What if little Timothy Sweet never actually died – what if  
he turned into something that couldn’t die?

“Why was the orphanage really closed?” Violet asks me  
quietly. Her voice shakes just a little. She’s just as  
uncomfortable with this as I am.

“What makes you think it wasn’t just abuse?” I whisper.  
“You’re the one who wrote that it was.”

“Tell me.”

“Children were going missing from the orphanage,” I tell  
her. “A few of the bodies were found and they were  
completely drained of blood.”

She stops, standing perfectly still.

“How did you find that out?”

“More newspaper stuff,” I tell her. “I read the Letters to the  
Editor section of the newspaper for three years before the



orphanage closed. There were murders referenced multiple times. I guarantee those murders were because of this guy.”

“You think Timothy Sweets was a vampire.”

“No,” I shake my head. “I think he still is.”

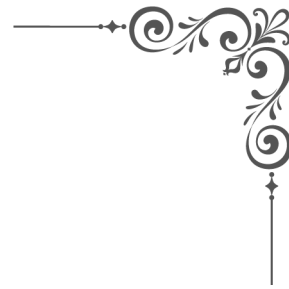
And I think he’s still after my clan.

My pack.

My lovers.

I think he’s still a vampire, and I think he’s been biding his time, but I think sooner than we anticipate, he’s going to make a move, and that’s when everything is going to go to hell.

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## 28

### Rose

I stand in the kitchen of Sweet's Home for Children and look at the brochure that's sitting on the counter.

A brochure.

Here.

It seems so unlikely.

I've been coming up to the kitchen almost every day because the window offers a lovely view of the forest. Sometimes, when I'm up here, I can pretend like she's just stepped outside. I can pretend like Melody is coming back to us at any moment.

I can practically smell her.

"Who do you think left it?" Gerald asks, coming up beside me. He sees the brochure, too.

It's a stupid question because we all know what this thing means. Every last one of us is aware of the fact that our darling Paul has an ageless enemy who has had his eyes set on the mansion since the day we chased him from it.

“He’s back,” Paul says, coming over and reaching for the flier. “He wandered this close to taunt me. He knows I can smell his fucking scent from a mile away.” He shakes his head and tosses the brochure back down on the counter. Then Paul crosses his arms across his chest. “Fucker.”

We *hadn't* smelled Timothy, though. We still haven't.

Because all we can smell is *her*.

We all got the taste of Melody on our tongues and now nothing else matters quite as much as her.

All we want to do is make her fall in love with us over and over and over again.

She's a distraction that's lodged herself in our hearts and nothing is going to be enough to clear our minds again. For as long as Melody lives, we're going to be lost in the memory of her.

My mates and I still sleep together. We still hold each other. We still crave each other, but it's different now because every last one of us has been in mourning for nearly three months now.

We miss her more than we ever expected to.

We feel different without her.

Before Melody came to us, we always felt like there was something missing in our lives, but none of us could put our fingers on it. After all, who would have thought that the thing missing for a group of vampires was a human?

Only, that's exactly what's wrong.

That's exactly what we're missing.

And now we're staring at a brochure that's detailing the fact that Sweet's Home for Children has been purchased – somehow – and will be turned into a museum.

This means visitors.

It means visitors will be coming to the house and crawling through the woods.

It means that Timothy Sweet is going to try to terrorize Paul because Paul is the one who killed his father, and we all know it.

Timothy Sweet wants to make sure we don't feel safe anymore.

“He's still angry with you,” I say.

“He shouldn't be. His dad was a real prick.”

“You did have him booted from running the orphanage himself,” Gerald pipes up about Timothy. It's true. Paul left his work at the orphanage shortly before the Civil War. He didn't look back, nor did he spend much time reflecting on his childhood home. He had other things to do and other places to go. He wasn't even aware that Timothy Sweet had returned to the orphanage and taken it over until it was too late.

A fellow vampire who knew Paul had been an orphan contacted us one day to let us know that Timothy Sweet had returned and was terrorizing the children of Sweet's Home for Children. It had become something of Sweet's Nightmare for Children at that point. Until that vampire had come to us, Paul hadn't had any idea as to what was happening.

None of us did.

Timothy had started using the orphanage as a hunting ground, and he needed to be stopped.

So, we stopped him.

We did it together.

Me, Paul, and Gerald fought him shortly after the three of us met. Paul told us his tale and Gerald and I were smitten, completely enamored with the idea of killing a vampire serial killer.

Only, we didn't kill him.

He'd escaped at the last minute, and now we were going to pay the price for it.

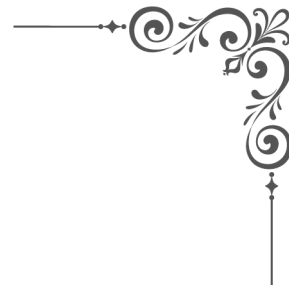
"He's going to bring people here to force us out of hiding."

"He's known we were hiding here for years," Liam points out. His accent is thicker than usual. He's stressed. I reach for his shoulder and touch him gently. He accepts the affection by reaching for me and tugging me close to himself.

"He hasn't had a reason to come after us, though," Gerald says thoughtfully. "So why now?"

"Because we left the solitude of our tunnels to go into town and make a fuss about Melody," Paul says, looking up at us. His eyes are practically flaring with frustration and pain, anger and chaos. "And now she's the one who's going to pay."

"We need to warn her," I tell the boys, but something makes me think that we might be a little too late.



## 29

### Melody

There's nothing like a first kiss.

As I lay on Violet's couch and try to sleep, all I can think about is kissing my vampires.

That's really how I've come to think of them – my vampires.

They might have their own backstories and their own lives and their own adventures, but they're mine. Forever and ever, these vampires are people I've grown to fall absolutely in love with, and I don't want that to end.

I need to go back to them.

It's just that I know as soon as I go back, it's a firm decision, and I don't know what that's going to look like.

The truth is that my humanity isn't really a lot to write home about. I have a crappy job and an apartment I can barely afford, and while I love Violet, the two of us aren't romantically involved. Not that I wouldn't be interested in her. Violet's honestly completely lovely. She's beautiful and kind – two things you don't find very often in the world.

“You're going to go back to them. Aren't you?”

I hear her, rather than see her. Violet's footsteps are gentle and quiet as she makes her way across the living room floor and settles at the foot of the couch.

"Yeah," I finally tell her. "I think I'm going to go back."

"I'm not surprised."

"No?"

"No," she shakes her head. "They seem to have made you really happy."

"It's kind of crazy, though. Right? Like, the idea that I'm going to go make a future with a bunch of vampires?"

"I've heard of crazier," she tells me.

"There's no way that's true."

"It's pretty crazy," Violet laughs. "But I mean, what isn't crazy? You only have one life to live, Mel. You might as well make it one you're proud of."

"I don't know if it's that simple," I tell her.

"Did you see this?" Violet hands me a little brochure. It's got a picture of Sweet's Home for Children on the front. It's one of the old pictures – one of the original drawings where Paul is one of the children.

"No," I shake my head and accept the paper from her.

"What is it?"

"They were at the post office today. There were a bunch on the counter, and I grabbed one. I had to run by the library, too, and they also had them. Looks like someone is turning Sweet's into a museum."

A museum?

Why?

And why now?

The timing of this revelation feels uncomfortable. After everything I've learned recently, the biggest takeaway has been that everything happens for a reason. Nothing is coincidence. There's always a motivation, always a hidden agenda. There's no possible way that someone randomly woke up this morning and decided to turn a random old building into a historical landmark.

“Why would anyone do that?”

“I don't know,” she shrugs, “but it kind of makes my urban exploring stuff less important. Nobody's going to be able to go explore a museum unless they pay to get in.”

“It's him,” I whisper, looking at the brochure. “He's trying to force them out of hiding.”

