


SHADOWING JANE BOOK 1



MY
NEIGHBOR
THE
VAMPIRE

BRENNA HARLOW

MY NEIGHBOR, THE VAMPIRE

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To all the gurlies who wanted more smut during their Twilight or Vampire Academy era.

Fang bangers for the win.

*To all the girlies who wanted more smut during their Twilight or Vampire
Academy era.*

Fang bangers for the win.



“**Y**ou’re obligated to be here, Samuel.”


Rune watches me from his seat across the room, a brandy hand and a girl’s wrist in the other. He smiles, teeth gleaming red beneath blue light.

“An obligation I never asked for, Lord Rune. You know that.” My narrow, but I remain slouched in my chair, watching his body language closely.

He clicks his tongue, shaking his head. “This is the way the world works, my boy. You’ve been obligated since the moment you entered our family.”

My responding question, spoken with so much loathing, isn’t one he wants to hear. His friendly mask drops, revealing the true killer he holds within. Rune’s pupils enlarge until they’ve filled most of his irises. His thin, bony hands claw around the antique arms of his chair. “Have you already forgotten about my brother, Samuel? Your maker?”

I relax my features, feigning subservience. “Of course not, Rune. I was a blow to us all.”



A picture flashes behind my eyes, so clear and beautiful. Lord Barro against the hardwood floor, the sweetness of his blood coating the air with an aroma. His limbs twisted, his head flattened.

The vision is so clear I can almost taste it.

Rune smiles then, his personality shifting like clockwork. He straddles my back, clasp- ing the human's arm in a firm grip.

She wobbles, her naked limbs weak from both blood loss and the venom. Despite the utter terror she should feel, her bruised lips are smiling up to the heavens as if she's flying there now. Blonde hair cascades over her shoulders, skating the tops of her breasts.

There are bite marks there. In fact, fresh wounds dot her entire body. Some are shallow cuts, others inflicted by brute force.

The sight of her is the only thing about this meeting that has me on edge. It isn't that she's naked and bloody, or that she holds any notorious secrets. My problem is her very presence, as it's a reminder of things I still can't control. An addiction I'll never fucking kick, no matter how much I work on the program.

Rune eyes me, a brightness growing in his gaze. He must see the reflection of self-torture in my stare, and he absolutely *loves* it. He's no different from any of the others. I'm a spectacle, a side-show for all vampire-kind.

The killer who hates eating his veggies.

It's why they've summoned me, I'm sure of it.

Rune flings the girl's wrist outward, propelling her forward. She stumbles before falling, her ass slapping over my knee with force. I position her so she's further away, not liking my proximity to her warmth. She doesn't seem to mind either way, with her eyes glazed and flickering over the ceiling.

os slack “Go ahead, Samuel. I’m sure you’re absolutely *famished.*” Rune
ir in itsagain, this time baring his teeth. His words are an order, not an invitati

Declining wouldn’t be an option even if I tried. My monster has
heard the soft *patter-patter* of her heart. My eyes fixate on the fresh
lightensseeping from a wound near her shoulder, and it’s as if I can *feel* it vil
calling to me.

Rune’s I lean closer, my attention divided between this unbearable ne
e lifted,keeping my composure. Rune thinks seeing this will give him more
slopesover me, and maybe it will.

But when my lips touch her skin, sliding along the crimson liquid, I
y, someto my darkness. I lap her wound like a dog would its bone, clinging
body with more vigor than I should.

edge. It Her blood burns its way down my throat, both agonizing and pleasu
ty. My Rune disappears. His office vanishes. The calming blue light fades.
control. There’s nothing but myself and the poison.
ork the And it tastes fucking *exquisite.*

mnants
nt from

umbles
so that
’t seem
blue-lit



e grins After my meeting with Rune, I make my way out of his building and
on. bustling city streets. It's darker in New York this time of night
already businesses have closed up shop and turned off their neon
1 blood Unfortunately, there's not enough darkness to gaze up at the stars, bu
brating, the price one must pay to make it in the big city.

And that's exactly what I've been *invited* to do, to stay and make ni
ed and the human population while I await the annual gathering of the elite.
power But the problem with the Night Order is that an invitation is alw
order, and those who disobey write their own obituary.
give in I travel two blocks on foot before hailing a cab. Always the opt
; to her came to the city without transportation. Rune dislikes seeing me ali
much as I dislike him, and this was supposed to be a simple in a
rable. transaction. I show up, speak niceties with the enemy, and return t
Mexico.

But now I'm *needed*.

"Where to?" The driver asks, his crinkled eyes reflecting in the rear
I tuck my fingers into my jean pocket, fishing out my phone. "Hi
reply, smiling as pleasantly as I can fake. "Whichever is nearest."

The middle-aged driver laughs, his voice deep and unbothered. H
me normal enough, which is good.

As he turns the corner, I dial Matthew's number.

He answers on the third ring, voice thick with sleep. "What do you v
I bite my tongue at his greeting, not willing to waste time being a
when I already have so much to unravel. "I need an apartment. Th
populated area you can find. Someplace I can disappear into while I'm

Clothing shuffles across the line. A single feminine, sleepy moan ec
the background. Matthew takes a few steps before I hear a door c

onto the “You’re staying?”

, when I focus my sight on the blurring background racing past my window signs. At this late hour, there are humans racing around. Most clutch their bags, eyes darting as they travel to their destination. The shadows bob along with the sensation of invisible eyes like my own.

ce with I can see why the Night Order operates here.

Humans are trapped in a never-ending terror experiment of the ways of making. They don’t need stories of vampires to fuel their nightmares, but their monsters are more familiar.

imist, I “Unfortunately,” I finally answer. “You and Francis should stay most as think Rune assumes we’ve all parted ways, and it’s best if he continues and out assumption. Just find me an apartment. I need it as soon as possible.”

to New The taxi pulls up to a towering skyscraper, brilliant white light spells its name. The hotel’s grand entrance is almost as impressive as the crystal chandelier on display in front of the lobby windows, which easily be mistaken for royal decoration. Wheels grate as a doorman pushes a loaded cart across the tile floors, the sound seeping into the sealed and invading my senses.

le finds And I’ll be staying here, forced to interact with the maids, host guests. It’ll be even more tortuous than Rune’s meeting.

“An apartment, Matt. Asap.”

want?” I end the call, pay the driver, and cross the threshold of my ten annoyed prison.

ie most

. here.”

shoes in

closing.

“You’re staying?”

I focus my sight on the blurring background racing past my window. Even at this late hour, there are humans racing around. Most clutch their bags tight, eyes darting as they travel to their destination. The shadows bother them, along with the sensation of invisible eyes like my own.

I can see why the Night Order operates here.

Humans are trapped in a never-ending terror experiment of their own making. They don’t need stories of vampires to fuel their nightmares, because their monsters are more familiar.

“Unfortunately,” I finally answer. “You and Francis should stay there. I think Rune assumes we’ve all parted ways, and it’s best if he continues that assumption. Just find me an apartment. I need it as soon as possible.”

The taxi pulls up to a towering skyscraper, brilliant white light spelling out its name. The hotel’s grand entrance is almost as impressive as the giant crystal chandelier on display in front of the lobby windows, which could easily be mistaken for royal decoration. Wheels grate as a doorman pushes a loaded cart across the tile floors, the sound seeping into the sealed vehicle and invading my senses.

And I’ll be staying here, forced to interact with the maids, hosts, and guests. It’ll be even more tortuous than Rune’s meeting.

“An apartment, Matt. Asap.”

I end the call, pay the driver, and cross the threshold of my temporary prison.



My smile is so wide my face nearly cracks. “Really, Joey, you leave.”

My once best customer places his arms on the counter, leaning close. “You tipped me so well in the past, Jane. One stupid argument and you banned me? This is my favorite coffee shop!”

I scoff, involuntarily taking a step back. “Sir, the argument you’re talking about was sexual harassment. Now go!”

If I didn’t have another patron in the front, I’m not sure I’d be so bold. As of now, Mr. Page is planted where he always sits, in the front booth behind the sugar packets. He’s watching Joey, his disgusted sneer searing into the asshole’s back. I make a mental note to give him his next cup of coffee at my house.

Joey’s cheeks flush a deep shade of scarlet, the color tinting his nose well. Sweat beads form on his gleaming scalp. “I’ve been coming here for years, Jane. All I did was give you a compliment.”

I fix my eyes on him, allowing my anger to radiate through my stare. “You placed your hands on me, *Sir*.”

Two loud claps sound from behind his shoulder, causing me to
Joey's eyes flash with something dark, but before I can recognize what
fantasies he's conspiring, Mr. Page speaks.

"All right, Joey. I think it's time for you to hit the road. There's
24-hour shop two blocks away and you know it."

Joey's eyes flash with anger, switching his gaze from me to Mr.
I keep my breathing steady, not allowing myself to succumb to the surprise
this meeting.

Joey's posture shifts and then he flaps his arms in a motion that seems
need to a dismissal for the both of us. "What-the-fuck-ever, man. Screw
shithole." Without turning to face me again, he storms across the small
e. "I've and out the door. It chimes as he exits, painting the room with
get me heaviness.

I bow my head at Mr. Page, hiding my shaking hands behind my
talking "Thank you."

He shakes his head, a sad frown tugging at his lips. "You think you
old. But people, but you don't." Muttering, he grabs his coffee and crosses the
with near making his way out of the shop. "Hope the rest of your night is better
into the Jane. You don't deserve these people."

I'm silent, frozen in place on the padded mat behind the lone counter
e on the moment he passes the front windows, I jump into action, winding my
neck as around to the lobby and locking the double doors.

With the numbness comes frantic lists of what needs to happen next
iere for I'll need to leave a note for Henry so he can notify the district manager
e. "You I'll need to warn Stacy before she clocks in. Joey was *banned*, explicitly
with witnesses, but he still came back to intimidate me. What if
complete psycho and robs the place during the day shift?"

o jump. Hell, what if he comes back for me tonight?

not sick I double-check that the door is securely locked and place a handwritten note on it before finding refuge in the bathroom. After shutting myself in, I turn toward the mirror.

My cheeks are flushed, and the dark circles beneath my eyes are visible. I almost had them under control before things at work got out of control, causing me to lose the sleep I had caught up on.

Otherwise, I appear as normal as ever.

I'm attractive in the traditional, feminine, chubby sort of way. My nose is prominent, but it often leads to discomfort and unwanted male attention. My hair is blonde, wavy, and casual. The size of my nose is regular. My face is symmetrical.

There are a million other beautiful, kind women in New York, but Joey chose me to be his personal target.

Fucking night shift.

I give myself thirty minutes to sit on the closed toilet and absorb my thoughts. It doesn't take long. Living in the city has taught me a lot about men, Ms. world. Like how some men are assholes, and others are the gentle type.

Mr. Page, for example. He's never even glanced at my tits while ordering coffee-no-cream-extra-sugar. Regardless, with either type, it's better to be safe rather than sorry.

Joey isn't the first man to accost me since moving here. There are a lot of instances on my way to work almost every night. None have been serious enough to touch me, but still.

I should be used to this by now. What had I expected when I left North Carolina for the big apple?

It is what it is.

I inhale long and deep before exiting the bathroom and unlock the lobby doors.

Three more people come inside the café, and only two of them do anything. I let the third man, a young homeless guy, rest his eyes in the extra ten minutes before my replacement arrives. We're supposed to be nice to people like him, but I don't have the heart.

I was in his position not too long ago. Maybe I wasn't as disheveled as he is now, but I was still lost, nonetheless.

Stacy, my co-worker, enters the store with a brush still lodged in her hair. My eyes red. She doesn't acknowledge me at first, but I've learned not to take things personally. Stacy needs coffee before she can have polite conversation.

When she finally mopes her way toward the register to log in, I recall the night's big scare. "Joey came in again. I think he threatened me."

Her eyes widen, fingers flying over the touchscreen as she types in her password. "Henry's gonna be pissed." She grabs an apron and shoos me to the back. "Are you okay?"

I nod, trying to smile. Fake it till you make it, right? "I had a customer here, and he defended me, luckily. I don't know what would have happened if I were alone. He seemed pretty unhinged."

Stacy shakes her head, pursing her lipstick covered lips. "I told Henry we need to put a pretty young thing like you on third shift. He doesn't care about you as long as he gets to sleep through the night."

My eyes float to the help wanted sign plastered on our window. "A little while he'll hire a new person soon. He said he'll switch me to second shift as soon as someone gets trained."

Stacy rolls her eyes. "Hmm. I'm sure he will, buttercup. Now go home."

ing the get your beauty rest before you turn into an old hag like me.” She winks
picks up her coffee, lifting it to her thin lips.

n order She doesn’t have to tell me twice. After scrawling a note on the back
e booth receipt and pinning it to the manager’s computer, I grab my bag, close
to kick and leave the shop with a wave goodbye to Stacy.

As I walk the six blocks back to my apartment, the sun rises.
led, but troublemakers have crashed, and the world is quiet. There’re echoes
from a major street nearby, but even that feels worlds away. The sun
er hair, brightening, coloring the sidewalk with its pink-ish glow. The sun
take it beautiful, but since working all hours of the night for the last year, the
on, and presence makes me sleepy.

κ. I love watching it rise, but afterward, I’m as dead as a doorknob.
ount the By the time I make it to my building, my legs feel like solid ch
iron. I’m tired, depressed, and ready to put this day behind me. Normal
; in her take the stairs up, getting my cardio in as I truck up to the sixth story,
ves the today.

I smash the elevator button like my life depends on it. It opens a
another later, and I step inside, leaning against the far wall. My head falls back
ould’ve connecting with the mirrored wall a little too hard, but I don’t have a c
to give. I let my eyes slide shut, giving in to the few seconds of peace
nry not until I get to my room.

ut risks But just before the sliding doors click shut, a slap sounds thro
enclosed space. My eyes fly open, focusing on the source.

‘Maybe A single gloved hand slices through the door, making the panels
as soon open. As the doors widen, my eyes adjust to the man in front of me.

Holy Hell, he’s *hot*.

me and Hotter than hot.

anks and So attractive I wonder if he's real or just an airbrushed AI robot designed to appeal to all female-kind. I've seen weirder things on the streets and a lack of these parts.

ock out, But this dude is all man. Flesh and blood. His dark hair hangs thick and cascading on either side of his face just above his ears. The man's skin is All the pale olive hue, adding leverage to the mysterious characteristics portrayed by his honkshis sullen, hard gaze. He's the dark and broody type, for sure. His brooding sky is down, a frown line forming between them. Tough night, maybe? My first sight is *He could be in the mafia.*

ie sun's His eyes meet mine for a brief second, their somber shade piercing and a little disappointed when his quick scan of me doesn't linger on my current files in beside me, his long black jacket billowing with his stride.

unks of "What floor?" My fingers hover over the elevator buttons, preparing to press any I'd whichever level he gives me.

but not The man shoves his gloved hands into his jacket pockets. He doesn't look up as he replies. "Six."

second "Oh." I smile, but my heart does an anxious little skip. "We're going back toward, same place, then."

are left I wonder what he's doing here.

o I have My apartment complex isn't grand. It's actually pretty shitty compared to most others, but it's moderately affordable and the studio rooms are big enough to feel comfortable. There's a doorman manning the door at the entrance which cuts down on crime.

bounce This place is a typical setting for normal people.

The man beside me, however, is *not* normal.

He belongs inside some faraway mansion, with the paparazzi being kept out of the bay outside the gates.

assigned We're both silent on the ride up, with nothing but the buzz of the v
aroundbreak the palpable tension. My hands are sweating, so subtly, I wipe t
my pants. Peeking through my lashes, I realize the man is staring
; loose, ahead at the elevator doors.

kin is a I'm a nobody. Completely out of his league.

ayed by But, *fuck*, I'd do whatever he asked to change that.

ws pull *Ding. Ding. Ding.* Finally, we arrive at our floor. The elevator chim
more before opening, and as soon as the gap is wide enough to exit, t
fleas. I trail behind him, watching as his dark suit shifts with his mover
}. I'm a This hallway splits in the back, leading either left or right. I h
ves. Hebreath, wondering which direction he'll take, and then nearly chokin
he turns to the right.

d to hit *No way.*

I pick up my pace, heart racing as I watch him continue past ever
i't lookAfter a few seconds, it's obvious that he's not stopping at any
theorized destinations. The crazy couple in room 210 seem like they
g to thehost sketchy individuals, but he rushes past their faded doormat.

The single mom in room 215? She's model-level beautiful, but...
passes her wreathed entrance like it's nothing.

pared to There's only one other room...

are big I halt outside my door, jingling my keys. He stops just ahead, at the
rs, too, to last room on this side of the floor. He fishes a single key from hi
pocket, it's metallic finish dancing in his black suede grasp.

My curiosity eats at me, and before he can slide his key into the lo
one nervous laugh slip between my lips. "Cleaning the apartment bef
held atshow it to renters?"

The man's dark eyes dart toward me, his gaze widening as if h

walls noticed I've been following him. He smiles, showing a dazzling
them on perfectly straight teeth. "Hardly."

straight And with that, he enters his room, slamming the door behind him.

I place a shaking hand over my heart. "Shit." With trembling fingers
unlock my door and push into my room.

It seems I have a new neighbor.

As once Fanning myself, I throw my bag to the ground and flip on the light
the manlight.

aments. My studio is less than average. Other than my bathroom, the quaint
old my completely open, featuring a half kitchen on one side and my bedroom
g when living room on the other. It's a little messy, but thanks to my multi-
smart lighting system, I've given the space tons of moody vibes.

Sighing, I strip to my undies and climb into bed, fluffing the pillows
y door, relaxing and flipping open my laptop.

of my My body feels like it's buzzing as I open my music app and click
/ might be sleepy Lo-Fi playlist I've been listening to during my nightly ritual.

I reach into my nightstand and fist my hand around the long, squishy
No, he knows I'll need.

Reaching beneath the covers, I slide off my panties, lower the pin
between my legs, and press the tiny button at its base, making it buzz
second When the silicone vibrates over my clit, the male heartthrob's face
is jacket my mind's eye, wetting me further.

Fucking neighbors.

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ore you

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noticed I've been following him. He smiles, showing a dazzling row of perfectly straight teeth. "Hardly."

And with that, he enters his room, slamming the door behind him.

I place a shaking hand over my heart. "Shit." With trembling fingers, I unlock my door and push into my room.

It seems I have a new neighbor.

Fanning myself, I throw my bag to the ground and flip on the hallway light.

My studio is less than average. Other than my bathroom, the quaint room is completely open, featuring a half kitchen on one side and my bedroom-slash-living room on the other. It's a little messy, but thanks to my multi-colored smart lighting system, I've given the space tons of moody vibes.

Sighing, I strip to my undies and climb into bed, fluffing the pillows before relaxing and flipping open my laptop.

My body feels like it's buzzing as I open my music app and click the sleepy Lo-Fi playlist I've been listening to during my nightly ritual. Then I reach into my nightstand and fist my hand around the long, squishy tool I know I'll need.

Reaching beneath the covers, I slide off my panties, lower the pink wand between my legs, and press the tiny button at its base, making it buzz to life. When the silicone vibrates over my clit, the male heartthrob's face rears in my mind's eye, wetting me further.

Fucking neighbors.



My new abode is...
Not what I fucking asked for.

I fist my hand around my phone, preparing to call Matthew and give him a taste of my mind, when the music begins to play.

I scan the room, searching the empty darkness for whatever could be broadcasting the gentle beats. And then I realize I'm in an apartment building, where multiple families live out their lives, including the ones next door.

The walls are thin, and it must be her device sounding the tunes. *A little charm* to look forward to while living in such a crowded place.

It can't be helped. I'm stuck here, in the *city*, and humanity is a side effect I'll need to get re-accustomed to. Slowly, I tuck my phone into my pocket. Calling Matthew can wait.

I take a moment to survey the room before making mental notes on what I should buy and have delivered here. There's enough room for a chair, maybe a single table if I'm lucky, and I can make do with the countertop as my makeshift desk.

I'm making a mental list when a new sound infiltrates the music. It comes with a raspy, breathless edge. The current song ends, and between it and the next track, my ears focus on the broken, buzzing silence.

Curious, I take a step closer to the wall, cocking my head as I listen. The buzzing muffles in and out, as if being contained by something for a second before springing free. Faintly, a deep, low moan penetrates the

The woman from the elevator is *pleasuring* herself.

And the sounds from this *human* seem to be... doing something to me.

A tingling sensation travels across my thighs, making me clench in anticipation. My manhood is responsive, swelling beneath the fabric of my trousers. I glance down at it in disgust as I move away from the wall.