If the building is full of people, the vampires won't be able to go there to practice their music anymore. They won't have free use of the tunnels anymore, either. They'll need to block them off before people start hanging out at the museum, otherwise someone will wander down and find their way right into their lair.

It's not that the vampires can't kill people. It's not that they never have. It's just that I don't get the impression that my vampires want to kill a bunch of random museum-goers who wander too far into the forest.



“Force them out? I don’t know if I’d take it that far,” Violet says, but I stand up and start pacing.

“It has to be Timothy. He’s mad at my vampires for some reason. Maybe they tried to kill him.” I pause. That has to be it.

The orphanage closed so randomly, and even though I could find very little information on the actual process of shutting it down, I do know that Timothy disappeared for a very long time.

Most people probably think he’s dead, but I know better.

“Maybe they’re the reason the orphanage closed. I’m pretty sure he was poaching children and draining their blood and my vampires put a stop to it.” That must be it. The timetable all matches up.

“But they didn’t put a stop to him,” Violet sighs. She shakes her head. “Vampires. Who would have thought we’d be dealing with actual *vampires*?” I know that Violet still can’t really wrap her mind around all of this, but I don’t blame her. Sometimes I still can’t believe it, either.

“And now he’s trying to turn their home into a museum so they can’t come out. There will be people everywhere, which means that the band will either have to move deeper into the woods – perhaps in yet another abandoned mansion since apparently, there are quite a few – or they’ll have to go somewhere else entirely.”

It’s not like the band will be able to play their music beneath a museum. When the building is remodeled, someone

will go wandering into the basement, and they'll discover the secrets of the vampires.

And they'll learn that my people have something to hide.

"When is it supposed to open?" I ask. "I don't see a date on here."

"I Googled it," she says. "I couldn't find much, but there is a city permit for construction," she says.

"A city permit?"

"Yeah. All of that stuff is public record. You can just type the address into the city website and see all of the permits that have been pulled."

"And?"

"And from what I can tell, it sounds like construction is starting soon. Like, probably tomorrow or the next day, soon."

"That's too quick," I tell her. "We need more time."

Violet frowns and shakes her head. I know what she's going to say before she even opens her mouth.

"That's the one thing we don't have, Melody."

Yeah, well, I'm not going to let Timothy take the only good things that have ever happened to me.

If he wants to torment my vampires, he's going to have to go through me.

I turn to my friend.

"I'm going to need a really big favor, Vi."

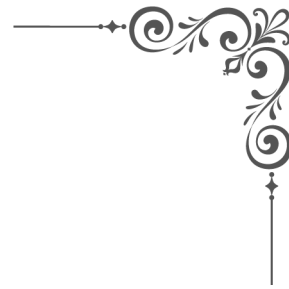
"Anything."

“I’m going to need you to help me do a crime.”

Most friends would shake their head and tell me to fuck off, but not Violet. She just grins and nods.

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

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## 30

### Melody

The drive to the edge of the forest is totally silent.

It's nearly dawn, so I know the vampires are back at the main mansion and not in Sweet's Home for Children. Violet and I park the car and then hike to the dilapidated building. Even though we're about to completely destroy this place, it's hard not to imagine how beautiful it would look if anyone ever did renovate it. The building was lovely once upon a time, but that was a long time ago, and the truth is that not every pretty building is worth saving.

With all of the terrible things that happened here, I think it's safe to say that this is one house worth destroying.

"This is it?" Violet asks, staring up at the house. The shutters are all hanging off the windows and there are a couple of holes in the stairs that lead up to the front door. If I'm very quiet, I can practically hear the sounds of children laughing, but those joyous sounds are quickly replaced with screams.

"Yeah," I nod, looking up. "This is the place." Violet wrote about it but hasn't actually visited yet. This is her first journey

to this particular building, which is unfortunate. I wish the two of us were exploring this place on better terms.

“It’s even cooler than the pictures you took.”

“Yeah, I didn’t really capture the spirit.”

I had been in a hurry when I’d taken the pictures. Now I regretted that. I kind of wished I’d slowed down a little to really capture the wildness of the building or the way the vines are slightly overgrown. This place was probably really beautiful once, but now...

Now it’s about to be just a memory.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Violet asks. “I mean, the leaves are pretty dry. It won’t take much to start a crazy fire.”

“That’s why you’re going to call it in,” I remind her.

We’re hauling gasoline and matches with us. I sure as hell hope that this works as well as it looks like it does in the movies because Sweet’s is about to go up in flames.

It’s the only way to make sure that Timothy doesn’t turn the building into a museum that’s going to bring humans upon humans into the forest. I don’t want anything bad to happen to any of my lovers.

I don’t want anything to happen that’s going to hurt or destroy them.

“And what if the cops ask me why I was out here?” Violet looks nervous. “How am I going to explain that I was just randomly in the woods?”

“The truth,” I tell her. “You said it yourself. My pictures weren’t that great. You can explain that you needed better shots for your website, so you came out to take some pictures this morning. You discovered the house was on fire at that point.”

“It’s too suspicious,” she says.

“It’s not.”

We didn’t buy gas. Violet’s neighbor left some half-empty gas cans in her carport last month and forgot to reclaim them. It’s not like we stopped to buy gas on the way and there’s going to be a credit card receipt or video footage.

There’s nothing.

It’s just us – just the two of us.

And this building.

“We need to burn it,” I say quietly.

We’re going to burn it and then I’m going to disappear with only the contents of the backpack I’ve got on.

Violet is silent as the two of us walk through the house. We make sure to spread our gasoline as evenly as we can. I’ve never committed arson before but I’m hoping I don’t totally screw it up. We spread out the liquid, trying to cover as much ground as we can. I’m pretty sure that if we can get the first floor really burning, the rest of the house is old and dry enough to light up and then collapse inward on itself. That’s the goal since it means the tunnel entrance will be buried and the basement will no longer exist.

When we're done, Violet and I hug for a long time in the kitchen of the house. I hold her, just breathing her in. I hope she knows just how much she means to me.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Violet whispers.

"I'm positive."

I want them.

I want my vampires.

I've been gone for too long already, and I've had so much time to think, but yes, this is what I really want.

It's what I need.

"Then I completely support you," she tells me. "I'll box up your stuff, okay?"

"I appreciate it."

I don't have a lot of stuff, but Violet will put it in storage, and I'll come touch base with her in a month or two – once things settle down and it's safe and clear to do so.

We hug for a long time. I'm not quite ready to say goodbye, but the sun is going to come up soon, and I want to be buried deep in the tunnels before it rises.

"Goodbye, Mel," she whispers, and then she's gone.

I stand at the kitchen window and watch her leave. It only takes a few seconds before she's out of sight, but I stay where I am for just a little while longer. I'm lucky to have a friend like Violet, I know. I'm lucky to have the chance to save my vampires.

That is, if everything goes according to plan.

I know that this is only a bandage on the real problem. Timothy Sweet is still going to be out there, which means he'll come for Paul and the rest of us again. We're going to have to spend the rest of our lives watching over our shoulders to make sure that he never gets the jump on us.

Luckily, I'm about to have a group of people surrounding me who are smart and wonderful and sexy, and who happen to have all of the time in the world.

Finally pulling myself away from the window, I make my way to the basement entrance.

The last time I stood here at the top of these stairs, I had no idea that I was about to embark on a crazy-ass journey that was going to be filled with chaos and pain and a whole lot of orgasms.

Now I'm very aware of what I'm running back to, and I'm happy.

I'm so very, very happy.

Making my way down the rickety old stairs, I reach the bottom of the staircase and pour the rest of my gasoline out. Then I set down the gas can.

The only thing left to do is to light the match.

The house is old and damaged and broken enough that it's going to go up in flames. Before I say goodbye to this entire place, I take the little brochure for the Sweet's Home for Children Museum out of my back jean pocket and look at it one last time.



“I don’t know who the hell you thought you were,” I whisper, “but you’re not welcome here.”

Timothy Sweet needs to get lost and forget that he ever knew Paul. The fact that I’m throwing a wrench in his plans for emotional torture is very pleasing to me, but then I hear a sound that makes me realize I got too excited, too soon.

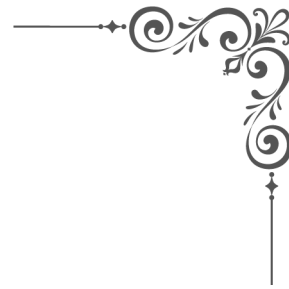
“Oh, I don’t think that’s a very polite thing to say. Do you?”

A sinking feeling hits my gut as I turn back toward the kitchen stairs. There’s a man standing halfway down the stairs. I know even without introduction who he is.

It’s Timothy Sweet.

And judging by the fangs hanging low, he’s definitely a vampire.

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## 31

### Melody

“You’re here,” I say, staring at the tall man in front of me.

For being almost 200 years old, Timothy Sweet looks pretty damn good. Oh, he’s no Paul. He’s no Gerald, no Liam, and certainly no Rose. He’s gorgeous, though, in an immortal sort of way.

The thing I’ve started to realize about people who are immortal is that they almost seem to have this sort of glow about them. I can’t really describe it except to say that it makes them look almost angelic, which is kind of the opposite of what they actually are.

Timothy is dressed the way you would expect a vampire to dress. He’s got on a black button-down with black slacks. His shoes are polished without a single scuff mark on them. Then there’s the jacket. I really should have noticed him sooner because he’s got this long leather coat on that stretches almost to his feet. I would have expected such a coat to make *swooshing* noises with every step, but it’s actually silent.

“I’m here,” he agrees. He stares at me. “And so are you.”

Does he know who I am?

He must.

He must be able to look at me and just *know*.

I'm loved by Paul.

I'm adored by Gerald, worshipped by Liam, and protected by Rose.

He *has* to know this.

“What are you doing here?” I already know the answer, and I already know that I can't let him get to the tunnels behind me. They're my escape route, of course. I was going to light the building on fire and then start running, but now I can't get to the tunnels without him seeing me.

And Timothy looks like he's hungry.

I'm not sure where he came from. I'm not sure if he was outside and waited for Violet to leave, but there's no doubt in my mind that my friend is safe. She's not stupid enough to get caught by a vampire.

Unlike me, apparently.

I've been caught by all sorts of vampires, so what does that say about me and my ability to be intelligent?

Not much.

“I own the building.”

“You're the one who bought it,” I murmur. “You want to turn this place into a museum. Why?”

“It's my heritage.”

“It's your father's legacy, you mean.”

“And my own.”

“You were kicked out of Sweet’s Home for Children,” I point out. “You murdered innocent children.”

“They weren’t that innocent,” he shrugs. He doesn’t seem surprised that I know this. He also doesn’t seem bothered that we’re both here talking.

He’s got a game plan, I realize. He’s not in any hurry, which means he thinks he’s won. I’m pretty sure he knows all about me. He knows that I love the vampire rockstars, and he knows that they’re crazy about me.

He just doesn’t know that he’s never going to get to torment them.

“They were children.”

Another shrug. Then a smirk. He’s enjoying this.

To him, this is the ultimate game of cat and mouse, but I’m not interested in playing games for fun.

I’m interested in playing to win.

Timothy can obviously smell the gas that’s spread throughout the house. He can see the gas can at my feet, which means he knows what I’m planning to do. He doesn’t seem nervous or afraid though because he thinks that he’s won.

He hasn’t.

He’s never going to best me.

I’m not scared of some dickhead vampire, and I’m certainly not scared of someone who has to resort to petty

games in order to beat Paul. Timothy Sweet wants a fight? He's going to get a fight.

"That's the problem with you humans," he says slowly, walking the rest of the way down the stairs. I take a step back, but unless I want to open up the door to the tunnels and reveal that to Timothy, I can't move anymore.

I don't know if he's fully aware of all of the underground tunnels that lead out of the basement here. He might know, or he might just think that my vampires are really good at getting around undetected. Either way, I'm going to make the assumption that he's clueless and avoid giving anything away until I absolutely have to.

"You're weak," he continues.

"We aren't weak."

He ignores me and keeps talking.

"Every human I've ever met makes me feel sick," he snaps, walking toward me. I'm already backed up against the wall, so there's literally nowhere else for me to go. I could slip my backpack off and have a few more inches of space, but I'm not going to move. I don't know what this guy will do if I try to drop the backpack. I probably should because I run faster without it, but right now, I'm just trying to gauge my next move.

There's a stake in my back pocket. He hasn't noticed it because when my back was to him, he was upstairs and could only see the heavy backpack I'm wearing. He doesn't know

I'm armed, but if I'm going to try to fight the vampire, I'm going to need him to underestimate me.

And I'm going to need him to get close to me.

"What about Paul?" I ask, deciding to egg him on and try to upset him. An angry vampire is a vampire who isn't thinking clearly. Timothy has size, experience, and immortality on his side.

All I have is a stupid stake.

And I need him to get closer to me.

Fortunately, Paul seems to be a sore spot for Timothy because he's on me in a flash. His hand is on my throat as he pins me against the wall. Unlike when Paul or Gerald or Rose or Liam do this, it's not very sexy. Timothy has some seriously rank vampire breath. Coupled with the fact that my backpack is kind of digging into my spine at a weird angle, the entire experience isn't very fun at all.

Still, he's close to me.

I reach into my pocket and place my hand on the stake. Now I need him distracted enough that I can shove it into his heart. I know that if I miss, I'm dead.

If I miss, everyone else dies.

If I miss...

Well, then it's all over.

"Your precious Paul was a terrible human. He always thought he was better than me."

"He is better than you," I snap.

I *hear* him slapping me in the face before I see his hand. Then pain spreads throughout my entire body as I realize that I did just get bitch-slapped by a vampire asshole.

“Don’t you *ever* talk to me about that bloodsucker. Paul ruined my life. He killed my father. Did he tell you that?”

“No,” I whisper.

“My father took Paul in when nobody else would. He barely even hit him.”

I picture Paul, small and tiny and lost in the world. Then I picture Mr. Sweet taking advantage of that.

What would a little boy like Paul have been like if he’d been allowed to flourish?

If he’d had a loving family?

Would he still have become a vampire?

Maybe he wouldn’t have needed to.

Still, I can’t picture him any other way, and I shake my head. I don’t need to hear anything else from Timothy. It’s time.

“You seem to be precious to him,” Timothy says. “I can smell him all over you. He’s going to be sad when he finds your corpse.”

“It’ll never happen,” I tell him. I’ve got my lighter in one hand and my stake in the other. He hasn’t noticed either object.

“Any last words?” Timothy asks. He extends his fingernails a little bit, digging them into my skin. It hurts, but he’s not cutting me. Not yet.

I decide that a fake-out is the best approach.

I widen my eyes and look at the staircase behind Timothy.

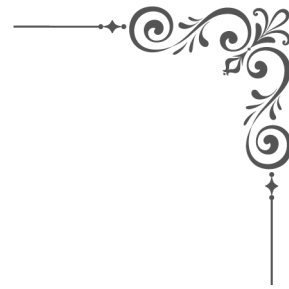
“Paul! You came! I knew you’d come!”

I pour all of my energy into sounding excited and relieved, and it works. Timothy can’t resist turning over his shoulder and peeking at the non-existent Paul. This gives me the opening I need to drive the stake into his heart.

And then it’s over.

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## 32

### Melody

**H**is body starts changing right away, reverting to its true age. I don't spend a lot of time looking at him.

He's gone.

I crumple the museum brochure up as much as I can and light it on fire, and then I toss it. Once the flames are moving, crawling over Timothy's body and up the staircase to the first floor, I head into the tunnel, close the door behind me, and start running.