I attempt to remember all the details of my brief encounter with the woman, desperately searching for something in her persona that would suggest an otherworldly nature, but nothing stands out. She was petite, curvy, and wore her golden hair in loose waves around her head. Truly average, like most humans are.

I chalk up my erection to one thing; I haven't slept with anyone in a long time.

My last partner had been a meal, and her pleasure ended the moment she began. The shameful memory nearly melts my sexual excitement away, but then the woman behind the wall belts out another throaty cry.

It's only natural for my body to react when sex is shoved in my face.

Grunting in annoyance, I lean against the far wall and pop open the zipper on my pants. Of all the issues I'm dealing with, my pitiful show of frustration is something I can easily mend.

Refocusing my senses on the other side of the wall, I let the woman's moans enter my thoughts. The soft smack of her lips and the constant p

t's soft, her vibrator fill my mind as I take my cock into my hand. I'll be asha
and the this action later, but for now, giving into this meaningless release is
what I need.

deeper.

g for a

air.

ne.

up with

: of my



with the

I reveal

aceous, I spend most of the day in the bathroom.

rage, as The apartment's windows have thick blinds, but light seeps thro
cracks, and it makes me lethargic. Until I have blackout curtains in
far too I'm left with no choice but to shut myself into the only space
windows.

nt mine If I were somewhere else, invisible from the eyes of the Order, I w
ray, but mind falling into the coma-like state the sun cripples me to. It's the or
I can dream, after all.

. But here, with the Night Order stationed in the city's heart, I'd be
: button myself open to potential assassination.

: sexual So I'll sleep when I'm dead.

My sunlight induced grogginess washes away with the apprc
oman's twilight. I spend the last minutes of the day under the steaming spray
pulse of shower, letting the warmth of the water soak into my cold, dead sk

med of tepidity lingers as I fish an outfit from my too-light suitcase and put it on, exactly trapping the heat with my clothes. It won't do much, but for a few minutes I'll almost feel alive again.

I don't pay enough attention to the noise on the other side of the wall as if karma were to slap me, my neighbor opens her door at the same time I do. We both step outside, and when her feet hit the hallway carpet, she catches her scent, wafting it past my nose.

She smells of strawberry shampoo and freshly toasted bagels, and that's faintly familiar and exotic at the same time. Her blonde hair is waving against the back of her toffee colored jacket. She jiggles her keys as she pursing as she glances inside the bag looped over her arm.

She hasn't realized I'm here, too absorbed in her task. I think I'm shuffling past her without a word of acknowledgement, but that seems a little neighborly, and I might be locked in this location for a while. I'll try to appear normal to the humans. Nice and friendly, not serial-killer-ish. I'm installed, slightest.

without “Are there any good pizza places around here?” I ask in a relaxed tone, the words slipping effortlessly from my mouth.

couldn't The woman jumps in surprise, dropping her keys. Her gaze settles on me, and she quickly whips around, blonde tresses flowing through the air. She places her hand over her heart as her eyes rake me up and down in one leaving movement. “Holy shit. I didn't hear you come out.”

I smile, hoping my features look more friendly than terrifying. “I'm not here, let me.” I step forward, bending to grab her fallen keys. When I'm inches from her body, feeling the heat of her blood as it courses through her veins. I hold the keys out with two fingers.

in. The She grabs them, careful not to touch my gloved hand. “Thanks.” He

it it on, eyes focus on my face, their sheen glittering beneath the overhead f
minutes, “Um, I’m sorry. What?”

“Pizza.” I grin again, but this time it comes naturally. “I’ve he
all, and special in this city. Are there any suitable spots nearby?”

time I The girl takes a step backward, pulling her bag over her shoulder. N
breeze I have time to pay attention, I *do* see something strange in this hum.

isn’t wild like a wolf or deadly like a cold-blooded vampire, but she’s
aroma like the sun. The curly edges of her golden hair, freshly dried, comp
damp, this quality. Tiny freckles cascade in a line over her face, starting fr
ys, lips cheek and traveling over her nose to the other. Her lips are full, givin
weight to every word she speaks.

about She licks them now, drawing my eyes downward. “I think there’s a
s... un-few blocks away, but I’m not sure.” She shrugs, half smiling. “I’ve a
need to only lived here for a couple of years.”

in the My brows knit together. “But you like pizza, yes?”

The pink glow of blood blossoms over her cheeks. “Yep. The store-
nanner, kind is good too, though.”

I laugh, incredulous. “Better than the acclaimed New York style?”
on me, Her cheeks burn brighter, and she turns, starting down the hallway
air. She the doorman can give you a better recommendation.”

quick It’s clear that I’ve uttered the wrong words. Maybe she hasn’t been
restaurant near here because she can’t afford it. That would make sense

n sorry, said she’s lived in this city for two years, and judging from her a
I rise, couldn’t be more than her early twenties- she’s probably been strugg

hrough make ends meet. New York isn’t a cheap place. I’m not even sure how
rent is for this building, but it’s definitely a lot higher than the proper

or green its outskirts.

ixtures. After a moment, I fall into line with her, both of us making our way
elevator. As we walk, I glance at her legs. They're covered by black
ard it's something that goes along with the plain colored uniform she's wearing
shoes, a pair of red Converse's, clash with the black skirt and white
ow that up, but I like the look. It suits her.

an. She "I'm Samuel, by the way."

bright, Her chin tilts upward as she side-eyes me. I don't miss how her lip
ment upward for a fraction of a second.

om one "Jane," she replies.

ing more *Jane*. Such a common name. I'd figure her a Naomi, or a Lily,
Something unique to match her enthralling allure.

place a "Where are you from, Jane?" I glance down at my watch. Rune w
actually speak with me in twenty minutes. I have enough time to drag c
conversation, at least until we make it to the lobby doors.

She makes a quiet humming noise in the back of her throat. "C
-bought know, around." Her shoes scuff the against carpet with every step she
making more racket than necessary.

"If I had to guess, I'd say you were from somewhere south c
r. "I bet Tennessee, perhaps? Or Kentucky, maybe."

Her chin juts as she glances at me, eyes sharp. "Why would yo
n to the that?"

se. She I keep the humor from my eyes as I answer with the best southern a
ge- she can muster. "You sound like a southern bell, my darling."

gling to Her features morph into a glare. "I sound nothing like that." She
v much careful to mask her accent as she replies. "Besides, you're wrong. I'
rties on North Carolina."

"I was close."

y to the She stops in front of the elevator and jabs the button, her spin
tights, “What about you? Why is a guy wearing a Rolex moving into this c
ng. Herbuilding?”

button- The elevator pings as it rises past each floor, creeping upwa
torturously slow pace. “This building isn’t terrible,” I lie.

She snickers. “Right.”

o twists I gesture for her to go in first, and she steps into the elevator withou
I take my place behind her, pressing the button for the ground flo
doors close softly, and we begin our descent.

maybe. There’s silence as we lower, the elevator pinging as each level pass
loosen the collar of my white polo. “I’m here temporarily,” I finally re

wants to She glances at me from the corner of her eye. “Oh,” is all she says.

out this The door opens, and again, I display chivalry by gesturing for her
first. I watch her hips sway all the way out of the building, deciding to
Oh, youmy obvious lapse of sanity for the time being.

e takes, Human or not, this woman is... *interesting*.

of here.

u think

accent I

’s extra

m from



e rigid. Rune's building rises from the ashes of an industrial wasteland, seem
rummy of place amongst its smoggy backdrop. Concrete steps rise from the sidewalk
leading to the guarded front doors.

rd at a Two vampires, henchmen, hover near the entrance, both staring stoic
my direction.

I climb the stairs two at a time, jogging at an acceptable speed
t delay. human that may be watching.

or. The The men let me enter without question. No doubt they both remember
outrage at yesterday's rude greeting. I smile at them as I pass.

es by. I Inside, the lobby is spotless. The room is adorned with white tile
ply. tables set with red orchids. On the far side of the space, I see a
countertop, and behind it sits a brunette. Taking confident steps, I move
to exit way towards her. Her ruby red lipstick is smeared slightly, meshing with
ignore pale foundation she knows she doesn't need.

She ignores me for a moment as she jabs at her keyboard, fingers moving
so quick they blur. When her gaze finally rises, I smile. "Margret."

Her eye twitches, face remaining blank. "He's expecting you."

I pat the countertop. "It's always a pleasure, Marg."

She snarls then, her eyes flashing red, cutting into me like diamonds.
Margret, Sammy boy."

I'm not sure what holds the Viking legend to Rune's establishment.
I have a feeling this is a punishment deriving from the Night Order itself.
My pity showing in my features must infuriate her.

I smile at her as I leave, much like the henchmen stationed at the doors.
When I enter the elevator, I let my mask drop.

There's only one reason I'm here.

To lie, kill, and disappear as fast as possible.

ing out Rune suspects me. I'm certain of it.

lewalk, The Night Order doesn't call on people unless they discover power wish to exploit. Their power, *his* power, is the truth of my sins. For Rune cally inis personal.

I killed his brother. My Lord. A vampire blessed by the Order.

to any Rune either knows, or plans to wring the truth from my neck like a chicken's last cry.

ber my The Night Order's annual meeting, the one I've been summoned to isn't until next week. Rune has *insisted* I aid him in a few political ile, and until then. The only skill I have, and the only one he wants, is to hmarblekill.

ake my So I guess I've fallen back to my previous career path, at least for t with the being.

The elevator doors open to a long, white hallway devoid of décor moving just like Rune's soul. My footsteps echo as I approach the entrance at of the hall, and before I've made it halfway, the barrier creaks open.

Rune's office is a blast from the past; an old man's wet dream. Behind desk is a wall full of fine wines and dark whiskey, and beside them are ls. "It's of cigar boxes. The room's lighting is the only thing from this era, a blue hue cascading from built-in fixtures on the ceiling.

it, but I I stop at the threshold, pressing the door open with the push elf. The fingertips.

"Come, Samuel."

or. Rune's raspy voice echoes from beyond the door. I find him seated in an antique leather chair nestled in the room's corner. Today he is alone nothing but a lit cigar for company.

No women, no blood.

My throat burns, and I swallow, pushing down memories of the
er theytasted only yesterday. My feet beg to remain planted where they are
ne, thisforce them to move, approaching the empty seat across from my
collapse onto the velvet cushion, my aura emanating ease as I cross
over the other. “Are you ready to tell me why I’m here, Rune?”

a dying The aging man smiles, his blunted teeth stained with old blood. He
finger against his cigar, causing a flurry of ash to drop to the
attend, “There’s no beating around the bush with you, is there, Samuel?”

l issues I stare at him, my head cocking. “Not really. I’d rather get throu
unt andweek and return to my villa, but you already knew that.”

He scoffs. “Return to your villa? Why? I don’t understand what ho
he timethere. You used to be so...” He gestures with his cigar, swirling a s
smoke into the air. “So vicious. How could a mundane life of acting
or art;please your needs?”

the end I remain perfectly still, careful not to bunch my fists. “I’ve changed.

“Hmph.” he nods, taking a drawl of his tobacco. “You have. Barros
ind hismust have taken a real toll on you.” His eyes narrow, flashing red for
e stackssecond.

with its I loosen the tightness in my jaw. “A Lord’s death is always a blow t
ego. I was supposed to protect him.”

of my Rune’s lips tighten. His intelligent eyes search mine for any
deception.

After a moment, he relaxes into his chair, the mask of familiarity res
d in his“Nevermind that. I requested you for your skill set, not your p
ie, withdilemmas. There’s a newly turned vampire somewhere in the city, c
humans and leaving them in ditches. It’s causing a real pain in my a
need you to find him and give him this.” He leans to the right, pull

a girl I drawer of a side-table open. His hand disappears for a second
e, but I returning with an envelope. It's sealed with red wax, stamped with the
uncle. I Order's cheesy logo. Blood splatter with a bold X on top. "Make
one leg reads it. If he seems like the type to skip our generous invitation,
smiles, this time elongating his sharp, curved fangs. "Then ensure he
e taps a how impossible that will be."

ground. I take the invitation from him, turning it around in my hand. "You w
to hunt a vampire and intimidate him into attending the annual me
gh this This is child's play. Any other vampire, even the dumb bodyguards st
at the front doors, could hunt a newly turned fledgling. I expect
lds you assassination order, or the kidnapping of a vampiric leader's runaway,
tring of *this*.

human Rune grimaces. "This fledgling is flighty, like a mouse. Two of n
have come back empty-handed, and the Order wants this done *now*." I
" toward the envelope. "So do it."

s' death I resign with a sigh, tucking the letter into my suit pocket. "Do you
a brief file on this *mouse*? A list of the body dumping areas he frequents?"

Rune tips his cigar toward me, grinning victoriously. "I'll have I
o one's email you the information in a few hours. Until then," He points
window, where the glowing cityscape hums with life. "enjoy the wor
hint of New York City."

suming.

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ss, so I

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before
e Night
sure he
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knows



want me
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The *wonders* of New York City include bar hopping drunkards and ladies of the night. No matter how intimidating my demeanor is, people stop me on the street, asking for change. Once a lady with a cast leg beckons me, politely asking for a dollar. If I hadn't left home with nothing but a credit card, I'd have given her money.

have a
Margret

As I travel closer to my apartment, seeking the comfort of solitude, the streets get denser. Humans mull down the sidewalks, passing so close they brush my shoulders. All of them smell like fresh blood and sweat. *I* smell them like strawberry shampoo and toasted bagels.

to the
iders of

She's infiltrated my mind again. Jane. A warm-bodied *human*. I consider ways to make up excuses for my earlier actions. 'She's my neighbor,' and 'she looks good' are frequent explanations for my growing interest in the girl.

I know how terrible I am for wondering, but still, I *wonder*. Why did she move from her hometown in North Carolina? Where is her family? What about her *excites* me? My brain stumbles its way into a corner, wondering around all the who's and what's of her existence.

I'm turning the corner of a busy street when my phone rings, the buzzing inside my pocket. My finger swipes the screen as I lift it to my ear. "What?"

"Is New York living up to your expectation, brother?" Francis' smile is laced with humor.

"Right," I snort. "It's a fucking wonderland. Tell Matthew my apartment is a piece of shit."

Francis's laughter crackles through the speaker. His voice distorts as he moves away from the phone. "Yo, Matt! Sam is pissed about the flat. He wanted something bigger." I hear Matthew snickering in the background.

"I don't care about the size. It's fucking empty. How am I supposed to live with my freedom without a mattress to soak up my tears?"

Francis chuckles again. "I'll line something up for you. What do you need?"

"A futon, blackout curtains, and a table." I think about my bombshelter and add, "Throw in a case of wine and crystal glasses."

"Oh, damn! The night life must be turning you into a classy motherfucker. Wine?" He pauses. "Wait, you aren't hosting women, are you?"

I hesitate. He thinks I've been asked to accept blood slaves from the streets. It's something they'd do. Something I'm glad they haven't done. "Nothing like that."

He clears his throat, the background noise on the other side of the phone suddenly quiet. "Have you fed?"

I stop mid-stride. A man grumbles as he weaves around me, his face pinched in anger.

I inhale deeply, burying my emotions deeper. "Yes."

he tone Both Francis and Matthew exclaim. “Shit.”

my ear. “Rune had a girl ready for me when I got to his office. I don’t think her, though.”

g voice “You’d know if you drank more often. You can’t get fucked up if you a tolerance.” Francis chides.

ment is “Seriously, Sam. A taste every few days. That’s all you need.”

My nostrils flare as I exhale. “Yeah, yeah. I know. It was easier to s as hefeedings out at home. Here, there are people everywhere. This whole t. I toldcity smells like food.” I kick a discarded cardboard cup out of m in thestomping down the sidewalk again.

“Then it should be easier. One alleyway feeding every few days. You used tosharp and the Order won’t be able to control you by blood temper Simple.”

do you My throat constricts. “Fucking alleyway feedings? How low do you am?”

ell of a Francis’ carefree voice cuts back into the conversation. “Beats fucked up in front of the enemy. There aren’t any free roaming deer fucker. York, Sam. You’ll have to deal with it.”

Deal with it. Right.

Order. My voice hardens. “Find someone to deliver my furniture.”

a. “No. “Already on it,” Matthew calls out in the background.

I press the red button on my phone screen, ending the call.

he line

; brows

Both Francis and Matthew exclaim. “Shit.”

“Rune had a girl ready for me when I got to his office. I don’t think I killed her, though.”

“You’d know if you drank more often. You can’t get fucked up if you have a tolerance.” Francis chides.

“Seriously, Sam. A taste every few days. That’s all you need.”

My nostrils flare as I exhale. “Yeah, yeah. I know. It was easier to space feedings out at home. Here, there are people everywhere. This whole fucking city smells like food.” I kick a discarded cardboard cup out of my path, stomping down the sidewalk again.

“Then it should be easier. One alleyway feeding every few days. You’ll be sharp and the Order won’t be able to control you by blood temptation. Simple.”

My throat constricts. “Fucking alleyway feedings? How low do you think I am?”

Francis’ carefree voice cuts back into the conversation. “Beats getting fucked up in front of the enemy. There aren’t any free roaming deer in New York, Sam. You’ll have to deal with it.”

Deal with it. Right.

My voice hardens. “Find someone to deliver my furniture.”

“Already on it,” Matthew calls out in the background.

I press the red button on my phone screen, ending the call.



Unknown Number: Ur gonna pay, bitch

I stare at the pixelated screen of my old government smartphone, repeating the words in my head. *Ur gonna pay, bitch.*

Wrong number? Distant enemy from high school? Or the stupid who publicly harassed me last night?

I'm leaning towards Joey, the self-righteous pig of a customer.

If I could go back in time and burn his ten-dollar tips, I would maybe. I used those tips to buy wine some nights, and I'd probably n those.

But still, how fucking bonkers do you have to be?

The world warns women of men like him. Guys who give only wh think they'll get something in return. As if my tips weren't *earned* damn good barista. My exceptional service alone brought in every penny he gave.

Yet, when he grabs my ass from over the counter, *I'm* the bitch.

The door dings with Stacy's late arrival. I pocket my phone, smilin gratefully. Her resting bitch face remains until after she's clocked

guzzled half her mocha latte, as usual.

“Slow night?” She finally asks.

We both scan the empty, but spotless, lobby. I’ve scrubbed the tables to near perfection, a telltale sign of the stress I’ve endured. Regulars, mostly.”

She clucks her tongue. “Maybe the morning rush won’t be so bad th
I smile. “Maybe not.”

As Stacy makes herself comfortable behind the counter, I head to th
office, removing my apron and grabbing my bag from the storage ar
eyes fall on the trash again, remembering the crumpled up note I fo
there earlier. My note, the one scribbled on a receipt after yesterday
encounter.

“Hey, Stacy?” I ask, breezing past her. “Did Henry say anything at
note I left last night? You know, about the customer we banned from
in?”

One of her eyebrows lifts. “Oh, yeah. He fumed up a storm. Sa
moving you to the second shift as soon as another employee is hire
interviewing someone this week.”

My chest loosens just a little, and I sigh, patting the counter. “Aw
Have fun today!”

She makes a face. “I’ll try.”

g at her
in and

corner
“Yeah.
en.”



he back
ea. My
ound in I walk home feeling lighter than I have in weeks. Henry’s plan
’s close transition me to second shift, and soon, I hope. It’ll be a higher
environment with all the business, but I wouldn’t mind the change i
out the Time would pass quicker, that’s for sure.

coming And Henry would be there for half of my shift. No one would me
me while the boss was in the back. Joey sure as hell wouldn’t show l
ys he’s again.

d. He’s The swinging of my shoelace breaks my thoughts, drawing my atten
my feet. With a huff, I move beneath the awning of a pawnshop and
resome my knees, tightening the strings. The streets are dim, and with noth
lamp posts to brighten my surroundings, it takes longer than usual to
the knot stuck at the base of my laces.

Before I’m finished tying the loops together, a tingle creeps up the
my neck, chilling me from the inside out.

The sensation of being watched isn’t one that’d normally al
especially in the city, but this is heavier, like eyes boring into the de
my soul. My hand shakes, causing the laces to tremble between my

Dread builds every second I remain in this position, unknowing who is leering at me.

I've freaked myself out like this before, thinking there are unseen eyes watching me as I walk from one room to another, so I force myself to stay calm as I finish tying my shoe. When I turn my head, I expect to see a phantom of empty space, brought on by my lack of sleep and rising sea level.

Instead, I see a figure cloaked in the shadows of early morning dawn. Dark clothing and a black balaclavas mask conceal his features. His eyes, dark and piercing, are set on me.