And then I keep running.

And running.

I've spent enough time in the tunnels that I know my way through them even without a guide. There are torches that line the walls, but none of them are lit. It doesn't matter because I brought a flashlight with me and I'm not stopping.

I'm running.

I'm running away from the past and toward my beautiful future that I'm going to share with my mates.

I still can't quite grasp the fact that a group of vampire rockstars found me, claimed me, and loved me.

And I still can't believe that I'm giving up a life in the human world to love them.

Only, I no longer care.

I don't care about silly things like having a job or hanging out with coworkers after a long shift. I don't care about anything except falling into their arms every night – and sometimes every afternoon.

I reach a fork in the tunnels, but I know where I'm going. I take a sharp left and keep going. This particular tunnel goes deep underground, which means I'm running at a downward angle. The air around me grows colder as I make my way closer to the mansion, and as I approach, I slow.

My heart is racing as I near the entrance from the tunnel to the basement of the mansion where my vampires live.

My vampires.

My loves.

I know that they don't know how much I love them, and I hate that. I hate that I've made them wait.

I hate that I've made them worry.

I hate that there's ever been any sort of doubt that we're all meant to be together, but it doesn't matter anymore because I'm back and we're going to make this work.

We can definitely, totally make this relationship work.

I reach the entrance to the house, and I pause for a moment to catch my breath. I know that the moment I walk through the door, everything is going to change. My entire world is going to be completely rocked and shaken because they're everything I've ever needed.

They're everything I've ever wanted.

I've spent a lot of time in my life feeling unloved and unwanted, but when I'm with the vampires, it's like everything suddenly makes sense.

It's like my life is exactly where it's supposed to be.

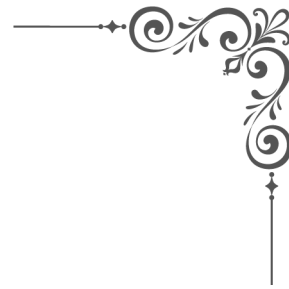
It's like nothing else matters.

I reach for the door and I tug it open, stepping into the basement. I walk through it quietly until I reach the staircase that leads upstairs. This mansion is the one I belong in. It's the home I've always dreamed of.

I make my way up to the top of the staircase, pausing at the door.

And then I hear the music.

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## 33

### Paul

We've made so many mistakes.

I know that we should have been more honest and upfront with Melody about a lot of things. I probably should have sat down with her and poured my broody heart out to let her know exactly what to expect with me.

I'm not perfect and I know that.

I'm not the best vampire or king of the vampires or any sort of vampire representative.

I'm just me.

And so, as I stand in the living room of our beautiful mansion, and my friends and I play our music, we sing from our souls. Even though we aren't all singers, today is a day for singing, and so, we sing.

The song we're playing is one I've been working on since Melody left. It's untitled, but I think I'm going to call it *A Vampire's Lament* or maybe just *Regret*. For me, there's nothing quite as terrible as losing someone I love, yet here I am.

Lost without her.

When we finish the song, I sink to the floor, emotionally exhausted. It's the only thing I feel these days. Ever since Melody left, it's like a fog has appeared to cover our home. Every single one of us has been struggling to stay alive and to stay awake and to pull ourselves from bed.

I know that Rose in particular hasn't been sleeping. All four of us have been staying in my bedroom. We've piled into my bed each and every night and even though we're still sleeping together, the magic we shared with Melody is just out of reach.

She really did change something in our hearts.

She made me feel like I was better than just some lowly vampire.

She made me feel like the world could be a beautiful place.

And she made me feel like no matter what happened next, she was going to be by my side.

I feel, rather than see, my companions surround me. They're staring at me, I know, and I'm quite sure it's because I'm being so damn broody and whiny.

"You need to get up," Rose says.

"There's no point."

"You're being dramatic," Liam points out.

I look up at him and glare.

"Is it dramatic to know that my entire world has been torn away from me? Is it dramatic to believe that I've lost the human who could unite us all for eternity? Is that dramatic?"

“Yeah,” Gerald says, rubbing his chin. “I’d say that’s all quite dramatic.”

I stand up so quickly that a stake falls from the inside pocket of my leather jacket. I knew I should have fixed my zipper, but I didn’t. Damn.

Rose is on it instantly. She leaps down and picks it up, holding the stake in front of me.

“What the hell is this?”

“I think you know.”

“You think I know?” Rose throws the stake against the wall so hard that it shatters. I didn’t even know that was possible. Then she grabs me by the throat and shoves *me* so hard that I fly back, too.

Luckily, I don’t break as easily as the stake.

Still, I land hard on my ass and I groan as I start to collect myself enough to sit up and look at the three pissed-off vampires in front of me.

Apparently, I’m not doing as good of a job as I think I am with keeping everyone happy.

“What the fuck are you thinking?” Liam reaches out with both hands, grabs my jacket, and hauls me to my feet. For a minute, I think he’s going to punch me in the face. I won’t stop him because I know I deserve it.

Only, he doesn’t do that.

Instead, he tugs me toward himself and kisses me with a sharp ferocity I haven’t felt in a very long time. His hands are

in my hair and suddenly, mine are in his. The two of us let everything go as we start making out right here in the middle of the living room. Our band practice is forgotten.

We have something more important right now.

“I can’t believe you were going to fucking stake yourself,” he murmurs as he kisses me. “Don’t you know we need you?”

“I know.” I say, but I’m not sure that I do. There’s a dark, twisted part of me that thinks they were all fine before they met me and they’ll all be fine after. I know I’m not supposed to feel this way, but I do.

We need to find a way to stop Timothy. We’re going to have to go out and hunt the fucking vampire and stake *him* before he can do anything else to hurt any of us, but right now, I push it out of my mind.

For the next few minutes, I don’t need to worry.

I don’t need to be sad.

I don’t need to feel afraid or lost or lonely because *he’s* here.

They all are.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Rose move to Gerald, but my eyes are firmly on Liam. He shoves my jacket back off my shoulders and lets it fall to the floor. I’m wearing a black band t-shirt and he reaches for that, tugging it up and over my head. His hands are on my chest now, and I start working on his clothes, too. He’s wearing far too many.

The room is silent aside from the rustle of clothing. Vampires don't breathe, so the air is almost entirely quiet. Back when I was human, I loved the sounds of grunting during sex. Now, the sound I love most is the biting.

When Liam's fangs pierce my neck, it's all I can do to keep from melting into the fucking floor. The pain, the pleasure – it all wraps around me and covers me as his hand finds its way down my pants and he starts stroking my cock. I reach for him, too, and the two of us begin jerking each other off while he feeds from me.

“You're so fucking good,” he murmurs, licking my neck and sealing the wound. He looks at me as he licks a drop of blood from his lips. “You taste so fucking good.”

He kisses me again, and I know we're both close to coming right here and now. I don't even care about making a mess in my pants. All I care about is him. All I care about is this moment.

I hear Rose and Gerald crying out. They're both coming, and the sound of their fucking is enough to push me over the edge.

“Come with me,” I manage to grunt out to Liam as the pleasure washes over me and I come right there in the living room. He groans his release and I feel hot, sticky spurts of cum coat my hand and his pants as he throbs with pleasure.

Then he kisses me.

And kisses me.

And kisses me.



When he pulls back, there's still a sadness in his eyes, but it's faded a little bit.

"I promise you," he whispers. "Everything is going to be okay."

I nod, suddenly feeling relieved, and I know this is why I have him. This is why I have all of them. One lover might not have been enough, but these three...

These three will carry me through hell.

They'll never leave me.

They'll always be here by my side, and they'll help me no matter what happens.

I hug him tightly, resting my chin on his shoulder, and then I opened my eyes.

And that's when I see her.

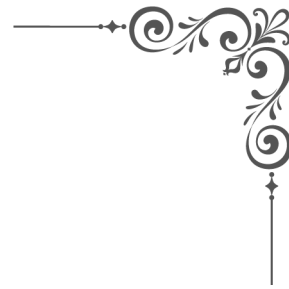
Dirty.

Tired.

Worn out.

Melody looks like she came crawling through the tunnels beneath the forest, but she's here, and I can't believe it.

"I'm sorry I didn't call first," she whispers. "But I need to talk to you."



## 34

### Gerald

Rose, Melody, and I sit in silence while Paul and Liam go shower. The fuckers came all over their pants and while I'm sure they'd both be completely happy to talk to Melody in a state of undress, having our mate return to us is kind of a serious thing that should be treated as such.

I should wait to say anything, but I can't stop staring at her. Melody is covered in dirt and leaves and dust. I'm pretty sure I can smell literal *ash* on her, but I'm afraid to ask what's happened or where she's been.

Rose doesn't seem to have the same problem.

"Where were you?" Rose whispers.

"I went home. I-I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye properly," Melody says quietly. "I should have said goodbye. I should have talked to you, but..."

"You were afraid," I finish her sentence for her. "You thought that if you said goodbye, you'd never actually leave."

She looks up at me with shock on her face. I shake my head.

“You act like none of us has ever had to make a hard choice before, darlin’. We all understand. Trust me.”

Some of us have been through harder things than other, but in the end, it doesn’t matter how “hard” or “painful” your experiences were. It doesn’t matter if you had a rougher time than someone else. Literally the only thing that matters is finding the people who make you happy, and then you’ll have support no matter what you face.

“I had to go back,” she tells me. She’s crying, but not sobbing. There are silent tears sliding down her face. They’re leaving little streaks in the dirt she’s covered in, and suddenly, the only thing I want to do is give her a damn bath.

“Come with me,” I say, and I take her hand. Rose follows as I lead Melody out of the living room and upstairs to the second floor. We make our way to my bedroom.

Once we’re all standing in the room, I gesture to her.

“Take off your clothes.”

“What?”

“Take them off, Melody.”

“But...Gerald...” She looks desperately at Rose before turning back to me. “I think we need to talk first before I get naked.”

“No.”

“But-“

The time for fun and games is over. I step forward and grab her by the throat, forcing her to look up at me.

“Did I fucking stutter?”

“No.”

“Then take off your clothes, Melody, or I will rip them the fuck off of you. You’re dirty as hell, you’re covered in ash, and you’ve got leaves in your hair. You need a fucking bath and I’m going to give it to you. Do you understand?”

Silence.

Then, she nods slowly.

“Yes, Gerald. I understand.”

Painfully slowly, she takes off each of her clothes. Piece by piece, she takes off her boots, socks, jeans, and panties. Her shirt and bra follow, and then she’s completely nude.

“You really are absolutely gorgeous,” Rose says. Melody looks at her. Surprise covers her face, like she’s still not really sure if any of this is for real.

“Come on.” I take her hand and lead her into the bathroom. I draw a bath and make sure to add plenty of bubbles. Melody loves bubbles. Then I help her in and begin washing her body. Rose comes into the bathroom and leans against the wall, watching as I take care of Melody.

I’ve *missed* caring for her. I’ve *missed* showing her my gentle side. There are so many things I’ve missed about her.

“I’m glad you came back,” I tell her.

“I’m glad I came back, too.”

“Was it a hard decision?”

“Yes.” Melody catches my eye. “Is that bad?”

“No,” I tell her firmly as I gently move a washcloth over her skin. “If the decision was easy, then that would mean it wasn’t the right one. The biggest decisions are usually the hardest, and generally, choosing the right one tends to feel the worst.”

“Why is that?”

“Because easy feels good,” Rose offers.

We’re quiet as I finish washing Melody. Then I carefully help her out of the tub. Once she’s dry, I wrap her in a warm robe and the three of us head back to the living room where Paul and Liam are now sitting side-by-side on one of the sofas. They instantly jump to their feet and hurry over.

“Is she hurt?”

“What happened?”

I hold up a hand to both of them. Before these over-the-top men decide to panic and freak out about Melody’s physical condition – which is fine – I need to reassure them.

“She’s safe, and she’s fine. She’s not injured. She hasn’t quite explained what happened, but she’s here, and that’s all that matters.”

Paul steps forward and grabs her, pulling her into his arms. He presses a kiss to her head.

“We thought we’d lost you.”

“It’s true, lass,” Liam agrees. He, too, takes her and tugs her close. He holds her like he’s scared of losing her again and

I know that he is. “He went all dramatic and almost staked himself.”

“What!?” Melody gasps and spins around to look at Paul.  
“You did what?”

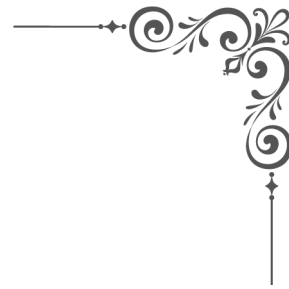
He has the decency to look a bit sheepish.

“You weren’t supposed to tell anyone,” he says.

“She’s not just anyone. She’s our mate.”

“Is that true, Melody?” Paul asks. His eyes darken as he forces her to finally make a decision. “Are you our mate?”

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## 35

### Melody

“Y<sup>es</sup>.”

I’m their mate.

I’m here.

I’m ready to be with them.

All eyes are on me as I start talking. I know I need to get this out as fast as I can because if I don’t, I’m going to panic. I know I’ll get scared and back out and not say it, so I need to blurt this out fast.

“I love you,” I tell them. “I needed some space, and I needed to figure out everything for myself, but I love you. All of you,” I add, just in case it wasn’t clear. “I’ve been listening to your music for so long that there’s a part of me that feels like I’ve known you my entire life.”

I pause for a moment, trying to catch my breath. I know that there’s so much I need to say and I don’t feel like I have a lot of time to say it.

“I want to be with you,” I say. “When I went back home, that was what I realized. I realized that my ‘home’ is really here with all of you. Rose, you’re just so kind and incredible.

And you're sexy. I've had a crush on you for as long as I can remember. Being with you just makes me feel like I can absolutely fly. And Liam," I turn to the Irishman.

He smiles as he looks at me. Then he nods encouragingly, as he always does.

"You always believe in me. You're fierce and strong, but you're soft and gooey on the inside."

"A true cinnamon roll, I know," he nods.

I smile as I turn to Gerald.

"And you," I murmur. "You're so wild and strong. You're a protector. I know that no matter what happens, you're going to fight to keep us all safe."

His lips quirk in a slight smile. He nods but doesn't say anything as he lets me turn to Paul and finish up the sappiest speech of my entire life.

"And Paul," I whisper. "You're the one who holds everyone together. I'm glad you didn't stake yourself because this group would fall apart without you."

I know that I'm crying, but I can't seem to stop as they surround me and hug me as a group. Every single one of them touches me and starts kissing me. They're making promises to me as they thank me for coming back.

And I feel so loved.

And adored.

And just *safe*.



It's ironic as hell that I feel the best I've ever felt in my life surrounded by monsters, but here I am: loved by them.

When they pull away, it's Paul who speaks first.

"We need to talk to you about something."

"What is it?"

They exchange worried looks before they gesture for me to sit down. Reluctantly, I sit down on one of the velvet couches. Rose sits to my left and Gerald is at my right. Paul and Liam stand before us.

"If you're going to stay here, then you need to know that we have an enemy," Paul begins. "It all started long ago."

"Paul was an orphan," Gerald says sadly, and I can feel the pain there. It's obvious that he's known this about Paul for a very long time, but that it's no less painful for any of them.

And even though this is information that I found on my own, my heart hurts, too.

It's not hard to picture Paul as a sweet little boy who didn't belong at a place like Sweet's Home for Children. Paul deserved to have a good childhood. He deserved to be loved and cared for and protected.