My neck snaps forward, turning away from the masked menace. I lurch forward, clutching my bag to my chest. *Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit.*

My steady stride slowly increases to a brisk jog, and then a full out sprint. My thick thighs rub together, causing my tights to swish with every step. By the time I reach my apartment building's entrance, I'm out of breath, my lungs screaming. I jab the key code to get inside and twist my head, searching the streets for my assailant.

But he's gone.

Maybe he hadn't even given chase. I was too frightened to look back. I loosen my grip on the bag now.

I step deeper into the building, my head bent to scan the streets through the open door. Suddenly, my body clashes with an impenetrable force.

"Whoa!" I ricochet backwards, head spinning so fast the world tilts. I haven't caught my breath, nor has my heart dislodged itself from my chest. Inhaling sharply, my eyes travel up the suit-clad figure until they reach a pair of solemn eyes focused on me.

"Are you alright?" His gloved hands reach up to my shoulders, steady and firm.

ould beme. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I don’t have time to realize I’ve fallen into the arms of my sexy ne
i forcesThe fear is too palpable. I grab his wrists, squeezing tightly. “There
to keepman in the streets wearing a mask.”

othing. Samuel stares at me, features unmoving. I think I glimpse c
g stressreflecting in his eyes, though it’s gone as quickly as it came. Stress is
me insane. Suddenly he looks behind me, through the window, h
1. flaring. “Did he approach you? Threaten you or display a weapon?”
is eyes, I lick my dry lips, panting. “No. But he was definitely watching me,
was wearing one of those scary robber masks.”

I creep His eyes linger on the window for a second longer, but slowly, they
to mine. A forced smile tugs on the corner of his lip, and he drops his
t sprint.“The streets are full of mentally ill, especially at this hour. Did he
/ step Iyou?”

breath, I inhale deeply, closing my eyes for a moment. “I don’t know. I didi
archingany footsteps.” *Not over the sound of my rushing heartbeat, anyway.*

“Ah.” Samuel grabs my sleeve with the edge of his fingers, tugg
away from the doors. “I’m sure the cops will get him, then. Yo
beforeprotection, right? I assume a lady wouldn’t walk the streets at night
something to keep her safe.”

ugh the He pulls me past the sleeping guard stationed inside the lobby and
the elevator. I’m shivering by the time he presses the lit button, I
s. I stillmyself with both arms. My teeth chatter as I reply. “I have a little k
throat.bottle of mace in my bag.” I hadn’t even thought about trying to ret
ached awhile running away. A lot of good it’s doing me.

“Wonderful.” Samuel says, gritting his teeth. His half-smile never
eadingmaking the conflicting reactions *very* confusing. I ignore him, focus

returning my heart-rate to a normal pace. *Inhale. Exhale.*

neighbor. The elevator doors open, and we both step inside. “I know it’s for

me was lame to ask, but I’m curious. Why the Hell are you walking the streets at

night?” His body is more rigid than it was before, like it’s barely con-

trived something he doesn’t want me to see. Definitely not the vibes you’d

making invite into your life, but right now, his presence is comforting. I’d

is nose answering his personal questions than running from a masked stranger

“Work.” I reply, leaning against the metal interior wall.

and he He mimics my pose, eyeing me with his arms crossed over his che-

you... work in a diner? A waffle house?”

y return I wrinkle my nose, head shaking. “No. I’m a barista.”

hands. He stares at me, unblinking. “And you work the night shift?”

follow “You’d be surprised how many people keep odd hours. Coffe-

demand when you work while the sun sleeps.”

n’t hear His lips edge upward. “I see.”

I rub my hands over my eyes, suddenly exhausted. “What about you

ing me the Hell are *you* walking around the city at night? You in the m-

u have something?” I smile, giggling inwardly at my joke.

without He doesn’t laugh.

Instead, he moves to the side, bumping me with his shoulder. My s-

toward does somersaults. “You’re lucky I was in the lobby to begin with.” He

rugging at me, brows threading with confusion. “Buy a gun. Keep it in your ba-

ey chain I scoff, side-stepping away from him to put extra space between

rieve it gun? No way.”

He purses his lips, dark, floppy hair skimming his forehead. “Are yo-

wavers, weapon?”

sing on I shrug. “Not when it comes to women protecting themselves. It’s j-

not okay with carrying a weapon of mass destruction.” I gulp. “I’d probably blow my foot off.”

alone at He sighs. “Get one anyway. Leave it unloaded. Hu- *Criminals* maintaining run at the first sight of shiny metal.”

normally The elevator doors shudder open, causing me to jump. Samuel is rather be unmoving, looking from the doors to me with humor in his dark eyes.

. He extends an arm. “Ladies first.”

I collect myself, straightening my spine as I exit the lift. “Thanks so much. Good sound advice, Samuel.”

He falls in step beside me. “Are you going to take it?”

An icy breeze kisses my cheek, causing me to shiver again. “Probably not. Like I said, I’m not really the gun wielding type. Besides, you were right. I’m not sure it was just a psycho aimlessly wandering the city.” My gut clenches if my intuition is telling me that no, *it wasn’t*.

What are the chances that I ban a customer for being unruly towards me? Why he returns the next night acting ruthless in front of another customer, a mafia message from an unknown ID calling me a bitch, and *then* I see a menacing figure leering at me on my way home? Fucking one in a million?

When I realize Samuel hasn’t said anything about my rejection of his suggestion, I glance at him. He’s keeping pace with me, but his expression is darker, clouded with inward turmoil.

g.” I tell myself I *don’t* need any more drama in my life. But... he looks at me. “Am I worried when I fell into his arms in the lobby.”

I stop in front of my door, watching as he trails lazily to his own threshold. Pulling my keys from my bag, I call over to him. “Thanks for helping me not freak out in the lobby.”

Just, *I’m* His head snaps over, the angry frown evaporating, replaced with a

robably grin. “No problem. Stay safe, Jane.”

He waits until I’m safely inside my apartment before he unlocks his
ormally

remains

for the



bly not.

ght. I’m

ches, as I force the tension out of my sore muscles by way of steam. A pip
stream of water cascades over my head, sliding down the length of m

rds me, I’m not sure how long I stand there, doing nothing but absorbing the v

I get a but eventually the water turns from hot to lukewarm. Within two minu
masked body is scrubbed and my hair is washed.

I step onto my cushioned bath mat, wrap one towel around my he
of his another around the width of my body, and leave the bathroom.

yes are After checking that my blinds are indeed closed, I let my towel fal
ground and allow my body to air dry. One perk to living alone is the f

seemed to wear my birthday suit whenever I feel like it. And tonight is one c
nights.

reshold. It’s weird, but being naked and locked inside of my home calms i

ng with like my brain finally accepts the fact that we’re *safe*. Being exposed
there’s no one around but myself and my thoughts.

i casual

The sun is out fully, creeping into my room through the blinds and door. red curtains that were *supposed* to be blackout. However, the filter turns my apartment pink, and I can vibe with that sort of ambience.

I snack on popcorn and two bottles of water, trying to soothe my fulfillment. Full belly. Completely hydrated. Still, satisfaction evades soon as I close my eyes, the text flashes behind my lids. *Ur gonna pay*

Pay what? My rent? I've done that already. Taxes? Do that on payroll. I'm sure as Hell not going to pay for doing my job and expect customers to behave.

I sigh and roll over. My laptop is open beside me, playing the Lo-Fi fall asleep to every day.

Closing my eyes again, I try to force my mind to blank.

This time, I don't see the text. I see *him*. Samuel, my very hot and p
y body. criminal neighbor. He's standing beside me in the elevator, pressing
varmt
me with his shoulder like he did earlier. Only this time, he comple
tes, my
shove by stepping in front of me, caging me against the wall with both

My breathing increases, and I let one hand trail over my breast
ad and
lowering it between my legs.

Samuel, chiseled jaw locked as he presses his sharp nose against
I to the
Samuel's gloved hands caressing my cheeks, cupping my neck, traili
reedom
my hard nipples.

I moan, open my eyes, and fling my bedside table's drawer open. I
vibrator tightly and close my eyes, imagining all the different thin
ne. It's
dream Samuel will do to me.

means

The sun is out fully, creeping into my room through the blinds and shitty red curtains that were *supposed* to be blackout. However, the filtered light turns my apartment pink, and I can vibe with that sort of ambience.

I snack on popcorn and two bottles of water, trying to soothe myself to fulfillment. Full belly. Completely hydrated. Still, satisfaction evades me. As soon as I close my eyes, the text flashes behind my lids. *Ur gonna pay, bitch.*

Pay what? My rent? I've done that already. Taxes? Do that on every payroll. I'm sure as Hell not going to pay for doing my job and expecting my customers to behave.

I sigh and roll over. My laptop is open beside me, playing the Lo-Fi tunes I fall asleep to every day.

Closing my eyes again, I try to force my mind to blank.

This time, I don't see the text. I see *him*. Samuel, my very hot and possibly criminal neighbor. He's standing beside me in the elevator, pressing against me with his shoulder like he did earlier. Only this time, he completes the shove by stepping in front of me, caging me against the wall with both arms.

My breathing increases, and I let one hand trail over my breast before lowering it between my legs.

Samuel, chiseled jaw locked as he presses his sharp nose against mine. Samuel's gloved hands caressing my cheeks, cupping my neck, trailing over my hard nipples.

I moan, open my eyes, and fling my bedside table's drawer open. I grip my vibrator tightly and close my eyes, imagining all the different things that dream Samuel will do to me.



I'm sitting inside the bathtub, fully clothed and far from the sunlit area, when the first of her moans seep through the wall.

My cock hardens as soon as I hear the throaty sound, lengthen member beneath the tight denim of my designer jeans. I squeeze it, try to force the reaction away with sheer strength, but it does nothing to satisfy my desires.

I growl, low and deep in my chest. *What fucking desires?* Jane is a lustful Food. If I were to take these lustful thoughts next door, my pleasure would end in her death. There's no doubt in my mind.

Maybe if I weren't so deprived, so *entranced* by the warmth of the cum liquid pumping through her veins, it'd be different. But as of now, I have no control.

The human, Jane, would break me, and then I'd break her.

I ignore her sweetly low hums of satisfaction for a long time, until the height of her crescendo of pleas, she whispers *my name*.

"*Samuel,*" she begs.

Samuel.

How many other Samuel's must she know? Five? Ten? Surely she
one of them, and not me, the monster who's peeping on her through
wall.

My head thuds against the tile as I lean backward, closing my eye
cock is dangerously ignited now, spurred on by her acknowledgement
Samuel.

Groaning, I turn the water spigot with my foot, allowing the shower
rain down on me fully clothed. The noise drowns out whatever else
next door whispers, and for that, I'm grateful.

One more week in this city, and I'm gone.

t living

ing my

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top my

human.

ould

rimson

, I lack

l at the

The furniture arrives sometime mid-day. I left the door unlocked, so w
delivery company calls my cell, I instruct them to enter and
everything.

Before the sun fully rose, I left a handwritten note on the island c
asking them to *please* install the curtains before leaving. Inside the en
was a hefty tip, ensuring their cooperation.



means Luckily, none of them try to enter the bathroom. I locked the door, a solidcase.

When they leave, I get my first taste of unabridged freedom.

es. My *Darkness*.

of me. Matthew bought the highest quality blackout curtains, preventing a sliver of light from entering my living quarters. I step into the open hallway inhaling the scent of freshly manufactured fabrics and cedar wood.

the girl As always, my brothers have spoiled me.

In the center of my room, there is a medium-sized coffee table with a wood surface. Against the wall opposite it stands a futon, its cushions covered with protective plastic wrap. On top of the table is a single shopping bag, its contents overflowing.

Red wine and a set of crystal glasses.

I change into the last remaining suit I packed and wait until the first rays of twilight.

Jane's alarm clock goes off, but I have a feeling she's only snoozing because her apartment goes radio silent right after.

Good.

I tuck in my white polo, shove on my gloves, and exit my room before she has a chance to conveniently bump into me again. It isn't right for me to establish a friendly relationship with her, no matter how neighborly it may seem. I can't risk knowing Jane, not ever.

counter,

envelope

, just in

even a
1 room,



a shiny

on still Marcus Lee Godwin.

opping That's my target's name. At least it was when he was human. I
could go by Red Eyes, or Cold One. Who fucking knows?

I have his address, too, which has been inactive for the last six
st signs lining up with the time-line of bodies found by the NYPD. Our
Marcus has been busy since discovering his long-lasting immo
ozed it, Twenty-three corpses, and those are the ones *found*. Others will sure
up given enough time.

I dodge my way through the crowded streets and carefully step
fore she mounds of trash. It's Friday night, and the city is packed with humans
me to bars and stores, their breath thick with the smell of alcohol. This par
d seem. city is dirtier, darker, and less overseen by officials. It's the perfect
grounds for a newly changed vampire.

At first glance, the intel I received appeared useless. The Night
men searched Marcus' last known residence, along with his previous p
employment. They even interrogated his best friends, to no avail. T

was an average joe. He paid his bills, frequented the pub near his apartment and sent his estranged ex-wife child support every month.

The typed report clarified that his ex hadn't heard from him in either.

But... There's one lead the others hadn't explored.

Marcus's friends said he owned a dog named Rocket. The pup had been missing since his disappearance, but his friends were adamant he loved the animal. It's easy to assume he'd eaten the pup and tossed his discarded corpse wasn't discovered in his apartment.

On a hunch, I scoured his credit card expenses for the last six months. Now he *Rascal Puppies of NYC, INC.*

A quick Google search and a ten-minute walk later, I stand in front of a dog boarding company's building. The three story structure shows signs of age with discolored, chipped bricks and mismatched windows. The door is the most worn but dirty paw prints are sprinkled on the bottom half, adding to the company's brand.

Concrete steps rise to the front door, and as I approach, canines howl around deep inside the belly of the establishment. Their high-pitched cries leave through the air, blocking out everything else. I strain to listen through the chaos, and soon I pinpoint one distinct heartbeat inside, pumping slowly as I hunt the animals.

So *someone* is home.

Attached to the door handle is a sign reading 'Temporarily closed due to family emergency'. This is a family run organization, then. My jaw clenches as I ring the doorbell, expecting to repeat the action a few more times if anyone answers.

But, to my surprise, the door swings open before my finger has even

partment, the buzzer.

A middle-aged woman, her graying hair pulled into a lopsided ponytail, stands behind the screen door. She smiles at me, and the moment she does, a sickeningly heavy feeling settles in my gut. Her eyes are glazed over, her enlarged pupils sparkling. The grin plastered on her face is one of embarrassment as if she has just been tortured.

She tilts her head, supporting her weight by the doorframe with one hand, but a tiny twin bruise peeks from below her collared shirt. "Are you the friend?" she asks, voice dreamy.

I give her my most dazzling smile, hiding the hatred building in my chest. "Of course, my dear."

She nods her head, giggling as she shoves the screened door open. She wobbles, unsteady on her feet. "The man is very nice. He took me away."

I swallow the useless emotion threatening to surface. "Is your husband here?"

She nods, her eyes wide. "My husband! Oh, Luis is such a doll. They put him in the basement!" She steps aside, holding the wall for support, and beckons me down the hallway, beckoning me further inside. I shut the door behind me, locking it just in case.

"And when was the last time you saw Luis, Ma'am?"

She glances at me, the wrinkles between her eyes bunching. Her mouth twists in astonishment, a sly smile escaping her parted lips. "I can remember, actually."

I nod my head in understanding, taking her by the upper arm. I listen intently, but below the floor, no matter how hard I strain, I hear no other heartbeat. Instead, my heightened senses catch another noise.

Scuffling overhead.

onytail, I let go of the woman's arm, turning her toward me gently. Lea does, a close, I point toward the ceiling. "Is the man upstairs?" I whisper. Her, her She nods her head, eyes flashing wide. Thankfully, her response is euphoric whisper. "The attic."

Dogs still hoot and holler, hopefully giving me the advantage. With one arm. proper knowledge, hearing a specific sound over the noise of *everything*. A man's be a hard skill to master.

I leave the woman in the hall, sidestepping her to ascend a set of creaking wooden stairs. I climb the creaking boards three at a time, moving swiftly.

As I approach the aged door at the peak of the stairs, I slow to a wide pace and listen. I can make out the faint sound of shuffling feet. I can definitely hear something inside, and it's *large*.

In one swift motion, I push the door open, its rusted hinges screeching louder than the animals downstairs.

In spite of the clamor, I spot the creature in action.

A pitiful excuse for a vampire, a total *fiend*, bows over the corpse of a young woman. The tanned girl lies motionless, her limbs twisted in unrecognizable behindangles. Her black leather skirt hangs around her waist in pieces, completely shredded, and her throat-

Her throat is no longer there. It's been *eaten*.

My hands clench tightly as I meet his surprised gaze. He leaps to his feet, knees bent and fingers clawed.

I shake my head, closing the attic door as I step into his forbidden lair. It would be a shame if the poor woman downstairs witnessed what's about to happen, regardless of whether or not she'd remember it. "Marcus, Marcus, Marcus!" I smile at him. It's the same smile I gave Rune's guards; the same

gave Margret. Only this time, the expression is layered, deepened by
ning in hot fury raging beneath my skin.

He spits, leaving a puddle of blood on the hardwood. "I don't know
another the fuck you are," he says, voice distorted with anger. "But you have
now."

Without the I loosen my gloves, pulling the first one off by the fingertip. "I'm
ing can Marcus, but you've been misinformed. If anyone is dying tonight, I guarantee
it'll be you." His face screws, causing his bald head to wrinkle. He opens his
rickety mouth to speak, but I stop him, holding up a finger. "But-" I remain silent
ftly. remaining glove, tucking it into my jacket pocket. "I'm supposed to keep you
snail's alive. Your choice."

There's He leaps toward me, my warning falling on deaf ears. To be honest,
betting on him to make this mistake. The pressure of being trapped in this
eaming city, paired with my misguided feeding and the urge to fuck my
neighbor- well, it's all been a bit *much*. Blowing off steam with death
Marcus is exactly what I need right now.

Use of a I calculate where to place my fists as he flies through the air. Before
naturally lands atop me, my arms shoot outward, catching him in his spleen and
completely with one fluid motion.

Marcus stumbles backward, bending to hug his stomach as he chokes on
air. While his back is lowered, I jab my elbow into his spine.

His feet, He crumples to the ground with a thud.

I crouch beside him, slapping one cheek until his squeezed eyes roll
air. It'd "Do you understand now, Marcus?" I bend closer, allowing my fingers to
happen, descend. "*You aren't the only apex predator in the room.*"

Marcus..." The terror in his face does nothing to lighten my rage, especially not
smile. My peripheral is consumed by the growing pool of blood oozing from

the redcorpse lying nearby. I wrap a single hand around Marcus' throat, squ
until his eyes bulge, their whites pooling with crimson liquid. "You'
ow whovery," I lift his head, slamming it onto the wooden board below. "care
e to dierepeat the action again.

And again.

I'm sorry, And again.

arrantee Soon, Marcus is crying blood, and his head is seeping.

ens his I shove myself to my feet, reaching into my suit to retrieve the
ove myOrder's invitation.

ep you "If you want to survive, then you need to do three simple things." I

waving the sealed envelope in the air. "First, leave this home and
t, I wasreturn. Do not kill the remaining human resident. Since you *bit* I
l in thevenom will make her confused about what's happened. Fix her husband
humanit looks like an accident."

ear old Marcus coughs, spitting blood onto his chin.

I grin. "Great. Second, stop killing girls and leaving them where the
fore hecan find them. That's a *stupid* fucking mistake." I scowl at him, dropp
d throatininvitation. It glides to his chest, landing with a soft thud.

"And finally, make it to this meeting. If you don't go, you die.
okes onstory."

Marcus pushes up on his elbows, wheezing. "Who are you?"

I stare at him, letting the truth settle into my bones.

e-open. "A hunter."

angs to At this moment, it's like I never stopped being that version of myself

I simply buried him. Hoped and prayed he died once and for all.

ot when Turns out, he didn't.

om the *Fuck you, Rune.*

queezing Asshole knew exactly what he was doing.

ve been I turn to leave, but stop before I reach the door. “Oh, yeah, and I
/less.” into re-homing poor Rocket. You aren’t exactly fit to be his ca
anymore, agreed?”

And with that, I leave, not stopping to soothe the wandering
downstairs. Marcus will comply with my rules, and she’ll be fine.

Devastated, but fine.

e Night

I begin,

I never

ier, the

d up so

e police

ing the

End of

lf at all.

Asshole knew exactly what he was doing.

I turn to leave, but stop before I reach the door. “Oh, yeah, and I’d look into re-homing poor Rocket. You aren’t exactly fit to be his caretaker anymore, agreed?”