He deserved to have people who wanted to protect him the way he protects this little vampire clan.

Our group really is held together by Paul's love. It's easy to see that he's the one who basically forged this group and who works his ass off to keep everyone together.

“The man who ran the orphanage had a son who hated me,” Paul says. “The two of us were bitter rivals the entire time we were there. I left the orphanage as soon as I could. I ran off and began a life of piracy.”

Wait a minute.

“You were a pirate?”

Paul nods.

“You’re a...rockstar vampire pirate?”

Another nod.

I stare at him. Paul being a vampire I can believe. Paul being a rockstar I can believe.

But...Paul the Pirate?

This I’m struggling with.

“That sounds like something out of a bad romance novel,” I point out.

“I know.”

“Were you...a good pirate?”

“No pirates are good, love.”

Everyone is quiet as Paul continues speaking. One thing I’m really starting to love and respect is the fact that everyone here respects each other. I’m sure there will be moments where we argue or where there’s jealousy or perhaps even a harsh fight, but it’s all based in respect and trust, and I think that’s why I know this is where I belong.

“The two of us were rivals for many years,” Paul continues. “Eventually, I returned to Sweet’s Home for Children. The man who ran the orphanage, Franklin Sweet, was a terrible person. I killed him.”

“Were you...already a vampire at that point?”

“Yes.”

“And how did you...become a vampire?”

I’m not sure if this is a personal question or not. Most of the band hasn’t exactly told me how they were turned. Correction: not a single one of them has told me how they were turned, but I’m sort of dying – not literally – to find out.

To my surprise, Paul’s eyes light up.

“Oh, it’s a funny story, really. You see, I was on the hunt for a kraken.”

“A kraken?”

“Oh yes, it’s a giant sea monster, you see, and...”

I lean back on the sofa as Paul recants a tale of woe and wonder and explains how during the hunt for the legendary kraken, he was actually bitten by a member of his crew. Paul the Pirate Captain had been so busy hunting the monster that he hadn’t noticed his dwindling crew or the fact that one crew member in particular had grown particularly vicious. They killed almost everyone, but the man actually liked Paul and decided to turn him instead of kill him.

“And that’s how I found myself standing in front of Sweet’s.”

“And you knew,” I whisper. “You knew you had to kill him.”

“I had no choice,” he says. It’s sort of valiant, really, this mission of Paul’s. It’s the kind of thing a hero would do – move mountains to kill a predator. I’m sure Paul doesn’t think of himself like that.

“And then what happened?”

“I took over the home,” he says proudly. I wonder if he’s thinking of all of the children he helped, of all of the kids who needed him while he was the headmaster of the orphanage.

I smile as I look at him. When I saw the pictures of Paul with all of the kids, I could tell that he really loved them. It was clear to me that his life and his sacrifices made a difference to them.

“He was wonderful,” Rose says with a smile. She looks over at me. “I didn’t know him back then, of course. I met him and Gerald on the same night more than a century later, but I’ve heard his stories over the years, and I know he was fantastic.”

“I certainly tried.” Paul says. Then he seems to deflate a little. He starts pacing, walking back and forth, but Liam places a hand on his shoulder.

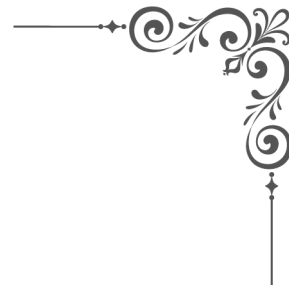
“Tell her,” he says. “She needs to know what she’s up against if she chooses to stay.”

“I’m staying,” I say firmly. This time, it’s Gerald who speaks.

“We’ve all been alive a very long time, Melody. We all have villains from our past. They come out at the oddest times. None of us would ever do anything to hurt you, but you need to be ready for that. Do you really want to be a part of something where you might have to fight?”

“For you all? I’ll do anything.”

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## 36

### Liam

She's a beauty, this lass. Strong and brave. Curious and smart. Gerald and Rose feel the same way. Each of them has a hand planted firmly on her thighs, essentially locking her in place. I don't think she's going to try to run again, but if she makes that decision, well, I think I'll be the one wrestling with a stake in my hand.

It's been a good long time since our group expanded. I was the last one to join, and I instantly knew that they were the ones for me.

It was never even a question.

When I was turned, my sire left me high and dry. There was no one to take care of me, no one to protect me. Meeting this lot was the best damn thing that could have ever happened to a fool like me.

They're the best thing I could have ever hoped for.

And now we have Melody.

"There's a lot you don't know about us," I tell Melody.

"I don't care." She juts her chin out stubbornly.

“You might care once you have to hear what he’s going to say.” My voice holds a bit of warning, but she’s so certain that she’s not going to leave it fills my heart with the weirdest amount of happiness.

“We’ve all been alive a long time, Melody,” Rose says. “We have enemies.”

There’s a certain sadness to her voice. Rose, like all of us, has had her fair share of stalkers and monsters and people and creatures who wish her harm. That’s one of the reasons we’ve stayed together for so long, though. We believe in protecting each other.

Above all else, we want to make sure the others are safe.

We want to make sure that no matter what happens, every damn one of us is protected and cared for.

*That’s* the real reason we’re together.

Protection coupled with love.

“Some enemies are worse than others,” Paul says. “In particular,” he sighs, and I reach for his hand and squeeze, letting him know that I’m here. It seems to give him the strength to keep talking. “The son of the man I killed. He’s been angry with us for years. He returned to Sweet’s long after I’d left. He took over the orphanage. I wasn’t aware of the fact that he, too, was a vampire, but I found out he’d been killing the children who lived at the orphanage. I thought I took care of him, but apparently, I didn’t. He’s hunting me now, and I’m afraid that he’s going to put you at risk, Melody. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

We all look at her. I'm certain she's going to start crying, or perhaps she'll say it can't be that bad. Unfortunately, we all know very well that it *can* be that bad, and it *is* that bad.

Only, she doesn't say what I think she's going to say.

Instead, Melody cocks her head.

“Are you talking about Timothy Sweet? Because I literally just killed him like an hour ago.”

We all stare at her, and for the very first time since I've met the other vampires, we're all completely silent.

What did she just say?

“Um, hello?” Melody looks to each of us in turn. “Is everyone all right?” She looks back at Paul. “He's like, super dead,” she says. “I wasn't about to let that bastard hurt you.”

“What are you talking about?” Paul asks. “How could you know?”

“Because I have the Internet,” she shrugs. “And my bestie is pretty good at research. We found out about all of that. Should I start calling you *Paulson* now?” Melody asks, winking at Paul.

I look at him curiously. “Paulson?”

“Don't,” he snaps.

He reaches for Melody and pulls her from Rose and Gerald. She's on her feet now, and he grabs her by the chin and forces our pretty mate to look at him.

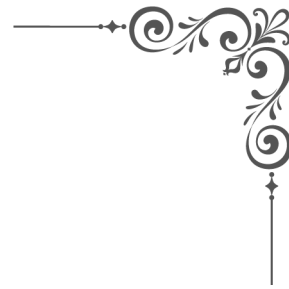
“Tell me what you're saying.”



“He’s dead, Paul. He’s dead and he’s never going to hurt any of you. I made sure of it,” she adds. “We’re going to be safe. Now stop teasing me and just kiss me already.”

Then *she* grabs Paul by the collar of his shirt, and she tugs him close, and she kisses him.

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## 37

### Rose

There's nothing quite as magical as feeling like your mate has your back, and Melody has just proved this to us.

To all of us.

She didn't just kill Timothy for Paul. She did it for us as a group.

"I'm sorry about the orphanage," she says, pulling away. "It's completely destroyed. There won't be a museum there, but there won't be anything else, either. The entire basement is pretty much done for, too. I don't think you'll ever be able to go back and play music. I think everything's collapsed in on itself."