And with that, I leave, not stopping to soothe the wandering female downstairs. Marcus will comply with my rules, and she’ll be fine.

Devastated, but fine.



6

JANE

THREE DAYS LATER

I pour cold foam over a cold brew latte, dribbling a few drops of milk on the counter.

“Oh, I wanted the new chocolate cold foam.” A high-pitched voice sounds from behind the counter. Inwardly, I scream.

Outwardly, I smile up at the college aged customer and apologize. “I’m so sorry. I’ll make you another one.”

Her thin lips lift, the expression not reaching her eyes. She tosses her long, red hair over her shoulder, shrugging. “No biggie.”

Hmph. No biggie for her. I’m the one who has to redo this entire project. I get to work re-pouring her drink, frothing her chocolate cold foam, and layering it on top.

She leaves without shoving a single penny into the tip jar.

Ugh.

I check my phone once she’s gone, hoping to read a few chapters of my new e-book I bought. I’m at the part where the girl realizes her brother’s best friend is mega hot, and he might be into her. I slide my finger down the screen, pulling down my notifications bar.

And that's when I see it.

Another text from an Unknown ID.

My thumb trembles as I click the text, my free hand gripping the countertop with white knuckles.

Unknown ID: Pretty lil tits, baby. I'll be licking them soon.

I nearly gag, brows furrowing as I glare at the screen. What the fuck? Who says things like that? I scroll up, and sure enough, the number is the same one who told me I'd pay a few days ago.

My phone buzzes, and a shiver works its way over my spine, creeping over the my neck and turning my hairs straight up.

An image is loading.

It appears blurred at first, thanks to the shitty download speed of my phone. But soon, the colorful shapes define into people.

e. "Oh! It's me. Me and the woman who left minutes ago.

My eyes dart toward the glass shop windows, peering toward the street. I think the angled picture could have been taken. A streetlight illuminates the street, but there's an alleyway between two shops filled with shelves. Is he hiding there, watching me at this very moment?

I sprint towards the door, my urgency barely contained. Slamming the door with a little too much force, I grip the handle, quickly locking it with the back of my wrist.

Not even bothering to leave a note on the entrance, I shuffle to the back of the café, my phone gripped tightly to my chest. When I reach the bathroom, I rush inside, my breath coming out in ragged gasps.

Why?

I tap my phone, staring at the photo again.

There I am, plain as day, handing the college girl her latte. Leaning

the counter, a thin sliver of my cleavage shows. Fucking creeper. It is
fault that my shirt doesn't fit right. If I button the last button, I guaran
ing theboobs will snap the thread. Besides, nothing shows. Not ordinarily. I
my boss would sure as Hell gripe me out over it.

I tug at the white collar of my uniform, a fresh wave of insecurities
: actualIs my new stalker, most likely that slimy piece of shit Joey, going to ra
mber isWhy else would he send something like that? And truthfully, no ger
would have tried to feel me up when I handed them their beverage.
ping up Joey or not, this stranger wants to hurt me. He knows where I wo
pretty sure he's the masked menace from my encounter while I walke
too.

of my Typing like a madwoman, I Google 'how to get a restraining order'.

For the rest of the night, I sit here, researching and having inter
panic attacks. I don't reopen the store until ten minutes before Stacy
: spot If someone tattle-tells on me in some Yelp review later on, then what
es mostthe boss asks, I'll make sure he knows how bad the security at this
adows.fucking job is. Maybe I'll even demand a raise.

; into it

a twist

back of
room, I



; across

sn't myI splurge on an Uber once I clock out, lingering near the door with a fr
tee myhand until the car arrives. The driver is a woman, thank God, and
f it did,quiet jazz tune from her speaker as we travel. I tip her fifty percent of
price, despite not having the funds to spare. She was kind, bu
; rising.importantly, she just saved me from running the entire way home. P
ipe me?saved me from a few hysterical tears, as well.

tleman The lobby inside my apartment is silent, other than the occasio
snore from the watchman. I tip-toe around the gray-haired man as h
rk. I'mback in his chair, only quickening my pace once I'm a few yards away
l home, I jam the elevator button three times, bouncing on the balls of my fe
"Rough night?"

I spin, a surprised cry building in my throat. When the man's flawle
mediateappears, I push it back down.

arrives. Samuel.

ever. If I exhale, releasing my anxiety with the breath. "You have a bad l
; stupidsneaking up on people, you know."

He smiles down at me, teeth glinting. "I'd argue that it's you who
too easily."

I roll my eyes, facing the elevator doors as they slide open. Samuel
his hand on the small of my back as I enter, guiding me. An excited zi
from my stomach to my throat, but I force it from my thoughts. There
many emotions to unravel tonight, so this one will have to wait.

I lean against the metal wall, observing him. "So, how was your r
fine whiskey and money laundering?"

He knits his brow, staring at me quizzically. "I'm sorry. What?" H
tilts in this innocent, adorable way, dark hair flopping.

I laugh, and the action breaks away a chunk of the anxiety lingerin

appe in chest. “Joking.” I shrug. “You wouldn’t tell me your occupation when plays at the other night, so I figured you to be some kind of mobster criminal. I lift the gesture with my index finger at his suit, black gloves and all. “You about it most look the part.”

robably He stands a little straighter, tugging at the bottom of his black button-down shirt. “I’m... sophisticated. Classy,” he winks at me, causing the ritual soft butterflies to start all over again. “But not in the mob.”

ie leans I swallow, my throat tightening. When I reply, my voice is shaky. “... a third-shift banker, then?”

et. He mocks a grimace, his eyes alight. “Not the banking type, either.”

His infectious energy wraps around me, loosening more of my stress face creating a center of aloof calmness. I’m just about to quip back a suggestion of him being a male escort for wealthy cougars when the building’s doors shuddering open.

abit of Samuel shoves his hands in his pocket, an enamoring gaze flicking at the opening in a silent gesture for me to exit first.

startles Holy Hell, this man’s charm could make an angel fall to ruin.

I grip the straps of my bag tight as I walk through the doorway, my mind places quickening. You do not have time to flirt with the neighbor. You need to be running preparing for war against your stalker. Rehearsing the moment you are through the NYPD doors to get a restraining order. Not drooling at Samuel’s shoes.

ight of Samuel lines up with me as we walk. “Have you had any more trouble with wackos on the streets?” His tone is smooth. Guarded.

is head I lie. If I decide to flirt with him after this entire situation is settled, I don’t want to be the neighbor who had a stalker. I want to be the neighbor in my

I asked who has a wealth of wit and pretty curves. “Nope.” My gaze flicks
Plus,” I him. “Must have been a fluke, like you said.”

olutely His eyes narrow slightly. “I see. Bet you’re relieved, then.”

I nod my head eagerly. “Oh, yeah. Totally stoked.”

utton-up Totally stoked. Do people even say that anymore?

pple of He nods his head, jaw feathering. “Totally.” His tone is mocking.

Damnit. People *don’t* say that anymore.

‘You’re I stop in front of my faded welcome mat, snatching the keys fr
pocket on the side of my bag. Samuel continues to his door, stealing
toward me as he fishes his key from his pocket.

ess and I shove my key into the lock. “What?” I ask him, lips lifted in questi

ductive He smiles at me, already shaking his head, and oh God, what a smile

levator Giggling, yes, *giggling*, I stumble through my door, bidding him f
with a sappy goodbye.

toward Truly, I’m a lost cause.

If the sexy boy next door tries to woo me any harder, I’ll be sleepin
bed instead of mine.

y pulse I relock my door, drop my bag to the ground, and skip into the bat
d to be already loosening the tight bun from my hair.

u walk

ill over

le with

, then I

ighbor

toward



om the
glances

I wait until my shower is steaming before I hop beneath its spray. Tiredness and poor sleep have wreaked havoc on my muscles, but the battering from the water's force soothes the knots just a little.

I stand there, eyes closed and absorbed by the warmth, until I'm consciously swaying myself to sleep. With a sigh, I reach over to grab my phone mounted to the wall with my latest cool gadget; a waterproof phone with built in bluetooth speakers. I hit the home button, which lights up the screen, and swipe to the playlist app.

Instead, I see another message.

It's a media text.

Gulping, I click the image, watching as it slowly loads.

The photo is of me.

Inside my shower.

Eyes closed, and head tilted.

Nude.

He's inside my apartment.

The moment realization hits, a deep, dangerous chuckle cuts through the sound of the shower.

“Told you you’d pay. Didn’t I, little bitch?”

An outside force yanks aside my shower curtain.

The masked menace sneers at me, a gun cradled in his hand. The mask rises to his face, ripping the black fabric from his skin.

Joey smiles at me, his crooked teeth grit tight. “Aw, don’t cry yet. You’ve got to have some fun to get through.”

It’s only then that I become re-aware of myself. I cup one arm around my breasts, using my remaining hand to shield my privates. My eyes sting with heat. Am I crying? I must be.

He holds his gun high, pointing at my head as he flicks his wrist, getting close to me to force me to move. “Come on, butterfly. Let’s try out those *pretty wings*.”

He sneers. It’s a sickening sound.

He reaches for the gun holder on the wall, pulling it up the

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What on *Earth* am I doing?
Am I intentionally tormenting myself, or am I that depraved out of control? The latter must be true.

As I stand in front of my apartment, waiting for Jane to enter hers for the first time to know she's safe, I realize I'm feeling something I haven't felt in a long time. I just can't define what that *something* is.

Every day at dawn her moans haunt me, and every night, I imagine what she's doing while I'm... being someone who is *dangerous* for her. Jane seems so simple. She makes coffees and probably cleans the café she works in, but when she comes home, she's able to rest. Breathe. Dream.

Am I jealous of her humanity, then? Or... do I simply want to protect her?

Once I'm inside my room, I take off my shoes, preparing for the day to come. I'll be sitting here like a chunk of motionless stone until I start listening to whispers through the walls. Sighing, I toss my boots against the hardwood floor as a buzz hums from my jeans pocket.

Sliding the phone out, I answer. "Hello?"

“Lord Rune sends his gratitude.” Margret’s chipper voice spills from the speaker. “Three targets in three nights! Very impressive.”

I grunt. “Yeah, sure.” I tilt my head back, resting it on the top of the chair as I close my eyes. “Who’s next?”

Fingers fly over a keyboard in the background. “Oh! The Lord wants to explore the city for the next couple of days before the annual meeting. He’s said to have fun. There’re thousands of tourists to feed from. New York’s enormous.” Margret’s tone turns cold at the end.

My jaw hardens. “Oh, does he?” My tone remains light, despite the growing annoyance.

“Of course,” Margret croons. “Toodle-do!”

She ends the call before I can expose myself by biting her through the phone.

Rune wants me to explore. To *feed*. Have such a good time that I’m not going to curb my urges anymore. Then, at the Night Order meeting, he’ll find my hand by way of blood manipulation. ‘*You’ll sign this contract, won’t you, Samuel? Sign it and I’ll give you this pretty half-drunk blonde! You won’t regret it, right? Be my slave and you can have her.*’

I’ll not be held weak by my lack of control. If Rune wants to win, he’ll be defeated, he’ll have to use another tactic.

Humming with frustration, I cross the room to my half kitchen, open the cabinet to retrieve a bottle of wine. I had hoped to break the seal on a particular bottle once I invited my neighbor over, but that fantasy is beginning to look like more of a bad idea by the second.

I listen to the soft patter-patter of Jane’s shower as I pop the top off the lid to my lips. As the bitterly sweet liquid washes down my throat, I lean against the wall, sensing her from beyond the barrier.

She’s still a mystery to me.

om the Jane is gorgeous and sultry in the nerdy school-girl sort of way, but *only human*. Urges to fuck her would be a normal lapse in character. Wanting to protect her from the stranger who followed her home? Would she own a weapon so she could save herself from an attack? I push myself back because I want to touch her, but fear she'll crumble? It's unusual.

York is Even before changing into this monstrous version of myself, I was soft. Never vulnerable.

ite my Is that what I am now? Has she created yet another weakness? One he can manipulate if he discovers it?

The bottle's neck buckles, sending a hairline crack down its length. The line. I mutter, carrying the dripping wine to the sink.

unable The glass shatters against the metal drain, causing a loud clatter to reverberate through the room. Suddenly, the noise on the other side isn't you, wall shifts. Jane's shower is still running, but now... there are muffled sounds beneath the stream of water.

And two heartbeats, both accelerated.

see me I grip the edge of the sink, my fingers flexing the metal. Has she... with someone? Found a hookup to replace her nightly ritual of finishing herself while thinking of me? Because she moaned *my* name each time of this one else's. I knew it was true the moment a blush entered her cheeks at that following elevator encounter.

Closing my eyes, I listen deeper, pushing away the white noise of the door hitting the tile. Jane whimpers. But with pleasure, or fear? My brow wrinkles, I relax as I continue to eavesdrop.

"Drop your hands and get on your knees," the second human, rumbles, his voice labored.

it she's Jane whimpers again. Is she... crying?

ter, but *Fuck*.

Wishing My chest tightens to an impossible squeeze, immobilizing me.

Holdingbreathing. Stop thinking.

Not my "Please," she cries.

It's that word, *that pleading word of devastation*, that rips away
s neverounce of control I have. I don't forget what could happen if I take a
absorb it. Saving her means killing her later. Revealing myself mean
e Runebe a prisoner. Running means Rune will chase.

I take in these revelations and more, and not once does my resolve v
"Shit." Jane means *something*, and despite not knowing what the fuck it is,
I can't let her be harmed.

atter to I charge at the wall, ripping straight through the plywood and the th
e of theof insulation. Particles fly, floating through the air around me as I s
l voicesnew surroundings. This takes less than a second, but the moment
between hearing her plea and finding the coward who caused it fe
forever.

. paired I've exited into Jane's short hallway, directly in front of the closed
ngeringher bathroom. My fist closes around the doorknob, compressing it u
me. No molded by my palm. The lock snaps. The hinges flex, buckling as I j
fter ourdoor wide.

The next two seconds are longer than the first.

droplets I stand motionless, held captive by the sight in front of me.

wrinkles The steam from the shower fills the bathroom, while the spray of v
spilling onto the tiled floor. Also spread on the tile is Jane, curled
a *man*, shielding her body with her arms as she trembles. Her face is flushed,

wet with tears. Despite her terror, those green orbs of hers flick toward
Surprise passes through them first, but then... *relief*.

I stop “Who the-“

The vile, gut-less intruder turns his sights in my direction. *Good*
him, letting the weight of my fury bleed into my eyes.

Every His round face bleaches of color.

Reaction. I I form the ghost of a smile as my fangs slowly extend from their
as she'll place. The man has enough time to scream in terror, but he doesn't
sound. He realizes his inevitable death and stumbles back, fear palpable
waiver. eyes.

I know He knows it is too late.

The temptation to drag this out and savor it is overwhelming, but
in layer want to make Jane even more upset. I step in front of the man to shield
can my from his face as I bring my head close to his neck.

in time The adrenaline to consume him hardens my veins, but I suppress it
elements like before it has a chance to fully manifest. I don't have the luxury
succumbing to this need. Instead, I lunge forward and tear into his neck
door of one fluid motion.

until it's His blood pools into my mouth, but I refrain from swallowing. He
pull the his knees, grasping the gaping hole in his neck with his last remaining
strength. It does him no good. The artery is shredded, and a second lunge
goes completely limp, face planting into a puddle of his own blood
Jane's toilet.

water is My hands move of their own accord, shaking as I turn on Jane's faucet
up and spit *warm, lustrous* blood into the porcelain bowl of her sink, turning
cheek water pink as it spirals down the drain. I rinse my mouth, wiping my
with one finger.

ard me. If I consume even an ounce of this man's blood, I'll be too di
manage this mess. Jane *needs* me.

"Go to the main room, Jane." I intend to sound commanding, but m
. I faceshakes more than it should.

I glance at the top of her head through the mirror, but at this angle,
see her expression. Maybe it's better that way.

· hiding "What *are* you?" Her voice quivers.

make a I don't turn around. Not yet. "The other room, Jane." Gripping the s
e in hisstaring at the red of my irises, I force my tone to soften. "Please."

I hear her scuffle as she picks herself up from the floor. She swipes
from the rack as she passes me, and doesn't stop until she's out of the
I don't *Get yourself together, Samuel.*

ield her I stare at my reflection, watching my features until the tiny impac
blood wears off. A comforting heat spreads throughout my limbs, caus
quicklyillusion of life to creep into my cold bones. But the droplets I swa
cury ofaren't enough to give me a full buzz. I'm still coherent, capable enc
ck withdeal with this rationally.

I wiggle my fingers into my jean pockets, not bothered when my
falls toslicks the screen with blood as I speed dial Matthew.

naining *He's going to kill me.*

ater, he "Hey, motherfucker! What's up?"

od near I peer through the opening of the door, but Jane's room is dark
silhouetted against the slit of sunlight filtering in through her cu
aucet. Iwindow, sitting rigid atop her bed. I keep my voice low, hoping s
ing theaverage hearing for a human. "I fucked up, Matt. *Fucking code red.*
tongueyou to send a cleanup crew to my apartment. Someone you trust. They
a hole in my wall leading to the neighbors, and then they'll find a t

runk toneeds to disappear, and then *we all* need to disappear.” I speak so quick words blur together.

y voice The noise on the other end of the phone shuffles as Matthew repeats himself, probably walking away from whichever woman he’s looking at. I can’t “Whoa, back up. You killed your neighbor?”

I grit my teeth, glaring at my reflection so hard I fear Jane’s mirror will shatter. “No. I *saved* my neighbor. Saved her by killing a man *in front of* her.”

Matthew gulps. “O-okay, man. We can handle this. Kill the neighbor, take the bodies in your suitcases, and then we’ll get someone trustworthy to clean up the room. the wall. We all have a lapse of judgment sometimes, Sam. Don’t worry about yours-“

t of the “*You don’t understand.* “ My voice rises, and I pause, forcing myself to hush the level again. “I saved her and I’m *not* going to kill her. Don’t worry, I’m allowed I’m fucking up because I know. I knew it before I ripped through her. I’m sorry enough to Just,” I pause, rubbing my hand over my eyes. “Will you help me? I know it isn’t fair to ask, but-“

thumb Matthew cuts me off. “I’m in.”

My hand falls from my eyes. “You are?”

“Is she cute, at least? I mean, you’re going to die for her, so she better be worth it.”

She’s My lip ticks up just an inch. “I need someone to scrub this place clean. I’m certain Rune won’t miss me for a few days, so I’m leaving with her in the next twenty-four hours. Maybe we’ll get a head start. I’ll call you before I get to my next destination.”

’ll find Matthew murmurs in agreement. “Right. Buy a burner phone and a hoodie when you’re in public. The Order has goons everywhere, in

ckly the human watchers.” He shakes his head, jostling the phone as he clu
tongue. “Francis is going to be pissed he missed this conversat
ositions *human?*” He chuckles.

osting. Asshole.

“We’ll talk soon.”

ror will I end the call and return my phone to my pocket. When I e
front of bathroom, I flip the light switch off and reposition the door so t
leaning against the frame, blocking the grizzly scene from view.

or, seal Jane’s studio room is lit with red, twinkling lights, some strung aro
o repair wall, others glowing from various lamps. Most of the sunlight is tucke
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corners of the wall, dancing across the ceiling and over the untidy bec
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tell me The towel is at the foot of the bed, and she’s changed into a pair c
er wall. pajama pants and an oversized gray t-shirt. Her wet hair strings down
know it shoulders, turning the shirt a darker shade. Those deep, mossy eyes t
me, unyielding.

“*What are you?*” she whispers.

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Asshole.

“We’ll talk soon.”

I end the call and return my phone to my pocket. When I exit the bathroom, I flip the light switch off and reposition the door so that it’s leaning against the frame, blocking the grizzly scene from view.

Jane’s studio room is lit with red, twinkling lights, some strung around the wall, others glowing from various lamps. Most of the sunlight is tucked away behind the curtains, so the room is low and moody. Fake ivy climbs the corners of the wall, dancing across the ceiling and over the untidy bed where she sits. She’s shaking, arms clenched as she hugs her knees to her chest.

The towel is at the foot of the bed, and she’s changed into a pair of loose pajama pants and an oversized gray t-shirt. Her wet hair strings down to her shoulders, turning the shirt a darker shade. Those deep, mossy eyes train on me, unyielding.

“*What are you?*” she whispers.



Samuel fixes me with an intense stare, not responding for what feels like an eternity. I keep my eyes on him, counting the beats of my heart as they quicken.

Finally, he speaks. “Did you know him?” His head jerks back, gesturing to my destroyed bathroom door.