"We can go check in a few days," I tell her, coming up behind her. The four of us all surround Melody and start kissing her in turn. We're all touching her arms and her face and her neck and just *loving* on her.

"I can't believe you did this for us." Gerald has been quiet up to this point, but he seems especially emotional about this, and I know why. Gerald often feels like the world is out to get us. To be fair, it kind of is. Having a human who wants to love

us and care for us is pretty much the most wonderful thing in the world.

“I would do anything for you,” she tells us quietly.

“Does that mean you’re here to stay, love?” Liam is the one who asks the question that’s burning on all of our hearts.

We all want her.

Crave her.

We’ve all been losing our damn minds without her, but when she finally nods, it’s like all bets are off. Gerald breathes out this huge sigh of relief as he drops to her knees in front of her. He parts the front of Melody’s robe and leans forward, kissing her between the legs. She yelps in surprise and almost falls over, but Liam catches her and holds her upright.

“Not so fast, lass,” he says. “Good girls need to be rewarded.”

He kisses her mouth as I move behind her and start kissing the back of her neck. I lick her skin, enjoying each taste, each wiggle, each little moan that’s sliding out of her mouth.

Melody is quivering as she comes for the first time. I hear Gerald’s satisfied chuckle and then he starts to complain as Paul pushes him out of the way and takes his place kneeling before Melody.

“My turn,” Paul grunts. Then he goes silent as he begins torturing the human we love in the most delicious way.

“Put your leg on Paul’s shoulder,” Gerald commands. Melody does this, exposing her thigh. Even from my position

behind her, I can see that she looks fucking lovely.

“Such a beautiful dirty girl,” I murmur.

“She is quite lovely,” Gerald agrees. “I love watching her get her pussy licked like this.”

His words seem to *do* something for Melody because she starts wiggling again, grinding back against me. I grab her hips and hold her in place.

“You can’t escape this time,” I chuckle into her ear. “You need to come for Paul, Melody. Then you’re going to come for Liam. Then you’re going to come for me. We all want to taste you. Every damn one of us wants to claim you as ours.”

Because she *is* ours.

She comes again, crying out against Liam’s lips as he kisses her over and over. He’s relentless as he claims her mouth while Paul claims her pussy. This time, when the orgasm fades away, she practically collapses back against me. I laugh because she’s so tired and we’re barely getting started.

“Put her on the couch,” I tell Liam. “I want to see her come with your cock in her.”

This pleases Liam, just as I knew it would, and he keeps kissing Melody as he carries her to one of the velvet sofas. The boys and I love nothing if not a good show, and Melody is the star we’ve all been waiting for. My body feels like it’s alive and not dead in moments like this. Right now, Melody is showing us her sheer humanity as she sprawls out on her back on the sofa.

Liam positions himself over her. She still has the robe on, but it's fallen open to reveal her dark brown nipples, her soft skin, and the curls above her pussy. He slides his cock into her and she cries out. She tries to reach for him but I grab her hands and pin them over her head.

“Not yet, pretty girl,” I tell her. “You're mine.”

I kneel beside the sofa while Liam fucks Melody, and it's my turn to kiss her. She's greedy with her kisses, but so am I. Paul and Gerald are watching the show while they stroke their cocks. I reach my hand out until I grab one of them – Paul – and I grip his thigh as he nears his orgasm.

I pull away from Melody's lips and look at the breathless human.

She's panting.

Sweaty.

Groaning.

“You want to come so bad, pretty girl,” I murmur. “Do it. Come for me. I want to see you come for Liam so you can come for me. You want that, don't you?”

She nods and starts to look over at Liam, but I shake my head.

“Eyes on me, baby. Look at me while you come.”

He's still driving his cock into her, filling up her soft, tight pussy, but I reach for her clit and start stroking.

That's all it takes.

Melody's eyes flutter closed, and her mouth forms an "o" as her third orgasm washes over her, effectively turning her into a pile of jelly.

Watching her is enough for Liam to come, filling her up with his seed.

"That's my good girl," I tell her. "Take all of his cum, baby. Then you're going to take me."

Because I need her just as much as I've ever needed any of these guys. Maybe more. Melody is like heaven wrapped in a curvy package, but I don't think that I deserve her.

No, I *know* I don't deserve her.

None of us do.

Liam climbs off the couch. He stops to kiss her gently on the tip of her nose.

"Fucking perfect, lass," he tells her. Then he struts naked to one of the chairs and sits, leaning back to watch the rest of us finish playing. I can tell by the sparkle in his eye that he's having a damn good time.

We all are.

Paul and Gerald are kissing now. They're no longer rubbing their own cocks, but each other's.

Good.

This means that Melody is all mine, and I plan to make her come harder than she has so far.

We're going to end this evening with a bang if I have anything to do with it.

I look at the beautiful human sprawled out on the couch: curvy, sated, exhausted.

“You’re not done just yet,” I warn her.

“I feel like jelly,” she whispers.

“You’re going to be when I’m done with you.”

But that’s not yet.

I tug Melody to her feet and kiss her, cupping her face.

“You’re so fucking perfect, baby,” I warn her. “You’re everything we’ve ever wanted.”

“I think I’m falling in love with you,” she whispers. I know she means all of us, and I know we all feel the same damn way.”

“Come here,” I tell her.

It’s my turn to lie down on the couch. I’m still wearing a long dress, but I tug it up around my waist and start rubbing my pussy over my panties. They’re completely soaked, of course. There would have to be something seriously wrong for me not to be horny as hell after everything I’ve just seen.

Melody looks at me and bites her lip. I smile at her and raise a finger, giving her a “come hither” gesture.

My sweet girl obeys, coming over to me and standing there like the goddess she is.

“You’re going to ride my face, baby,” I tell her.

Her eyes dilate at this. She likes the idea, and I like pushing her and turning her on. I love teasing her and making

her fall apart for me.

I like making her wiggle and squirm.

“Climb on my mouth,” I command. “Ride me until you come, princess.”

“I don’t know if I can come again,” she admits.

“Then you’re going to be riding a long time,” I tell her. “Luckily, I’ve got plenty of it.”

She smiles lightly as she drops her robe to the ground and climbs over my face. She’s facing away from my body, which means she can grip the side of the couch for balance as she hovers there.

“No,” I stop touching myself long enough to slap her on the ass. “No hovering.”

“What?”

“I said ride my face, Melody. Ride my fucking face.”

“You’d better do it,” Paul grunts out. He’s about to come apart. I just know it.

“She’s being serious,” Gerald agrees. His voice sounds tight, too, and I know they’re both on the edge of release.

Melody hovers for just a second more, and I reach up to pop her on the bottom again, but she obviously senses my hand moving because she drops down onto my mouth so I can start licking her, and she groans.

Then she starts riding my face like a good girl, and I know that she is, in fact, a good girl.



I want to tell her this.

I want to promise her that I know how good she is, how sweet she is. I want to tell her that we're all so fucking crazy about her that she makes our hearts melt, but right now, what I want most of all is to just feel her come on my face.

I lick her, teasing her body as she moves more gracefully than humans should be allowed to move. I'm on the edge, hovering on that tiny sliver of space just before an orgasm washes away all semblance of reality, but I've got to hold on until she comes.

And then my sweet human comes.

I can tell the second her orgasm hits her because her entire body starts shaking and she drops even deeper onto my face. She tastes so fucking good, but I want more. I stop holding back and as my own orgasm starts rocking my body, I turn my head to her thigh, extend my fangs, and let them sink into the beautiful human on top of me.

Melody cries out but doesn't move as I taste her sweet blood. After four orgasms, she's so sweet that she practically tastes like candy. The guys are still watching, and I hear Gerald and Paul both coming, too, but I don't turn to watch. Instead, I drink from the woman I love.

I drink from the girl who makes us feel so complete.