Another silent tear skates down my cheek, betraying the terror I’m trying to conceal. Yes. I nod my head.

Samuel takes a step closer, stopping when he’s in the center of my doorway. My eyes fixate on the way his shoes look against the mandala design rug. How dark and edgy those combat boots look, and how perfectly they contrast with the shag carpet is in comparison. *Strange.*

“Was he the man who followed you home the other night?” Samuel’s voice is soft, too, like the rug.

I nod again. “I got him banned from the coffee shop. He said it was my favorite.” My voice is dry, cracking.

Samuel’s sharp eyes scan my room, pausing over the few decorations I have as if they interest him. Can plants and tiny crocheted animals

someone like *him*? He continues to look away as he asks his next question.
“How did you get him banned, Jane?”

I squeeze my legs, hugging myself tightly. “He reached around the counter and touched my backside while I was pouring his drink.”

Samuel’s eyes dart toward mine, their irises flashing a dangerous color. “Then it sounds like he got himself banned.” He steps toward the counter in countertop beneath my mounted television, his finger skirting over the handle of a tea kettle I bought. A synthetic rose is stuck in the spout, the velvety petals in full bloom. “Do you know how he found your room?”

I shrug. “Desperate people have a way of *finding* things, I guess. I’ve been texting me. Don’t know how he got my number, either.”

He touches the edge of my framed vision board with his gloved hand before turning to me, staring openly. His scrutiny winds up my spine, alighting every molecule in my body. Still, I don’t look away. “Do you know where he worked?”

I shake my head.

Samuel nods again, face scrunched in thought. He retraces his steps, leaving me to sit with myself as he returns to the bathroom.

As soon as he’s out of sight, panic replaces the numb. What is he going to do to me? How will I explain this to the cops? Will I have to clean Samuel’s blood off my floor?

My throat threatens to close, and I gasp, clawing desperately at the fracturing pieces of my sanity. Joey almost *raped* me. He was going to take me up. Dismember me, probably. Would he have gotten away with it?

The worst part is knowing no one would miss me. No one would remember plain old Jane, other than my co-workers. Stacy would be surprised to see me.

question for a month or two, but then I'd vanish from her thoughts, too. I'd be
No one.

counter And somehow, Samuel saved me.

He ripped through my wall to keep me alive. His fangs- *fangs*
crimson through Joey's neck before Joey's knife could tear through me.

he built Samuel didn't answer my question because he knows I already h
an old answer.

maroon He's a vampire.

A dark shadow, Samuel, returns from the bathroom with something
He washes. A leather wallet with the letter J engraved into the bottom corner

Samuel flicks it open, pulling cards out and tossing them to my fl
finger he had your cell phone number, then he probably had access to your
spine, Does the coffee shop you work in have Wi-Fi?"

u know I nod my head, eyes wide.

He casts a sideways glance over to me as he takes out more ca
reaches into the spacious money pocket and retrieves a paper busines
steps, "Ah, our friend owned a phone repair shop. Says here they're expert
field of spyware removal." Samuel leans toward me, extending his
going to offer me the card.

Joey's I take it.

Joey's Smart Phone Repair. Buggy? Slow? We'll give it a go. #1
at the for malware and spyware removal.

o carve "Do you pay your bills with your phone? Or get deliveries?"

I return the card to him. "Yeah, of course."

would Samuel's eyes darken. "He probably got access to your phone wh
hocked were on the internet at work. I've seen it happen before."

I dig my toes into the mattress beneath my comforter. "It doesn't

nothing anyway. How did you know he was here?"

His sable, inky hair falls over his forehead, framing the beautiful dark of his eyes. Slowly, he steps closer. "I heard you crying."

My chest squeezes. I hadn't been loud; I know that. In the moment so fucking scared my voice was barely audible as I pleaded with my bunch the fabric of my pajamas in one hand, clenching my fist around material. "You *heard* me?"

He moves closer, the intensity of his gaze locking onto me with a glint in his tenderness. "Yes."

My ears pound. "What else have you heard?"

His eyes sparkle, and his lips lift. The mischievous glint in his gaze is more than his words. "I'm normally too busy to listen. Tonight you're lucky."

"And you can do that because you're a... vampire?" The word gets stuck in my throat.

His head cocks, nodding once.

Vampires are real.

"What else can you do?"

He peers at me for a moment longer before taking a step back, defining his eyes dance over my room again, but this time they're measuring in town you have any boxes? A few suitcases, perhaps?"

"Why?"

He crouches, glancing under my bed. After seeing the only three of his own, he pulls them out. One is an oversized duffle bag, for if I ever spill my night somewhere other than here. The other two are bookbags, large for my laptop and anything else I'd need during a day trip. "Because matter, says, hands assessing the bags. "We're going on an extended holiday."

“I-I can’t leave. I have work.” I gawk at him, stomach fluttering.
arkness His brows arch. “Yes, and so do I. We’re both officially out of of
the foreseeable future.”

t, I was “I *can’t* do that.” My voice is firm. Assertive. It’s the first time it
Joey. I this fierce all day.

und the Samuel glowers at me, his hard mask returning. “You *will* do th
scoffs, staring at me as if I’ve sprouted horns. “Are you understanding

gentle just happened, Jane? I broke into your apartment. *Killed* a man in t
you. *Showed you my fangs.*” His eyes glint crimson, glowing in the di

“There are people here who aren’t like me. Hell, *I’m* not supposed to
reveal this. If I leave you here, alive and aware of who I am, you’ll be hun
u were killed. They’ll show neither of us mercy.” His voice doesn’t rise
normal, but even so, I flinch.

lodged He stands, not hesitating to close the space between us. His lean, m
body hovers over the bed, face dropping until it’s inches away from

“So, you’re leaving with me, Jane. Understand?”

Breathless, I nod.

lecting.

ig. “Do

bags I

end the

enough

ise,” he



Samuel unravels my life one drawer at a time.

I don't own much. Ten complete outfits, a television, a laptop, a desk, a few art prints on the wall, some greenery. Cutesy things that make me feel better. I've been happy when I'm here, alone and safe in my corner of the city.

Samuel tears everything I've built down within an hour, pouring all of it into boxes he found inside his apartment.

I've glanced through the hole into his lair once, but his lights are off. It should be sunlight coming in through the windows, but there isn't. He covers his with blackout curtains, too.

Night shift and all.

"Do vampires burn up in the sun?"

Samuel goes motionless.

We haven't spoken since he told me we were leaving. I haven't helped pack my things, either. Instead, I've remained here, curled atop my bed, watching his movements. I thought about jumping in to help him organize his book collection, but decided against it. Being almost murdered before I even know if monsters are real has earned me a much deserved rest.

He turns to me, his nose wrinkled. "No."

"Then why are your windows covered?"

He sighs, hand fisted around one of my cardigans. After shoving it into a box, he answers. "The sun makes me sleepy. *Very* sleepy. If I had the windows, I can stay aware of my surroundings."

I pull my comforter up to my chin, frowning. "Sleepy? That's all?"

His eyes slide over to meet mine, expression chiding. "It's debilitating. If I let the sun shine through, I'd be in a coma right now."

"Then why aren't you asleep? You don't like to rest?"

He shrugs. "Don't need to. My business in the city is..." He glances

again, eyes darkening. “Complicated. I’d rather not leave myself vul-
nerable for too long. Besides,” He grabs another handful of my clothing from
my dresser, shoving it into the half-full box. “If I *had* been slumbering, you
would be dead.”

I shiver beneath the blanket and curl tighter around myself. I’d be
glad to die.

There. Joey’s sick features flash behind my eyes; the evil simmering in his
eyes must be both raging with fury and wild with excitement.

Get on your knees.

I knew what was coming next. His fingers were on his belt buckle.
Samuel smashed in the door.

“Don’t.”

I peer over the edge of the blanket at Samuel. His knuckles are
white as he grips the corner of the box with so much force the cardboard is
size of paper thin. He scans my face, his jaw locked. “Whatever is eating you
isn’t finding it. The man is dead. You’re unharmed.”

Right. Unharmed.

“Why’d you wash his blood out of your mouth?”

Vampires drink blood, right? They feed from people like Joey. Let
me know if you did. Did Joey have a sickness that made his life force taste bitter? Would
you cover it up?

Samuel drops the box with a thud, turning toward me. After a moment
of hesitation, he crosses the room, stopping at the foot of my bed. His
eyes are on me. He shifts the mattress as he sits.

I push the blankets away from my face, leaning up on my elbows.

“Anyone else would have drunk him dry. I used to be an... *over-con-*
sumer. My... *brothers* helped me cut back, but now having a... *casual* con-

nerable harder. The blood makes me a little slow and fuzzy. I'm work
inside a balancing the two demons so I can return to normal, but it hasn't ha
ou'd beyet." He lowers his head, eyes wide and honest. "Does that make s
you, Jane?"

e more I remember the shining scarlet in his eyes when he turned tow
mirror, face panicked.

is gaze, Finally, I incline my chin in answer. "Your brothers sound lik
people."

His face remains stoic for a moment longer before cracking. He p
e when hand on his chest as he cackles, laughter ringing out. "Good people?
Jane. The world you've woken up in is devoid of such a thing."

I shake my head, lips pressed together. "No. You're good. You save
white, His laughter tapers out, one of his brows arching. "I think that ma
flattens, selfish, Jane. Not good."

1, don't I sit up further, lips turning down. "What does that mean? Ho
saving someone make you selfish?"

He sighs and falls backward, lacing his hands behind his head. "E
you're human, and showing myself to you is forbidden? Because not
like me. you means someone else will, and they'll make it slow and excruc
l I taste My stomach knots itself as Samuel's chin jerks downward, hi
narrowing. "Or because keeping you alive means I'm starting a war v
nent of elites, and my brothers could be destroyed?"

weight The knot tightens, wrapping around my chest. "Then you should l
him kill me."

He nods his head, and my heart flutters. "Yeah, probably should ha
1sumer. shrugs. "But I didn't. I won't."

lrink is I jerk my chin from side to side, eyes slitting. "Why?"

ing on Slowly, he rises, his gaze alight with a strange sort of... excitement
ppened“That’s what we’re going to find out together, Jane. Now, get out of here
ense to pack your bags. We leave at sundown.”

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e good

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Hardly,

d me.”

kes me

I don’t bother putting on something different. My pajama bottoms aren’t
w does fancy, but if I tuck them into my boots, they work. My night shirt
covered by my favorite sweater. It’s made with a thick, warm cotton,
because front has line art of a raccoon eating from a dumpster etched on it. If
: killing thinks any differently about me after seeing my eccentric outfit, he
ating?”say anything.

is eyes I hadn’t unpacked my work bag, so I cram the rest of my most
with the objects into it. My laptop. Journal. Sticker covered Kindle. My makeup

By the time I’m finished, it’s loaded twice its normal capacity.

have let Samuel’s stacking my remaining belongings against one wall, ready
movers he claims are coming once we vacate the area. I pull my strap
ve.” He my shoulder, staring down at the box near my feet. “Are you sure
will be okay?”



ement? He stands, one hand resting against the man-sized hole in the wall. He looks at the mess and brother called someone to come fix the mess. All of it, including removing every trace of your residency from this room.”

He doesn't mention the bigger mess these miracle workers will have to contend with. The body.

I peer into Samuel's apartment, more curious than frightened by the void-like space. He takes a step back, acknowledging my assessment. He can come inside. I haven't had time to make it feel like home, but—

I stride into the living room, stepping over a pile of crumbled dry food on the floor. Samuel's apartment is bare, true, but it's also very telling character. Everything is dark, but not in the moody way my room is. There's still light in there, at least. Here it is... heavy with the cloak of shadow.

It doesn't feel scary. In fact, I kind of like being in this dim, very real reality. It feels safer, like I've been shoved into a hideaway, but sometimes disappearing feels a whole lot better than showing up.

and the I wonder if that's how Samuel feels, too.

Samuel The single room is set with an elegant black futon and a heavy wooden coffee table positioned in front of it. An unsoiled wine glass sits on top of the counter, seeming out of place. Other than these small additions, the room is valued bare. No crumpled receipts on the tabletop, no empty coffee mugs. If I had seen Samuel enter this apartment for the last week, I'd believe it to be a good bag.

“Wow, this is...” I do a quick twirl, trying to find a polite way to describe this place.

ps over “Not my home,” he finishes for me.

ry stuff Samuel is leaning against the wall near the hole, watching me. He seems to reflect in the darkness, but I can't be too sure. He beckons me with one hand. “Come on. The sun is going down. Time to leave.”

ll. “My I sigh, looking around for any shred of information on *who* Samuel moving plain space reveals nothing. It’s just a husk. A façade.

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I sigh, looking around for any shred of information on *who* Samuel is. The plain space reveals nothing. It's just a husk. A façade.



Jane isn't herself. It's to be expected, after everything she's gone through. Even she's still going through. I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop, for her to scream and wield a stake toward my heart.

Instead, she's wandering the darkness of my room, looking for something she'll never find. Her face is paler than usual, withdrawn.

The sunshine will return to her eyes soon. I'll make sure of it.

She reenters the hole in the wall, returning to her apartment.

"Stay here for ten minutes and then join me in the lobby." I keep my eyes locked on her face, studying it for any sign that her panic is setting in.

She only stares up at me, face set with a fierce determination. "Why?"

"Because I need cash, and I don't want your face anywhere near the ATM's security camera."

Rune will begin searching for me when I don't appear at the Night City yearly assembly, and if I'm lucky, Jane will be off his radar. Her dec-

leave New York will be seen as a mere coincidence, just another person who decided that city life wasn't for them.

Jane nods, silently processing. She grips the strap of her bag and turns, crossing the room before plopping herself onto her bare mattress.

I glance at the broken bathroom door still resting against its frame. "Can you do me a favor?" I mutter, voice low.

"What?" Her tone is flat.

"Don't go back into the bathroom. You shouldn't have to see that again." She sighs, her shoulders falling dramatically. "I know."

I take one last look at her fluffed locks and the blush of life on her cheeks before I depart, returning to my brief abode. The only thing I need is my overnight bag, which was never unpacked. I grab it, pat my pants pocket to ensure my wallet is still there, and slip my keys out.

I exit my apartment, locking the doors for the last time.

After a quick glance down the hallway, I run.

Just because I'm being careful with Jane doesn't mean I expect I can easily find this place. If I'm lucky, and I normally am, Matthew was diligent in his discretion upon setting this rental up. There are cameras on every floor, and I've done well to shield my face when passing them during my time here.

"Okay." Even in the lobby, where entering the door unseen is practically impossible, I've been able to dip my head low enough that my face is unrecognizable.

But there's an easier, and dare I say more speedy, way to exit the building.

I climb two sets of stairs before I get to the rooftop door. It's locked, of course, but I shove hard enough that the bolt snaps. I half expect the fire alarm to go off, but it doesn't.

Tonight must be my lucky night.

Cool air bristles against my skin, flowing through my hair. When I

on whose deep breath, I half expect to smell the earthy musk of a mountaintop. I

I'm met with a smoggy stench and the scent of burning oil.

and then The backside of the building is my best drop site. There's a yard

gap between this building and the next, its bottom dark and polluted

with Do-mestreet trash. A quick scan tells me no one is nearby, and no wanderer

would be able to see me from this position.

I stride to the ledge of the building, hold my breath, and then step off

again." The fall only lasts three seconds.

The concrete shatters beneath my feet, creating a perfect imprint

for my skinshoes. A cloud of dust wafts up before me, and I stand tall, wiping it

from my shirt.

I move quietly through the darkness around the building, taking

care to stay out of sight. When a group of friends pass by the alley, I settle in

the crowd, blending in. There's an ATM a block ahead, nestled near the

entrance of a twenty-four-hour convenience store.

My head lowers as I near the shop, careful to evade any stray

light. There is no dodging the ATM's built-in security, though.

The gray-haired clerk watches me from behind his glass encased

counter, eyes narrowed in suspicion. I take it personally until a young couple

leaves the shop behind me, and he gives them the same glowering stare.

I slide my card into the ATM and type in my password.

"Shit," I mutter.

There's a four-hundred dollar withdrawal limit.

I'm able to extract money twice before the machine tells me I've

reached my daily limit.

Eight hundred dollars. That's all I have to get Jane out of the city

tonight. I take a deep breath. It'll have to be enough.

Instead, I shoot the glaring clerk my most dazzling smile as I leave.

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care to Jane still looks pale when I gesture for her to join me from outside the
to their doors.

entrance She stands with her arms crossed and hands clenched into tight balls.
soon as she notices me, her eyes grow wider and the green in them se
ameras. intensify. She looks at the snoozing watchman; his head bowed to gaz
illuminated cell phone. She approaches me nervously, and I can f
counter, apprehension as if it was a physical presence.

e enters She exits our apartment building, staying in the shadows as she jo
Her heartbeat thrums in my ears, *thump, thump, thump*-ing so loud an
worry she may collapse on the concrete from heart palpitations.

I link my arm with hers, guiding her forward. I notice the rush
heartbeat slows once we touch. She isn't scared of *me*. She's scared of
reached Her nostrils flare, inhaling and exhaling deeply as we blend i
evening crowd.

night. "Are you alright?" I ask.

She laughs, her tone incredulous. "No. Absolutely not."

“Tell me why.”

She snorts. “Because a man wanted to slice me up a few hours ago? Because I’m running on no sleep, I haven’t eaten, and now I’m *another* life behind? Because you’re a *vampire*?” She whispers the last while scanning our surroundings.

“You’re leaving another life?” I watch her closely, noticing as her eyes widen in shock for a moment before returning to normal. Perhaps she expected I’d pick up on her admission. “Tell me about that.”

We turn at the street corner, my destination shifting at her mention of the lobby. It’s a silly thing to have forgotten. Of course, humans need to eat frequently; I *know* this. And Jane’s stomach had made a funny sound a few minutes ago.

She snickers, leaning deeper into me on impulse. I try to ignore that slight shift in my direction causes the hardness within me to weaken so slightly, but the tenderness is there, reminding me why I shouldn’t be at his closer to this woman.

Why I shouldn’t, and why I must.

“There’s not much to tell. You know those generic-ass plots about a girl escaping her hick hometown to find herself in the city?” Her lashes fall against her freckled cheeks as her gaze falls. “Yeah, well, that’s me.”

“I’ve found that real life is always messier than any fictional tale of her ever be.” I give her arm a gentle squeeze before slowing our pace. “You tell me all about it after you eat.”

Her features are so interesting to stare into, each twitch of her mouth telling me something new about how she feels or thinks. Even now, the slight lift of her chin tells me she’s curious about what I’m saying. I manage to look away for a few moments to take in the shopfronts that lay ahead of us.

The restaurant stands out from the surrounding stores, its red brick corners unique and striking. The aroma of freshly cooked tomatoes and garlic leaves fills the street, tempting the humans that pass by. Customers are sitting at word, outdoor booths lining the front of the restaurant, chatting and laughing as they share their meals. A woman wearing an apron is standing near the entrance, greeting customers as they approach.

I hadn't "Come," I whisper, guiding my lovely companion forward. As I approach the worker, I plaster on my most dazzling smile.

of food. The young brunette's eyes flash with heat the moment she catches sight of me, her throat bobbing.

My little "Table for two, please."

Her mouth parts before closing again. The woman, *Claire*, if her name is the way is correct, clears her throat and tries again. "Of course! We'll have an open seating option available in ten minutes. Would that be okay?"

I get any I purse my lips, cocking my head in slight disappointment. Worry wrinkles poor Claire's brow. "I'm sure you have something else available. Does your place have a private room for meetings and such?"

It's a girl She stammers, her cheeks blazing red. "Yes, sir, but it's reserved for a flutter eight o'clock party."

My gaze flicks upward, peering at the digital clock mounted on the wall directly behind her. "It's only seven fifteen." I slip my fingers into my pocket, fishing out three of the twenty-dollar bills the ATM spit at me.

"We'll be done in twenty minutes. Here, this is for your trouble."

I leave the girl no room to argue. She dips her head in agreement and glances over her shoulder. "Johnny!"

to look A thin, lanky boy with curly blond hair snaps upright, his arms filled with dirty plates.

exterior Claire gestures toward us, discreetly shoving the wad of cash i
c breadapron. "Reservation, room number one."

itting in Johnny nods his head and stumbles toward us, weaving around c
hing astables and the humans who crowd them. "Follow me," he says.

ear the

As we

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ame tag

outdoor

rinkles We enter a dimly lit room large enough to host three tables. The server
n't this a set of menus at the nearest one. "Here you are, sir." He looks toward
dipping his head further. "And for you, ma'am."

l for an I pull out the nearest seat, dislodging our linked arms. "Sit," I w
urging her forward before I round to the other side. She tucks her bag l
he wall the table and gracefully slides into the chair across from mine. I requ
nto my beers, the only alcohol they serve, before the young server disappears t
earlier. the doors again.

Jane looks at me intensely, her a canvas of unspoken questions.

nd calls I return her gaze for a moment, holding her there as I try to uncove
emotion held within her. I hadn't known she could be this stoic, no
ed with realized how strong she was when faced with death and the absolute up
of her life.

nto her In fact, I know next to nothing about Jane.

And she knows my most guarded secret.

luttered “What?” I finally ask, lacing my hands together on top of the table.

She rubs her thumb over her index finger absentmindedly. “Why do you want to save me?”

I let my gaze drop, instead focusing on the menu. Deep-dish pizza with thick crust, pizza with pineapples... “I heard your cry.” I flip the page of the menu, hoping my next prompt will shift the subject away from my motivations. “What else is on your mind?”

Jane wrinkles her freckled nose before snatching up her menu and unfolding it. “So, you can break through walls and snap locked doors? Are you invincible, then? Like Superman?”

I cock a brow. “Superman?”

She purses her lips expectantly.

r places Sighing, I drop the menu. We both know I won't be enjoying this much as she will. “I'm strong. Very strong. *Not* invincible, though.”

She turns her menu over, scanning the various toppings. “Why do you think you have fangs right now?” As if to make sure, she glances up at me from beneath her lowered lashes.

est two I smile, displaying my blunted teeth fully. “Because I don't need to break through walls. They aren't being... evoked.”

Her brows knit together. “O-kayyy, makes perfect sense.” She looks at me audibly and taps the edge of her menu on the table. “Why the gloves?”

r every “I'm *cold*.” I cock my head to the side, eyes narrowing as I try to figure it out. “Why aren't you in a panicked frenzy right now?”

pheaval She presses her lips together, nodding slowly. “Oh, I am. Yeah...” She looks at me and her words trail off, and before I can tell her how insane she is for a pe

human, the server returns. He places two beers, two straws, and a bunch of napkins on the table.

“Are you ready to order?” He smiles sideways at Jane before turning to the waiter, his grin morphing into a more sophisticated expression.

Jane grabs my menu and places it on top of hers before holding the waiter's gaze. “Can we get a medium-sized stuffed crust pizza with mushrooms and spinach on top?”

I can't keep the distaste from my face as he walks away. Vegetable pizza was never my thing.

Jane starts up again, this time leaning across the table and speaking more vehemently. “You're a vampire who drinks blood, is super strong, and you can retract your fangs, correct?”

I nod once.

She sits back in her chair. “Okay, then who were you before you were a vampire?”

My body goes motionless. “Excuse me?”

“You were a human before turning into a vampire, right?” Her eyes are fixed on me as if to say ‘duh’. “*Who were you?*”

Who was I? It's been a long, *long* time since anyone has asked me that question. I lick my lips, staring deeply into her eyes. She wants to know the depths of my essence? Fine.

“I grew up in what is now southern New Mexico. My mother worked in a brothel in the center of our poor village. That's where I was raised along with a few children who were in a similar situation. Never knew my father.” My gut lurches, and I lick the edge of my canines, feeling the heat of venom in my gums as my incisors ache to spring free. “When I was sixteen, I was enlisted in the militia. It wasn't a serious thing at first

andle of club for boys growing into men.” I pause, not breaking eye contact as
one of the cold beers and bring it to my lips. My head tilts, drinking de
ning to I remember the beginning of my downfall. The glass clinks agai
tabletop once I’m finished. “Then the war began.”

em both Jane’s cheeks turn more pink with each word I speak, but she
za with patient as I share my snippet of history. “War?” She asks, taking a
her drink.

s never “The Mexican-American War. 1846.”

She chokes on her drink.

ng with “Are you all right?” I grab a napkin, handing it to her from across th
g, dead She takes it, eyes wide as she coughs. Nodding, she covers her mouth.

I grasp the edge of the table, carefully listening to her inner workin
paying special attention to her heartbeat as she breathes. Eventual
vere all death grip loosens, as does her throat.

She wads the napkin up and places it on the table, her palm flat aga
chest. “1846?”

widen, I remain silent, concentrating on her heartbeat until it slows to its
rhythm.

me that “That makes you, uh.” Her brows knit as she stares upward, m
ability? calculating. “Shit, I’m not good with math. Like, two hundred years ol

My lips quirks on one side. “One hundred and ninety-four years ol
ked and date.”

raised, Her chin nearly hits the table. “No way. I mean, sure, you ca
ew my vampire, but that’s like a virus in the real world, right? You can’t be c
ie thro dead. Just souped-up, *not immortal*.”

u I was Finally, something has caused my sweet Jane to do a double take.
t, just assure you my heart no longer beats. I died in 1847, and I haven

s I grabhuman since.”

reply as She leans back in her chair, jaw slack.

nst the “Any other questions you’d like answered?” A lazy smile spreads
my face as I watch her reaction. She threads her brows, gazing at me a
’s everone of the seven wonders of the world.

swig of “How’d you die?” Her words are a whisper.

My smile fades away. “The same way most people do. I s
breathing.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Did you die in battle?”

e table. Shrugging, I grab the neck of my beer, lifting it. “Something like tha

“Did a vampire have to kill you? Drink your blood?”

ags and The bottle shatters beneath the pressure of my touch, sending sh
lly, myglass everywhere. I move my arm quickly so that the remaining
doesn’t hit me or the table and instead lands on the floor. “Shit.”

inst her Jane scoots her chair back, standing. “Oh, shoot. I’m sorry! Let me-

I lift my other palm, halting her before she can drop to her knees be
normaltiny pieces of glass. “Jane, stop. There’s no need for *you* to be sorry.”

at her. “This was my mistake. Sit, I’ll clean it up.”

ientally She pauses, her eyes searching mine to find something she must
d?” see in the faces of her peers. Guilt wars over her features, thinning l
d, as ofand causing a tiny worry line to appear between her brows.

“My fault.” I repeat. “I’ll clean it.”

n be a She returns to her seat. Carefully, I grab an empty plate from th
*actually*nearest to ours and stack the sparkling shards on top of it. Our host w
pleased about the spill, but I had intended to tip well, anyway.

. “I can Jane sighs heavily, but I keep my focus turned downward, examin
’t beenetching on the floor as I pick up stray pieces of glass with my fin

After a moment of silence, I finally give her an answer. "Yes."

Jane picks up her beer, the condensation making the glass sound as if it's lifted from the table. "Yes, what?"

I lift my head, staring up at her. The orange glow from the dimmed lights forms a halo around her wavy blonde hair, shadowing her face.

"A vampire killed me," I reply.

stopped

at."

ards of
liquid



"

side the

I frown Jane only eats a slice of her pizza before getting the rest to go. I leave a tip for our kind server, despite knowing I have a limited amount of cash, and usually then carry her pizza box out the door, never letting her stray from my side of her lips sight.

The city is more alive now, with musicians singing on every corner and drunken women clamoring down the streets. I stay close to Jane at the table, fearing the crowd will separate us if I give her too much space.

won't be Jane glances at me sideways. "Do you have a car?"

Sighing, I shake my head. "But we're getting one."

ng each She stops mid-step, turning to face me completely. Fear registers on her face, and for a moment, I'm confused. "You aren't going to kill someone

steal their car, are you?"

Not an *entirely* bad idea, but I assume she doesn't want that out
don't particularly want to murder either, but dosing someone with my
d lights and making them *give* me their ride wouldn't be terrible... I shake m
"We'll rent. But first," I size up the upcoming intersection, follow
roads on all sides for as far as I can see. "We need to leave a false trail
circles for a bit." A tall, white bus passes by, its taillights blaring red
do you feel about public transportation?"

After paying both of our fares, we ride the overcrowded bus for two
Then we take a short walk, make it to the next bus stop, and do the same
over again. This goes on for so long that Jane's eyes begin to droop.

She's leaning her head against one of the metal poles when I
concede. We've done this dance for long enough that Rune's people
caught up for at least a day when they start to track us.

I touch her shoulder as to not startle her. "Hey, Jane?"

Her head snaps up, tired eyes widening. "Huh?"

Poor girl. She hasn't slept since yesterday morning. A wisp of her
hair falls out of place. I have to restrain myself from tucking it back
line of place.

She's a witch. She has to be using some sort of blood magic on me.

I clear my throat. "Can I borrow your phone?"

Her brows lift, but her lids droop again. "Don't you have one?"

"I ditched it. Tracking devices, and such. Can I use your phone or not?"

She slips her hand into her jacket pocket, pulling free a clunky
phone. "Here, the password is an L."

I enter the password, connecting the dots until they make an L shape
screen brightens, revealing a purple and pink background made

swirling, artsy clouds.

come. I Using her search engine, I find the nearest car rental locati

venommemorize its address. Luckily, they're open twenty-four seven.

y head. She doesn't notice as I slip the phone back into her pocket.

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swirling, artsy clouds.

Using her search engine, I find the nearest car rental location and memorize its address. Luckily, they're open twenty-four seven.

She doesn't notice as I slip the phone back into her pocket.







Something soft prods my shoulder, rousing me from sleep. “Jane, we’ve arrived.”

It takes great effort to open my sleepy eyes as the bus rattles along. My vision focuses just before it jolts to a halt.

“What?” I blink twice, twisting my head toward the voice.

Samuel’s sable eyes come into view. “We’re here,” he repeats.

“Here?” It takes me a moment to remember what Samuel said. “We’re getting a rental car so we can escape the city and travel somewhere else, far away.”

This all feels a little wrong, like I’m being taken captive by a stranger. It would be true if Samuel hadn’t saved me, or if he used any sort of force to get me to come with him. But he hadn’t needed to. Vampires are real, I believe him when he says someone dangerous might come for me.

Samuel’s hand snakes around my arm, lifting me to my feet with my resistance. “The rental shop is around the corner.”

I follow him down the aisle, stumbling over bags left unattended by fellow passengers. Samuel descends to the pavement and extends his

out once he's there.

I take it, wishing it wasn't gloved. Maybe if I could touch the child's skin, I'd understand that he's not the charming heartthrob my mind is mistaking him for.

Crushing on the new handsome, sexy, *delectable* neighbor is fine. Crushing on a butterfly for a being who ripped out another man's throat is *not*.

But as I step onto the ground, the bus doors shuttering closed behind me, Samuel squeezes my hand and smiles at me, showing his perfectly white teeth. My stomach tightens.

e. Jane, Maybe he's more human than he lets on.

ng. My It's the middle of the night, sometime around three in the morning, the streets are mostly quiet. There are homeless people sleeping against the crooks of buildings, muttering nonsense that probably makes sense in their dreams. I tip toe past them, being careful not to interrupt their rest.

earlier. Just as he'd said, after strolling around the block, we reach a car rental business. Samuel directs us to the small parking lot on the right side area in front of it, hidden away from the business's windows.

ewhere "Wait here," he says, planting one hand on my shoulder.

nger. It He stares at me, as if waiting for confirmation that I'll do as he asks. I force to my head.

l, and I A chill runs through my veins when he turns his back. I hug my shoulder, fighting the urge to slip into sleep like the homeless nearby, my body needs a break from standing. I'm so tired I that it's almost impossible to resist the desire to melt into a puddle right here on the concrete, but I fight that by focusing all of my attention on the obscure figures inside the rental car through the glass walls. How does Samuel plan to rent a car without leaving a trail for the mysterious *bad guys* to follow?

Hazy theories bounce around in my head. Maybe he has a wallet full of his fake IDs. Or maybe all the stories about vampires having the power to keep and mesmerize humans are true. If that's the case, then he might be using mind control on me this very minute. Maybe *that's* why I find Gettingscrumptiously delicious.

My legs sway as he exits the door, eyes drooping. At this distance, his eyes seem to shine with a reddish glimmer, like the straight of a feral cat.

"Are you ready to leave, Jane?" He asks, his voice firm but with a sparkle in his eyes that fades as he strolls beneath the dim glow of the streetlights. "Yes, please," I reply, my voice no louder than a whisper.

Against the
in their

rental
id stops

s. I nod

oulders,
craving The car isn't much to brag about.

use the Samuel rakes his hand through his dark locks, apologizing. "There's an eight hundred dollar limit at the ATM," he says, a sly smile hinting his

store's It's a white, late 2000s style Honda, and it's certainly better than the 1997 Ford Escort I bought when I was seventeen. I shrug as he unlocks the doors, dislodging the weight of my bookbag from over my shoulder.



full of charm. “Are you okay?” Samuel asks once we’re both seated inside the car. I force my eyes to open wider, to appear more alert as I nod and use the words “Yeah. Everything is fine and dandy.” *As fine and dandy as it could be, so considering I’ve witnessed a murder and am now on the run with a vampire.*

He turns the key in the ignition but doesn’t shift the car into gear. Instead, he looks at me with an odd expression on his face—a mix of confusion, admiration, with a dash of guilt.

“Tell me what happened today,” he says, fingers clenching the steering wheel.

My mind blanks. “What?”

He arches both brows. “Tell me what happened today.”

I rub my hands over my thighs, catching the loose fabric between my fingers. Sighing, I give in to his request.

“I came home from work, and the sun was rising. Met you in the elevator. Went inside my apartment and took a shower.” My throat feels like it’s constricted from within. I struggle to take a breath and push through the uncomfortable sensation. “Joey, an ex-customer from the coffee shop at the office. He, uh.” I glance at him, squeezing my hands tighter around my pants to keep them from shaking. “He attacked me, and you burst through the wall and sunk your teeth into his neck. You killed him.”

My words ring out in the car’s silence, and it feels like the world was an empty space perfectly still as Samuel watches me. He doesn’t move, doesn’t blink. “Continue,” he demands.

I force myself to look away from him, turning my attention to the skyscrapers in the distance instead. “You told me you were a vampire that I had to leave with you, because I knew more than I should. That

would come to hurt me if I didn't. We packed my room and left at sunrise quickly. Now we're here."

"I can be," Samuel puts the car into drive. "I just needed to know you were reacting to this situation like you should."

Instead, "How should I be reacting?"

"He side eyes me, lip curling upward. "Like you're in the presence of a killer. A monster."

"Ice skates over my arms, climbing until every hair on the back of my neck is raised. "Well, perhaps if you weren't so nice to me on the elevator last night, I joke."

"Perhaps," he agrees, but his voice is distant.

"We drive for half an hour; the streets becoming less populated with each mile. Soon, tall buildings gradually become more distant in the rearview mirror until all that is left are faint glimmers of light in the distance."

"When I first arrived in the bustling metropolis, the sight was something to behold. After a while, though, the noise and constant buzz of fluorescent lights became a nuisance. No one ever talks about the downside of coming to a big city from a rural town, one of them being that you can never see the stars through the smog. I thought I'd feel sad watching the last two years of my life shrink into nothing. I don't. Not really."

"Is your phone prepaid?" Samuel asks, his voice cutting through the comfortable silence.

"I purse my lips. Kind of rude to assume I can't afford the fancy service contracts, but he'd seen my clunky government issued phone, and I'm sure he hadn't taken him long to realize its service status. "Yes. Why?"

"He glances at me, one brow raised. "Can I borrow it?"

ndown. “For what purpose?” I ask, but I’m already reaching between my fingers, digging into the pocket of my bookbag.

seeing He glances at me, flashing a brilliant smile in my direction. “I’m not here.” I hand him the phone, a little nervous that he’ll be driving using it.

If he crashes the car while surfing the web, it’s likely that *his* insurance of anybody will be fine. Mine, however, will not.

But he handles multitasking well, his eyes never leaving the road. He quickly neckpulls one of his gloves off with his teeth, presses the button to activate the screen, and then dials a phone number.

The volume is on its highest setting, so when he presses the phone to his ear, I can hear it ringing.

h every “Hello?” a man answers.

arview, “It’s me.” Samuel says.

Instantly a string of curses sound on the other side of the line. I catch the tail end of his mysterious friend’s reply. “-Supposed to call me hours ago. Is this line secure?”

to the Samuel sighs. “Not really. I wasn’t able to withdraw enough cash, so I’m making do with what I have. I wanted to let you know that we’re ending our journey soon, and I’ll be using the last of my resources on a place to stay. We need to get together sooner rather than later.

igh the “Tonight?”

“No. We only have a little time left until dawn breaks, and you won’t be able to make it. Tomorrow, we’ll rendezvous at a mall in the North-Eastern part of West Virginia. Can you do a Google search and find one before I call? I won’t be able to contact you after this.”

I lean closer to Samuel, whispering. “Why won’t you be able to

ly legs, him after this?”

He glances at me, rolling his eyes. The man on the other side of the door chuckles. “*Is that her? Damn, man, she sounds real cute. Got that Southern while Bell accent.*”

Samuel makes a rumbling sound deep in his chest. “Can you give me an address or not?”

I inch away, folding my arms across my chest. I feel more and more nervous as the longer the discussion continues. What is Samuel’s goal here? Should I at least be informed about my fate? Or is this just how it’ll be now? My eyes are doe-eyed sheep, and Samuel as my cute, intelligent, *deadly* shepherd. He says to his friend, “*Twenty-Three Ninety-Nine Meadowbrook Road in Bridgeport. We’ll bring the cash. We won’t be able to do much in the near future should pick up some supplies for our friend. Oh, and Francis is dying here.*” The man chuckles again, his voice fading out.

Samuel’s face turns sour. “See you tomorrow,” he grumbles, his eyes narrowed.

And then he pulls my phone away from his ear and *crushes* it. He rips it so I’m left with fist over the cheap plastic and glass, crumbling the material until it falls from his fingers like soot.

“What the hell!” My eyes go wide, chest contracting with emotion. I’ve never not have been much, but that clunk of technology has been my lifeline for the last two years. And now it’s a pile of dust spread over the faux leather. I couldn’t console.

Samuel shrugs one of his shoulders. “If someone gets your number, they’ll try to track your phone. It’s a liability.”

My breathing accelerates, verging on hyperventilation. “What about contact contacts? You could have warned me first!” I cringe inwardly, aware

shrill my voice sounds and yet not really giving a fuck. Samuel's the line getting a bit too pushy.

southern He dusts his ungloved hand free of debris on his chest before plunking back on the steering wheel. "Okay, very true. I'm sorry. I should have apologized to you first." He sends me an observatory look. "But you'd have protested then you'd have gotten pissed when I destroyed it, anyway."

cut off I move away from him and lean against the car door, my head thudding against the cold glass. Immediately, its chilly surface soothes my skin. "It was a very jerk-ish thing to do." I mumble, my eyes locked on the concrete ledge of the highway as it blurs by.

Got it? Samuel's voice softens. "My apologies for being *jerk-ish*, sweet Janey; so we can meet again."

his eyes

makes a
leaves away



It may
be for the

leather I jolt back to consciousness with a start, my body slick with something. Something surrounds me, and it's tucked tight, morphed around my legs like a silk web. I kick my feet, but it's too dark to see what's confining me. "Am I still dreaming? Has someone trapped me?"

out my In a flash, I remember everything. Joey's attack. His gruesome death. Samuel storming in like a knight in silver armor. Leaving my old life

vibe is for the second time.

Footsteps sound behind me, and I roll to face the noise. The light flickers again a second later.

Warned Samuel is hovering near a door a few yards away, his arm still raised, and light switch. When he looks at me, his eyes show a hint of concern—his emotion quickly fades as he scans my appearance from head to toe.

Pressed I blink, allowing my body to catch up with the frenzy of my mind. “What are we?”

Concrete He takes a slow step towards me. “A motel.”

A quick glance down confirms that someone has swaddled me in generic patterned blankets, and I shift myself to loosen the covers. “What is it?”

He creeps closer. “Only noon. You should sleep longer. We can’t stay until sundown.”

I push myself up, examining the room.

It’s very... quaint.

The room features an old, retro wallpaper with orange and brown tones that appear to have been installed in the 1960s. The only furniture is a wooden dresser across from the bed and a single chair. On top of the dresser there’s an old-fashioned box television, one I doubt still works.

Sweat. Windows concealed by a set of curtains line the wall beside the front door, and I frown at them. “The sunlight?”

“The curtains are enough to keep me going. I’m drowsy, but it’s not like I can’t handle.” Samuel’s voice is deep; gruff. He takes the last step towards the bed before lowering himself onto the mattress, sitting just beside my feet.

death. His nearness heightens my awareness of myself. I sit up taller again behind the headboard, tucking my hair behind my ear and praying I hadn’t dropped

badly in my sleep.

icks on “Did I fall asleep?” I frown. “How’d I get into bed?”