A moment later, I seal her skin with my tongue and she slides off my face and lays beside me on the couch. She kisses me gently, licking my lips.

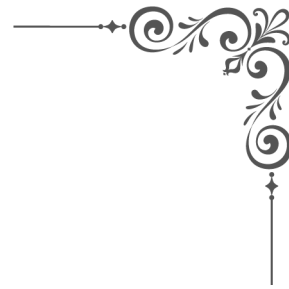
"I can taste myself on you," she whispers.

“Good. You taste delicious.”

She chuckles a little before laying her head on my chest, and I hold the sweet human there for a very long time.

I hold her until I feel like time really has stopped.

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## 38

### Melody

When I wake up in Rose's bed the next day, I look around to see that no one is here. It's only me. For a moment, I'm worried they've left me alone or locked me away to be a prisoner, but then I sniff the air.

Bacon.

Have they made bacon?

Yes, it definitely smells like bacon.

I climb out of bed and don't bother tugging on a robe or looking for clothes. They like me naked. I'm curvy and luscious and delicious, and even though I know I'm not everyone's cup of tea, my vampires love me exactly the way I am.

Why *shouldn't* I show my body off?

I make my way to the kitchen where Rose is sitting at the table with Gerald. Liam is – as I suspected – frying bacon. Then there's Paul, who is leaning against the wall looking broody. He's dressed in a trench coat and holding a newspaper. The only thing missing from his getup is a cigar.

“What's going on?” I ask.

“Paul went to get a paper,” Rose says. “He wanted an update on you killing Timothy.”

“Meaning he wanted to see if I really did it,” I point out, making my way to Liam. He kisses me softly before handing me a plate with eggs and fruit on it. He drops a few pieces of bacon on it and I head over to the table to sit down between Gerald and Rose. Each of them places a hand on either one of my thighs, locking me in place and letting me know that they’re happy I’m here and that this is where I belong and oh, I really feel like this is where I belong.

“And you did it,” Paul says, looking up. “They found a body. Barely, but they found something.”

“When a vampire dies, they don’t turn to ash,” Gerald tells me. “But the body does change. It reverts to its true age.”

I saw that happen. By the time I left the basement of the orphanage, Timothy was already too burnt to recognize. If he kept regressing to his “real” age, his body was probably even more unrecognizable.

“So, they don’t know it’s Timothy,” I point out.

“No,” Paul shakes his head. “The building is damaged beyond repair, though. It’s completely collapsed.”

“Good. Guess there won’t be a museum.”

“And they won’t find the tunnels,” Rose says quietly. “The destruction of the building made sure of that. It completely blocked the entrance to our tunnels. They’ll find the basement if they dig, but that’s it.”

“So, we’re safe,” I point out the obvious because that’s what I care about. Me and my vampires...we’re safe here. We’re in good hands. We’re going to be okay. The five of us are exactly where we’re meant to be – together.”

“For now,” Rose says, “but remember, Melody-“

“I know,” I interrupt her through a big bite of eggs. “You all have enemies. I remember.”

“Make sure you don’t forget,” Gerald kisses me on the forehead.

“I won’t.”

“Thank you for what you did,” Paul says. “You saved us.”

“I wouldn’t say all that. I’m sure you could have done it yourself.”

Paul leaps forward then, jumping into the air and landing on the breakfast table. He lands so hard that the table instantly breaks in two and my eggs go flying. Rose, Gerald, and I fall backward, hastily trying to avoid getting hit by the table, but Paul isn’t stopping.

He keeps coming until he’s got me by the throat and he’s hauling me up to my feet.

“No, Melody,” he says, “we could *not* have done this without you.”

“You didn’t have to break the table,” I whisper quietly.

“I’ll buy you another,” he says simply. And then he kisses me.

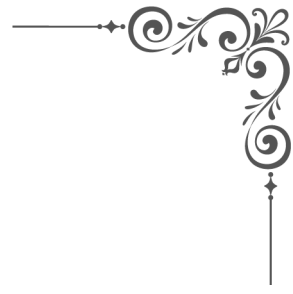
“My turn,” Gerald says, scrambling to his feet. He pulls me from Paul’s arms and kisses me, too. Rose takes a turn, and then finally, I find myself in Liam’s arms and the soft, sweet Irishman takes his time teasing my mouth.

By the time I’m seated at the counter with a fresh plate of food, I feel dizzy with happiness.

I can’t believe I’ve found them.

I can’t believe I’m really living with the vampire loves of my life.

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# EPILOGUE

## Rose

### Later that night

I climb to my little tower and sit surrounded by my books. I give myself nearly an hour before I finally stand up and walk over to the one that's basically leering at me. It's a volume I hate desperately, but that I can't bring myself to get rid of because I loved the author long ago, and he loved me, too.

I reach for the book, grasping the worn leather cover in my hands. I blow a little bit of dust off the top of the book. This is a volume I don't like to go near because it's something that holds memories I'd rather just forget about.

Only, I can't.

There are some things you can't forget no matter how hard you try.

There are some stories that just haunt you forever. You can try to run away, and you can try to fight desperately, and you can try to do a million different things, but...

Sometimes it's just not enough.

Having Timothy reappear makes me wonder about my own past.

How safe am I, really?

The man who wrote this book is a vicious bastard who wouldn't let something as silly as time or mortality keep him from me.



Grimacing, I open the first page of the book, I start to read.

*Dear Rose, I promise to find you.*

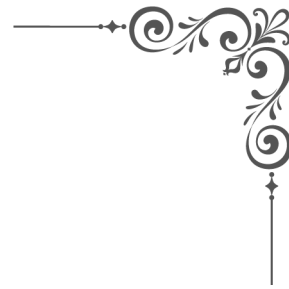
These are words that any reader would assume are loving and kind, but to me, they're the scariest lines in the universe.

To me, they make me feel even colder than I already do.

To me, it lets me know that I'm not really safe, and that it's only a matter of time before he really does track me down.

*The story continues in [The Sound of Roses](#).*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sophie Stern writes paranormal romance about dragons, bears, wolves, and princesses. Her work ranges from adult fairytales to cowboy adventures to dragon shifters who live on their own private island. Visit her at [www.sexysophiestern.com](http://www.sexysophiestern.com) to learn more.

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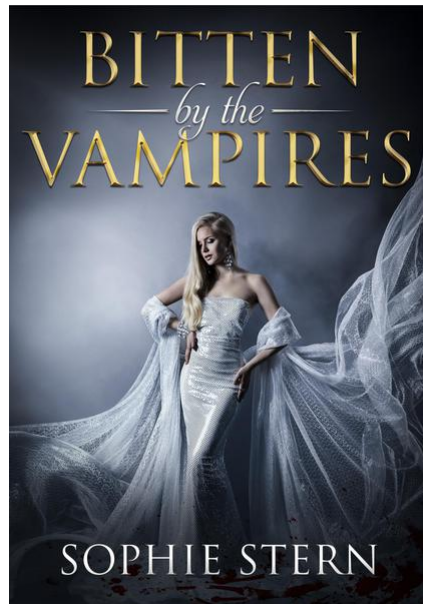
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Did you love *Sweet Nightmares: The Vampire's Melody*? Then you should read [\*Bitten by the Vampires\*](#) by Sophie Stern!



Some little girls dream of being princesses and living in far-away castles. Some little girls dream of being saved by a handsome knight. Some little girls want to grow up to marry a prince. Me? I just want to be a vampire. I don't think that's too much to ask, but the tall, dark, and cranky gentlemen who take Eagleton, one of the last remaining human settlements, don't seem to agree with me. In fact, they claim that the only way I'll ever become a vampire is if I give up everything and surrender to them. Fat chance. But being a vampire is my destiny, so I'll have to take every risk, every chance, every shot I get. I'll have to do whatever it takes to be bitten by the vampires.

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