His lip curls on one side, expression sheepish. “I carried you.”

d to the My eyes widen. *Carried me?* On a good day, I weigh two hundred j but that although it’s probably more after my obsession with chocolate last

Trying to imagine this lean, masculine, god-like male model cradl
“Wheresleeping body in his arms is impossible. *Had he held me to his chest?*

My cheeks burn as his smile grows wider, his eyes flashing at my re

“Um, is there a bathroom in here?” I push the blankets away fr
nto the flushed body, hoping to put distance between myself and Samuel as
at time possible. *He touched me. Held me.*

Samuel lifts his thumb, pointing toward the other side of the room. ‘
’t leave a door tucked into an alcove, nearly invisible from my angle against th

I slide away from the bed, careful not to bump into Samuel.

“Be right back,” I mutter, feet shuffling as I speed toward the only
place available.

stripes I secure the door with a click before facing the mirror.

a heavy *Holy Hell*, I look like shit.

dresser My makeup must have run while I was in the shower yesterday, an
yanked me out before I had time to cleanse the dark smudges bene
at door, eyes. Mortified, I glower at my reflection, realizing the restaurant v

had seen me like this. I turn on the faucet, splashing away the evidence
othing I My air-dried hair is a wild, wavy mess that hangs around my face,

ard the to my state of disarray. Blonde locks frizz out of their natural part, cre
æet. halo around my lightly freckled cheeks. I rake my fingers through the

inst the strands in a desperate attempt to tame them, but without my brush, the
bled too much I can do.

I keep the sink on as I use the toilet, a little too aware that Samuel has ultra-sensitive hearing.

As I sit there, I think back over the last twenty-four hours. Discovering the presence of vampires wasn't the most terrifying experience; it was watching someone die. Joey deserved it. It was his life or mine. I was relieved when Samuel came through the door and tore into his throat... but it was still hard to see the reaction ebb away from his eyes. Not so much out of guilt or because I felt any sympathy for my familiarity with my ex-customer, but because I know my life could be snuffed out just as easily.

And I don't want that to happen. It's the reason I took Samuel to the bathroom when he told me I had to leave with him. It's the reason I'm inside the wall bathroom while a vampire sits in the other room. Death is real. I've experienced it firsthand, tasted it in the air.

Before now, the premise of death was a lifetime away, so distant I could push it away from my mind.

Not anymore.

After washing my hands and turning off the sink, I leave the bathroom and find Samuel has reclined onto his back, taking up the entire length of my bed. He gazes at the ceiling above.

He turns his head, eyes following me as I slink around the room. Our eyes remain fixed on each other as I sit by his side, my back flush against the headboard.

Samuel's lips lift, lazily spreading to reveal his dazzling teeth. "Feeling better now?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

It's impossible to pretend I'm not drawn to Samuel. His physical beauty

uel hascaptivating, but it's more than that. When I look into his eyes, I feel l
attaching to something deeper, something unspoken. He looks at me as
trying to express his vulnerability without actually speaking about it.

rriying "Do you need anything?" he asks, voice low.

I shake my head.

l broke We stare at each other for a moment longer. So long that his dar
the lifestart to dilate, reminding me of the science documentaries I watche
r sort ofblack holes.

ould be "What's your full name, Jane?"

"Jane Ava Johnson."

eriously His eyes narrow slightly. "How old are you?"

ide this "Twenty-two."

seen it "Why'd you leave North Carolina?"

I close my parted lips, feeling my jaw clench. "I thought we
I couldldiscussed this."

His lip twitches. "I don't think we discussed it thoroughly. Real
more messy than a simple trope, remember?"

hroom. The past isn't an easy topic to talk about. It's not that my childhoo
bed ashorror story, or that I left behind a toxic relationship. The truth is m
and a little shameful. My mom, my dad, they were decent people. Su
ur eyeswere extremely religious and over the top with their judgmental attitud
inst thewas that enough to sanction my decision to leave them?

I was a nineteen-year-old dreamer back then. And now I'm on the r
l bettera dangerous, legendary monster, and he's staring at me, waiting for an
answer.

I exhale, blowing away my anxiety with the gesture. Samuel shoul
eauty iswho I am, and who he's stuck protecting. "I left because I wa

like I'm experience something different. Another reality, one where I wasn't c
s if he's to working at the general store while my daddy shot-gunned away ev
I brought home." My shoulders droop. "I just wasn't into the sma
lifestyle. Or, at least, I didn't think I was."

Samuel strokes his chin, and I realize both of his gloves are off. Hi
k irises are slender, with veins protruding up to his fingers. I wonder if they'
d about despite their supposed cold-ness.

"And what do you think now? Was living in the city the answer
problems?"

I grimace. "No, not really."

"What about..." his voice trails off, and his face blanks. "Boys? W
seeing anyone before this happened?"

Dumbfounded, I raise my brows. "You think I'd have let you wh
already away if I had a lover who'd miss me?" I shake my head. "No, I wasn't
anyone." *Other than the occasional run in with cute boy next door.*

l life is I remember the humiliating fact that he could hear me through the
and my face pales. Silently, I pray my vibrator was on its lowest setti
d was a of those days. *Please, dear God.*

undane, Samuel leans toward me, and soon his face is only an inch from
re, they hug the blankets close to my chest, unable to breathe or even think.

les, but "One more question before you go back to sleep, Jane." His nostril
and I notice the slight flutter of his eyelashes. "If I hadn't..." F
un with clenches. *Revealed myself*, would you have accepted an invitation
l honest wine with me?"

My breath catches in my throat, and I struggle not to gasp. Samu
d know close, his eyes dilating again as they sear mine.

nted to I *would* have had wine with him. I would have happily dove strai

onfinedhis bed after, too. The man- *vampire*- is something right out of the
ery boyromance themed Pinterest boards I search when I'm feeling extra ar
ll-townHe's a dream, a vision. A man I'd have fallen for the moment he calle
good girl.

s hands There's no way I can tell him any of these things, though. Absolu
re soft, way I'll ever admit how exciting each of those elevator rides was.

Instead, I jerk my chin in agreement, admitting my feelings only onc
to your His face breaks into a full smile, and it's completely breathtaking up
Every curve of his jawline flexes, flowing with glee. Under the cov
hand travels to my heart, pressing against my chest in hopes it'll slow.
ere you "It *was* my name, wasn't it?"

His question stuns me. "Um, what?"
risk me Heat simmers in his eyes, morphing the carefree Samuel into a smc
t seeingbarrel of lust. "You whispered my name while you were *ple*
yourself." As if to accent his accusation, he glances at the space betw
e walls, legs, like he can see my shame through the blankets.

ng each I shut my eyes. *Dear baby Jesus, why?* "You're *totally* mistaken."
"I didn't-"

mine. I "Oh, Jane, you did," he croons, voice velvety.

"No, I *didn't*." My skin is a flaming inferno now, spoiling every o
ls flare, denial I throw at him.

His jaw Samuel leans forward and lifts his hand, reaching toward me. M
to havecatches in my throat, and I let out a tiny, shrill whimper. *So stupid.*

touch lands on my cheek, just below my eye. His fingers skirt across n
el is socooling the heat there. He twirls a stray strand of my hair, his eyes f
across my face as he tucks it behind my ear.

ght into I could die right now. This man's touch could kill me, just as easily

the dark natural disaster. But staring into his onyx eyes, I see he wouldn't
happened. He *reverses* me, like a gift he's wished for his entire life.

and me a Does he, though? How can he feel anything for a woman he barely
let alone a girl who's caused this big of a disruption in his life?

itely *no* Maybe it's just lust. He heard me all those nights. Maybe I got in
head, made him *want* me. A flare of heat makes itself known in a
place; the sensitive area between my legs.

up close. Samuel leans away. "Of course you didn't, sweet Jane." There's still
humor in his voice, but his expression remains shielded as he
moving away toward the light switch. He flips it, darkening the room
revealing those strange, glowing eyes. "Now sleep. We have a big
ahead of us."

shivering

assuring

between my

I scoff.

ounce of

my voice

An icy When I wake, I feel caged. My limbs are stuck again, but it isn't from
my skin, fabric of the blankets this time.

flicking My eyes open, and I stare straight into Samuel's black hole irises.

"You drool in your sleep," he whispers, dipping his head toward me

as any



let that I barely hear his words, too focused on the fact that we're to
everywhere. Our hips are pressed together, my thigh covering one of his
knows, His arm is around my waist, one hand planted firmly on my backside
noses almost brush.

into his And then the *drool* comment registers.

another I push away, swiping my hand over my mouth. "I don't drool."

His eyes flash crimson. "You're a terrible liar." He tugs me toward
all a hint again, stealing away my breath. "It's cute, though. So innocent. So *pure*
stands, I press closer and inhale his scent, brazened by my groggy state. "I
om and pure."

g night "Oh?" His lips curl. "I see no lie in that statement. We should die
further." He lowers his head until our noses are brushing together. My
clench, my breath bated. *Holy shit*.

His nose skates down mine, traveling over to my cheek. "In about
minutes, we'll have to leave this bed and rejoin the outside world.
that, though, I want to ask for permission to kiss you." His hand traces
my spine, pressing into me and pushing us closer together. His palm
around the back of my neck, holding my head in place so I can't look
"Will you allow that, Jane?"

My throat is dry, so I lick my lips. "Are you sure we only have
minutes?"

He smiles, and before I have time to think, his lips are crashing down
the soft mine. I open to him, inviting his caress. He tastes bittersweet, an intoxicating
flavor, both sophisticated and brimming with the promise of trouble.

The kiss breaks all too soon as Samuel pulls away, his hand cupping
face. An expression of wonder flashes in his eyes. "You are..."

"I'm what?"

ouching He inhales, pulling my scent into his chest. “Unnaturally addictive
his legs. you a witch? I was sure you weren’t, but.” His hand traces over my
de. Oursliding downward. “There’s no other explanation for how you’ve trap
so completely.”

Butterflies bubble in my stomach, fighting to be set free. “Not a wit
plain, ordinary Jane.”

ard him “There’s nothing ordinary about you, *mi ceilo*.” His thumb strokes c
e.“ chin. “Now, sadly, our time is up.” A sly smile flashes across his fac
am *not* you ready to meet my brothers?”

scuss it
insides

out two
Before
vels up
i closes
x away.



ive two Samuel takes me through the drive-thru at a terribly greasy fa
restaurant, and I stress eat as he drives, gorging myself on the bur
own on fries in hopes that it’ll calm the new wave of nerves sizzling throu
icating body.

I’m on my way to meet Samuel’s *brothers*, and unless they’ve fo
ing my cure to old age, then they’re vampires, too. I try to question him dur
trip, but he’s as vague as ever.

“No, Jane, they don’t turn into bats.”

ve. Are “No, Jane, my brothers aren’t supernatural assassins.”

cheek, “No, Jane, we don’t all live in a gothic castle.”

ped me I relax into my reclined seat as he continues on the endless str
highway, losing myself to the moon’s allure as it follows us wherever
ch. Just I’m so focused on finding the supposed face on its surface that I hardly
Samuel changing lanes.

ver my “Are we getting off the freeway?”

e. “Are He glances at me, his eyes leaving the road to dance over my face.
here. Bridgeport.” He lifts a single finger from the wheel, pointing
ahead.

His finger redirects my gaze toward a large, reflective sign.

Bridgeport, ½ mile ahead.

My stomach clenches so violently I fear I’ll lose my meal. “Your b
they’re nice too, right?”

Samuel snorts. “Nice? Is that what you think I am?”

I sigh, crossing my arms. “Are they going to eat me or not?”

His eyes sparkle as he watches me. “No, Jane. They absolutely will

We pull into a mildly crowded parking lot five minutes later. Tl
looms ahead, all lit up with neon lights and flashing advertisements.
ist-food to our right is a black, sporty Mustang with tinted windows.

ger and I grab hold of Samuel’s shirt sleeve. “Is that them?”

igh my He peers out of my window, his lip curving as he takes in the vehicl
exactly.”

und the An engine revs behind us.

ing our Through the rearview mirrors, I glimpse the muddy silver Hummer
it whips around to park beside us. Two men gape from the window
wild eyes taking me in.

They're both young, probably early twenties, with dark hair and a complexion matching Samuel's. It's no wonder no one believes what they say. These two men appear utterly normal. Both of them are wearing t-shirts with the sleeves cut off, and one of them is sporting a cliché silver chain necklace around his neck. The passenger grins from ear to ear when they make eye contact, but the driver's lips only twitch into a grimace-like grin.

"Those are your brothers?"

"We're not," Samuel sighs. "Yes. Yes, they are."
straight

brothers-

not."

the mall

Parked

e. "Not

before

s, their

They're both young, probably early twenties, with dark hair and a complexion matching Samuel's. It's no wonder no one believes vampires exist. These two men appear utterly normal. Both of them are wearing t-shirts with the sleeves cut off, and one of them is sporting a cliché silver bullet necklace around his neck. The passenger grins from ear to ear when we make eye contact, but the driver's lips only twitch into a grimace-like grin.

“Those are your brothers?”

Samuel sighs. “Yes. Yes, they are.”







“So *this* is the pretty lady?” Francis says.

We gather in the dark parking lot between our cars, and flashes Jane an approving, coy smile.

I try to ignore my irritation, thankful that Jane has tucked herself p behind me. It keeps my brother from scrutinizing her body and ke from wanting to strangle him.

“I was hoping you’d both show a little respect.” I contain my an wanting to make things worse for Jane. She’s already worked up and want to add onto her troubles. “Jane is our *guest*. Not a toy for you with.”

Matthew rubs the back of his neck, glaring at Francis. “Sorry, ma been like this ever since I told him you were bringing a girl home.”

My eye twitches. “*That isn’t what this is.*”

Francis raises his eyebrows, his devilish smile widening. “What is Sammy boy?”

Carefully, I link my arm with Jane’s. “Jane, this is Francis.” I nod my younger brother, sending him a look that would cripple most r

“And this is Matthew.”

Matthew flashes a sheepish smile at Jane, raising his palm in a wave.

Jane’s response is feeble as she takes a few steps back from me, lifting her hand in greeting. “Hi, I’m Jane.”

My brothers simply stare.

“Did you bring the money?” I ask, sending Matthew a pointed look.

He stammers, reaching into the back pocket of his denim jeans. “Here, man. There was only fifty grand in the safe and I didn’t want to go going to the bank. You know, just in case.” His gaze is fixed on me, an unspoken warning clear in its intensity.

Francis *Just in case* Rune tracks the banking cameras and realizes my brothers are by my side, as they’ve always been.

partially There was a time when Rune saw me as my Lord’s favored son, a person fit to take over the family business. I was ruthless, brutal, and... nothing like the two men in front of me.

ger, not But he never realized the mask I wore. It was so well sculpted I had to take it off.

I don’t My brothers helped me then, and they’ll help me now.

to flirt Matthew hands me a thin paper bag. “I left the rest in the car. Show me enough in there for our shopping spree.”

n. He’s Beside me, Jane makes a soft exclamation of surprise, and I can’t help but smile to myself.

it then, I reach into the sack and pull out a bundle of money. “Here,” I hand it to Matthew. “You two hit the food and hygiene shops. We’ll meet back here in an hour.”

toward mortals. Francis’ face sours. “Why don’t you go shop for tampons and I’ll take a girl to try on clothes?”

He's not being serious. The glint in Francis' eyes tells me he's testing me, waiting to see how far I'll let him go with Jane. "Not. Going. To. Finding her. You're a stranger to her, and she's my... friend." My eyes narrow, and I lean into his. "Just do as I ask, Francis."

He casts a contemptuous glance in my direction, and as Matthew drives off, he lets his scorching gaze wrack over my girl.

"Right *Asshole*.

I offer Jane the money. "Here. This is collateral for all the trauma I can take, anyone through."

She stares at the brown paper bag, her eyes wide. "What?"
I suppress a smile, fighting the urge to break out into a goofy grin like an excited kid. When she gasped earlier, I took the hint that she hadn't been a prodigym for the wealthy type. It's time to show her differently. "You need to change like clothes until your belongings can be recovered from the movers."

She still doesn't take the bag. "I packed an extra outfit."
Carefully, I grab hold of her wrist and place the money into her hand. "Jane, I broke through your wall and killed a man in front of you. Besides, you can't wear the same two outfits forever. *And* you need to have a phone."

She stares up at me, assessing the situation. A gust of wind passes by, pushing her fragrant locks in my direction and sending the aroma of strawberry shampoo directly into my lungs. God, how *divine*.

I realize that I desperately want her to accept the money. I want her to trust me, to let me care for her, to spend her fortune like it's her own.

Her fingers close around the bag. "I'm only taking this because you need a phone."

ing me, My fingers lift without warning, gently caressing her chin. “Good gi
happen. Something flickers in her eyes, and that single look drives me mad.
searing

ags him

I’ve put



like an

figured

ed new “This is where you’re choosing to spend your money?”

We’re inside a clothing store, one where every item is under thirty
A majority of the shirts have comical catchphrases printed across their
r hand. Jane rolls her eyes as she weaves between the two racks. “It’s Rue
Take it, course I’m buying my clothes here.”

I a new “Everything is so...” I wipe one of my hands on the front of my bu
shirt.

ses us, “Relevant? Hip? *Fashionable?*” Jane glances over her shoulder at
oma of eyes alight with humor.

I concede, but only because of the joyous little cry she emits eve
to take she adds a new item to our shopping cart. “Yes, that’s exactly right.”
end my her a tight-lipped smile.

I trail behind her, cataloging which things she gravitates towards. S
u broke V-necks with approval, but casts an expression of disdain at crop top
shorts seem to be an immediate no-go for her. All the pairs of skinn

irl.” that fit her are happily tucked away in our basket. Her favorite color palette comprised of soft purples, emerald green, and blue.

Jane adds a white tank top to her new wardrobe before turning toward me. “So, um, I’m going to look in the back for a minute. Can you stay here? Maybe browse the men’s section for a while?”

I frown down at her. “Why are you going to the back?”

Her cheeks redden, and she wets her plush bottom lip. “You know, girl stuff.” Her voice lowers to a whisper at the end.

My brows raise. “Girl stuff?”

She nods.

“And I can’t come?”

The deep blush spreads to her neck. “No.”

Sighing, I raise my palms in surrender. “Fine, but stay within sight. You won’t be safe until we’re at my place.”

fronts. She kneads her lip with her top teeth. “And where would that place be exactly?”

I divert my eyes. “Go do your girl things. We need to leave soon.”

She spins on her heels, sashaying away from me. I can’t stop my eyes from traveling to those perfectly round hips as she walks away. I follow the curve of her head as she turns, redirecting herself to the very back of the store.

I try to stay busy while she’s gone, but it’s no use. The moment I turn away, my stomach churns like I’m about to be swallowed up. So, I try to give my gut and keep my eyes on her as she grabs more lingerie from the shelves.

She’s so focused that she doesn’t even realize that I can see her awkwardly holding a pair of thongs up to check the size.

Ms. Jean *Girl things.* I roll my eyes.

My jeans But damn, now that I’ve seen all the tiny black strings that she’s

alette is my mind clouds with all the ways I could tear them from her skin.

My sweet, delicate Jane.

ard me. She deserves better than a monster, and yet a monster I am.

y here? I keep telling myself that it's my duty to protect her. *I* was the one who fucked up her life. But this is more than my newly reformed morals, my presence is a weakness I never expected to have. Whatever happens for *girl* could ruin me.

So I have to keep her safe.

What's done is done. It'll continue to be done, too, because I can't deny myself the pleasure of knowing Jane. I've lived a long, miserable life with her and this could be the only highlight I'll ever get, and if it kills me to see her then so be it.

ht. You Jane returns a moment later, her recent additions shoved to the bottom of her basket.

ace be, "Ready to check out?"

"Yup," she replies, pulling the money sack out of her overalls and sweatpants.

es from

the top of

the

glance

rust my

shelves.

wardly

the

the

buying,



“You need a phone,” I protest.

Jane’s eyes bulge. “Yes, but not *this* one.”

“And why not?”

She grabs the front of my shirt, pulling me down so she can whisper into my ear. “It’s almost fifteen hundred dollars!”

I hold her upper arms, leaning back. “So? We have a lot more than that.” She glares at me, her green eyes murky.

“You *deserve* it, Jane.”

The fire in her gaze dampens. “What about the tracking thing you mentioned. Being about in the car? Are we sure no one could use it to find us?”

I shrug. “There’s a prepaid version, and you’re using a fake name. You check out.”

“I am?”

“Yes. You, my love, are a woman by the name of Maddie Plemmons. I slide my hands down her arms. “Isn’t that a wonderful name?”

A presence approaches from behind us. “I think it’s lovely.” Francis stands beside Jane, holding two handfuls of shopping bags.

Matthew is close behind him, and he catches my attention, pointing to my wristwatch.

I link my arm with Jane’s. “Come on, let’s buy your phone.”

We walk out of the store five minutes later, arms laden with merchandise. I take notice of how my brothers instinctually circle around Jane, protecting her without having to be asked.

Matthew speaks to me as we leave, his voice so low it’d be nothing more than a mutter to most ears. “About your rental? I’m thinking Francis drive it North. He can circle back and meet us at the cabins.”

“Sounds good.”

Francis growls low in his chest. “Why do I have to do it? I’m feeling bullied right now.”

Matthew snaps at him. “Because you pissed off Sam. You’re supposed to be *supporting* him, not trying to steal his girl like a college frat boy.”

“It’s called being *nice*. Showing a little flattery isn’t a crime.”

“That.” I cock my head in Francis’ direction, sending him a dangerous look that could be.

“Don’t get all jealous, man. She’s just a girl.” He frowns at me. “Did I talk to you save her, anyway? Rune’s going to hunt us for a hundred years now.”

“Fuck Rune. He was trying to trap me.” I sigh. “And I saved her because she wanted to, okay? She’s under my protection now.”

Matthew holds the mall’s doors open for us, letting Jane pass through. “Do you love her?” he asks, his lips barely moving.

Francis’ eyes widen for a fraction of a second. “Whoa, man. Do you love her?”

I ignore both of them, deciding to focus on Jane as we cross the street. “Do you love her? Hell, I wouldn’t even know. I’ve never loved anyone before. I just love *something* for her, that much is certain.”

I raise my arm, halting Jane before she gets to the outdated rental car. “Do you love her?” Francis’ eyes, wide with curiosity, glance up at me, and the crescent moon casts a glow on them.

“We’re riding with Matthew from here on out.” I say, trying not to look at Francis’ reflection on those deep, reflective orbs. “Francis is taking the rental back.”

“Oh,” she whispers. “I need my bookbag, then.”

Francis raises his voice. “I’ll get it for you, ma’am!”

Matthew pops the trunk of the Hummer, and we all toss our shopping bags inside. Soon, Francis returns with Jane’s tan canvas backpack. It’s decorated with enamel pins and puffy keychains.

ing quite He leans against the side of the vehicle, sending my girl a wide, ch
smile. “Here you go, miss.”

osed to Jane takes it from him, careful not to touch his hands. The blush
cheeks makes me want to bash Francis’ head in.

“Why don’t you wear gloves, like Samuel?” Jane asks him, her voic
ook. “It Francis throws a haughty glance in my direction. I return his gaze
icy stare. “Sammy here has a bad habit of forgetting how dead we
‘Why’dstill shakes hands in greeting, and since he’s been in the city all
w.” suspect he wore those leather things all the time.” Francis winks a
because I “Me, on the other hand... Well, I’m careful not to touch anyone who’c
the difference.”

gh first. I gently take hold of Jane’s arm, ushering her toward our car. “V
means is that he never gets laid.”

?” Francis scoffs. “Rude.” He clutches his heart, mocking pain.

et. Do I “Come.” I tug Jane further away from Francis. “It’s time to go.”

e. I feel She leans into my shoulder, tipping her head up. “They’re so *norm*
mouths.

car. Her

casts its

o fixate

load of

orduroy



arming Jane and I sit in the back seat as Matthew drives.

I could have ridden in the passenger seat, but it didn't feel right to sit on her back here alone. I'm sure she feels out-of-place amid creatures despite how *normal* she thinks we are.

low. "Are you hungry?"

Jane straightens, her head swiveling to face me. "Hungry? No."

He "Tired?"

Her lips form a tight smile. "Not really."

Jane. "Then what's on your mind?"

Her eyes dart forward, staring at the back of Matthew's head. She leans closer toward me, her warmth crashing into my side. It soaks into my skin, enveloping me in her scent. With her body pressed against me, I can feel her pulse reverberating through her body as if it were my own.

I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry.

Jane's hair brushes against my cheek as she closes the distance between us. "I don't think he likes me," she whispers.

My eyes fixate on a strand of her golden mane, and as if I need an excuse to touch her, I lace it around my finger and tuck it behind her ear. "Matthew isn't much of a talker."

"No, ma'am, I'm not. But my boy likes you, so I guess you're a good girl." Matthew's voice booms from the front seat. He adjusts his rearview mirror, positioning it so he can give Jane a kind smile.

Jane's cheeks flame red. "Shoot. I forgot about the ultra-sensitive thing."

"It's fine." Matthew redirects his attention to the dark stretch of road ahead of us. "If I didn't like you, you'd know."

The car goes quiet, but Jane doesn't scoot away from me. And

second her body heat remains next to mine, I grow warmer, like I'm t
o leave from a deep freeze. I grab her hand instinctually.

like us, "What are you doing?"

I examine her fingers for a moment, debating. "Are you scared to
me?"

She puffs out her cheeks. "Um, no?"

Smiling, I tug my glove off. "Good." I place my hand against hers
touching. Her skin is clammy, but not uncomfortable. Instantly, th
penetrates my exterior, working its way into my bones. I lean m
ie leans against the back of the seat, sighing. "Am I cold?"

y chest, Jane laces our fingers, strengthening her hold. "A little."

feel her I roll my head to the side, pressing my nose into her hair. "Do y
strawberry shampoo?" I already know the answer.

Jane chuckles. "Maybe. How'd you know?"

ween us. *God*, if I could just wrap her around me like a blanket, I think
content for the rest of my life. "And toasted bagels? Are those your fav

excuse She gasps, pulling away so she can look at me fully. "I had them
fatthewwork every night!" Her lashes flutter. "Could you smell them on me w
were at the apartments?"

lright." A leisure smile lights my lips, and I incline my head.

mirror, "What else could you tell about me? I mean, before things went wro

"Hm. Well, I know you like to play Lo-Fi before bed. I *also* know y
hearing to do something very unruly before going to sleep."

She glares at me. "You know nothing."

d ahead I arch one brow. "Are you sure?" I cock my head to the side, purs
lips. "I think I remember a little vibrating device buzz-"

l every Her hand flies over my mouth. My tongue darts out on impulse, tast

hawingskin. *Salty*. She narrows her eyes. “*Shut up.*”

Matthew coughs.

I grab her wrist, peeling her hand away. “My apologies, sweet Jane.”
Matthew clears his throat, garnering Jane’s attention. “Have you lived in New York your whole life?”

She settles back into her seat, scooting a few inches away from me.
“No. I grew up in North Carolina.”

Matthew nods. “Did you go to college?”

Jane frowns. “No.”

“What’d you do in the city?”

“Work.”

Matthew’s eyes widen. “Oh, so you were a working girl?”

Jane frowns. “Yes. Wait, no? I was a barista.”

“Ah.” Matthew glides the car off an isolated exit, turning right. “I’d behave any family?”

Jane squirms beside me, crossing her arms over her chest. “Not a beforeclose with.”

“So it’s okay that you’ve moved out of your apartment and left without notifying anyone? A search party won’t be issued?”

She shivers, her shoulder bumping into mine. “No one will come looking?”
I place my arm around her, staring daggers into the back of Matthew’s head. “He’s just being worrisome. You’re completely safe with us, promise.”

Matthew gives us a slight nod without turning around. I think he’s being mythat if he were to make eye contact with me, my stare would kill him being cautious. There’s a man there who will hunt us the moment he finishes her

Sam is missing. We were careful, but I wanted to make sure he couldn't find us through your disappearance."

"Jane relaxes against my arm. "What kind of man?"
lived in "A powerful one." I answer, holding her a little closer.

Damn.



Do you

"We're here," Matthew announces.

my I'm He swerves the car, bouncing us down a rough gravel road. The trees
in the wind, their branches scraping together.

the city Our destination is a safe house, one of many we've acquired through
the last century. This particular section of land rests deep within Kentucky.
"Appalachian Mountains, hidden from civilization. The only people
they might stumble upon us are hikers, but even then they're unlikely, as
Jane. I they stick to the designated trails.

Jane will be safe here.

realizes Secluded, but safe.

n. "I'm She stirs beside me, her limp form returning to consciousness after
falls out nap. "Where are we?" she asks, wiping her hand over her mouth.

I smile at her. "Kentucky."

i't trace "Kentucky?" She makes a face before turning to look outside her window.

The forest thickens as we move further down the drive. I've been here once before, when I signed the deed using an alias. We haven't neared the return since then.

A small cabin sits off the road to our right, but we blur past it. Jane glances back as the sight fades away.

"That one isn't for us." I clarify.

A few minutes later, we arrive at a larger structure. It's another cabin that's undergone extensive remodels since its foundation was laid. The roof slants over a sliding glass doorway, and the deck spreads around the building. I'm sorry to say that it hasn't been maintained well. Vines creep around the wooden protrusions and up the stairs, and unkempt foliage is completely engulfed our lawn. Weeds, saplings, and wildflowers scatter the entire area, overflowing from the forest's edge.

Jane lets out a throaty gasp. "It's beautiful."

As rustles rustle I glance at her, taking in the sight of her awe with a child-like wonder in my own. "Is it?"

Throughout She doesn't hear me. Matthew stops the car beside a lanky, hooded man in Kentucky's *Francis*.

le who "How the Hell did he get here before us?" Matthew asks.

long as Francis opens Jane's door for her, and she slides out, her backpack mounted on her shoulder.

I restrain myself from snarling like one of the beasts in the woods and shout after her. "Ditched the car so quickly, Francis?"

a brief He winks at me. "Wasn't hard. All I had to do was sink it in a lake."

Matthew's car door slams behind us. "Always taking shortcuts."

ndow. Francis?”

re only I go to help Matthew with the bags in the trunk, but as soon as I tu
eded to around, I’m assaulted by Jane’s lush giggles.

She’s blushing again, her cheeks a vivid shade of pink. Francis has
frowns around his arm, and his hand is on her shoulder.

Touching her.

This time, I don’t hold back the primal urge to growl at him like a
oin, but His eyes dart toward mine, flashing red. I keep my voice low and cal
he roof so Jane can’t hear. “*Touch her again, Francis, and I will end you.*”

e entire He drops his hand, smile vanishing.

is wrap Matthew slams the trunk shut. “Come on. We need to get you se
age has before someone gets killed.”

fter the *Agreed.*

I approach Jane, grabbing her hand. I gesture toward Francis. “I’ll t
bag.”

nder of He rolls his eyes, but drops the backpack into my open palm.

That’s better.

figure. Jane leans into me as we walk across the lawn, dodging pot-hol
every step. “Are you and Francis arguing about something?”

I force a fake smile. “Not at all.”

already She shrugs. “Sure seems like you are.”

“I can assure you we *aren’t*.”

is I step Matthew is the first up the creaky stairs, and he pulls a single, shi
from his pocket, unlocking the sliding doors. “It might be a little col
nearby place doesn’t have central heating or air. The old owner liked things r
you know what I mean,” he says, his voice echoing the moment h
s, huh, inside.

I gesture for Jane to follow him, and she does, stepping into the dark
rn back Francis and I remain stationary on the porch, our gaze locked in a
stare.

her bag Finally, he drops his gaze. “Look, man. I’m not trying to steal your ;
“What *are* you trying to do, Francis?”

My brother shoves a hand through his curly hair, smiling shee
maniac. “Testing a theory?”

culated Jane sticks her head back through the door. “Are you coming, Sa
Her eyes are wide with uncertainty.

I soften like a block of melted butter. She needs me, and Francis
ttled incan become all-consuming if I let them.

“Of course,” I tell her, turning away from my brother. Without a se
hesitation, I follow her through the passageway and into our new home
ake her

es with



iny key

ld. This Matthew approaches me as Jane skirts around the living room, her
ustic, if trailing over the dusty furniture. He lowers his voice to a whisper. “Yo
ie steps to hunt before sundown.” His eyes dart over my face. “You look we

ness. miserable. Keeping your strength is important now, Sam. Especially mutual want to protect this human.”

My vision darkens as I watch Jane examine the open room with wicker girl-” He’s right. I haven’t drank since my first night in New York, over ago. With as much time as I’ll be spending with Jane and her warmth, apishly easy to let my guard slip. If I bit her without permission... that unforgivable.

Samuel?” “I’ll go after I show her around. She may look like none of bothering her, but it has to be. She’s just discovered the monsters’ antics nightmares are real and that she’ll be living with them in order to stay I send him a tense look. “I’m waiting for her to break.”

condition of His brows shoot up. Behind us, Francis enters the front door with full of firewood. He releases the stack, letting it topple to the floor near furnace. Jane jumps at the noise, her pink skin prickling with fear.

I turn back to Matthew, glaring. “You’ll stay with her. Francis and hunt together.”

Matthew’s lip twitches, his eyes alight with humor. He pats my shoulder and walks away.

Francis kicks the stack of wood, smiling wolfishly. “I’m ready when you are, *brother*.”

Ignoring him, I cross the room to Jane’s side. She’s busy admiring wicker candle holder, an original piece from the cabin’s first owner. I close, placing my lips near her ear. “What do you think?”

She jumps again; her berry colored lips quivering. The moment our fingers touch, she relaxes. “It’s beautiful.” Her arms tighten around her back and “Beautiful, but cold.”

Francis tosses a log into the fireplace.

if you “It’ll be warm soon,” I say, but I move a little further away from
that my coldness doesn’t leech away her heat. “Let me show you the
le eyes.before I leave.”

a week Fear flashes across her features. “You’re leaving?”

, it’d be My lip quirks on one side. “No. I’m just... going into the woods for

at’d be Her brows scrunch together. “Why?”

I take her arm and guide her away, my fingers clasping the soft cloth
this issweater. “To hunt,” I reply, my stare fixated on the emotions as the
of herbehind her eyes. Shock. Curiosity. I want to say I see fear, but I can’t
alive.”sure.

I lead her past the kitchen. “Matthew will stock the fridge for you
an armI’m gone.”

near the She doesn’t respond, so I take her further into the home. A long, dark
hallway separates the common area from the master bedroom and bath.
d I willWhen we enter the shadows, her fingers loop around my wrist. I let go
sleeve, content with the physical contact as a replacement.

houlder “Where are we going?” Jane whispers, her grasp tightening.

“Almost there.”

ien you At the end of the long corridor, we come to a door. The only door. It
occurred to me that Jane and I would share the only bedroom until now.
a rusticthe realization sends a jolt of pleasure to my cock. *Shit*. She probably
lean inwant to share this space with me. I may feel at ease with her, but she
right to be wary of me.

ir gazes Either way, this room is hers.

chest. I flip the light switch, brightening the area.

This portion of the home is the same size as the living room and
combined. To the right are two doors, one leading into the master bath.

her, so and the other opening up to the walk-in closet. A four-poster bed rests
e room the opposite wall, its wooden beams holding up a canopy of white silk

The mattress is bare, but the closet is stocked with lavish sheets and bl

Jane exhales a shaky breath. “This is *huge*. Who built this place? I
a bit.” they could have sectioned this out and made a few guest rooms, at leas

I arch a brow. “You don’t like it?”

h of her She shakes her head. “No, I adore it.” Stepping past me, she cross
y flashroom, her feet pattering over the wooden floor. “I could actually do j
t be too here.”

I lean against the door frame. “You do yoga?”

u while Jane shrugs. “No, but I *could*.”

My chest rumbles with an unexpected chuckle. Jane is a very
rkened woman, indeed. I point past her head. “The bathroom is in there, a
hroom. closet is through the door beside it.”

o of her She stumbles across the space, bouncing on her heels in excitement.
see her face as she peeks into the bathroom, but I imagine it’s
awestruck as when she saw the bedroom.

I’ve never been so captivated by another person in all my life. Hell,
t hadn’t think I’ve been this interested in anyone *ever*.

ow, but Jane’s wavy hair flies around her shoulders as she turns to face r
doesn’t cheeks are rosy again. “Is this the only room?”

e has a I nod.

“And will we be... Is everyone staying here? Your brothers, too?”

“No. They’ll be in the cabin near the road, keeping watch.”

“So, it’ll be just us, then?”

kitchen I smile. “Yes, just us. My brothers will be coming back and forth, I’
throom They get bored on their own.”

against She shivers, wrapping her arms around herself in a hug. “Will you t
fabric.couch, or...?” Her eyebrows knit together as she looks at me inquisitiv
ankets. My stomach lurches. “If that’s what you want.”

I mean, She gnaws on her lower lip, and just when I’m about to soothe av
t.” nerves, my brother approaches, his footsteps sounding down the hall.

“Hey, Jane?”

ises the Her chin lifts.

yoga in “I have to go now. Matthew will be here if you need anything.”

Francis stops just behind me.

“I’ll only be gone an hour or two.”

Jane nods her head, but her worried expression remains. It takes
uniqueounce of willpower I have to turn and leave her there, alone in the cen
and thestrange, new world.

. I can’t

just as

I don’t

ne. Her



Most people think hunting is about the chase.

It isn’t.

m sure. Hunting requires patience and careful planning; one must move s
follow the prey’s movements, and time their attack perfectly.

make the Francis flanks me as I stalk a wild boar through the overgrown forest. I observe of us being careful not to rustle the fallen leaves. I stand on an exposed path, observing the animal as its tusks graze the ground.

Boar isn't my favorite, but its life force will strengthen me, and that matters. When it lifts its snout in an alerted position, I lunge, fling my arms around its wide belly.

It writhes in my tightened arms, squealing with a hideously loud scream. Moments later, Francis' hands wrap around its neck, squeezing.

The boar goes limp, its cries silencing.

We waste no time. The blood will be cold soon.

My fangs elongate, oozing venom as I close in on the creature's coat. They puncture the skin with ease, sinking deep beneath its surface. I tighten involuntarily, attaching to the beast. Blood, tantalizing and warm, flows into my mouth.

God, a boar shouldn't taste this good. My vision grows fuzzy as I devour the animal, my teeth digging deeper and deeper and *deeper*. I'm aware of Francis feeding beside me, but the physical world feels so far away I nearly forget reality altogether. The only thing that matters is the warm blood spilling into my mouth, down my throat, heating its way into my stomach.

I gorge myself, suckling until there's nothing left but flesh and fur. When I drop the boar, Francis has backed away, his elbow propped against the trunk of an old oak tree.

"You've been starving yourself, brother." He frowns, disapproving.

I wipe my mouth, and the back of my hand becomes stained with crimson.

"I don't need much."

He rolls his eyes, their irises shining in the darkness. "Yes, you don't. Especially now."

st, both I straighten my shirt, pulling stray swine hair from the fabric. “What
ed root, supposed to mean?”

He snickers. “Are you serious, Sam?” He steps toward me, into the
at’s all the moon’s beam. “You have someone to protect now. Someone who
ing my something.”

Another ping of jealousy shoots up my spine. “She means somet
screech.*me*, Francis.”

He lifts his arm, incredulous. “No fucking shit!” Shaking his h
gawks at me. “And if she means something to you, then we’ll protect h
you.” His finger stabs the air in my direction. “You’ve got to get ov
rse fur fears so you can be strong for her.”

My jaw “I don’t have a fear of blood.” I scowl.

sweet, “You fear what it could do to you. What it *did* to you.” He steps
“But that’s over now. It has to be. You drink to be strong for her.
cling to story.”

ware of My teeth grind together, my hands clenching into tight balls. “W
y that Ifuck do you think I’m doing out here? I drank. I’ll continue to do
rm heat heavy weight drops in my stomach. “What’s it to you, Francis? Why
ach. suddenly have an interest in how I protect Jane?”

By the For the first time all night, Francis looks truly uncomfortable. He di
inst the gaze, frowning at his feet. “You don’t believe in it.”

I shake my head, dumbfounded. “In *what?*”

He shoves a hand through his curly hair. “The soulmate theory.”
rimson. My bones turn to ice. “Is this the teaching of that deranged var
Italy? He had a lot of theories. None of them sounded part
ou do compelling.”

He shrugs his shoulders, shoving his hands into his pockets. “You l

it's that a lot. There's no reason for you to feel those things for a human unless special."

light of "She is special."

means His features flare with annoyance. "Then why wouldn't you think it possible to have a perfect match, Sam? Someone who makes you feel something to you otherwise wouldn't."

"I believe in perfect compatibility. I believe there are some individuals who just click. I *don't* believe a fraudulent, maddened vampire would ever. But other vampires know about mating bonds just so they can feed on you about their miserable, long lives."

Francis lets out a low, guttural hiss, his chest flaring. "The man who sold me nothing but the truth when I needed it most." His eyes flash closer before fading to their normal dark shade. "Just think about it. You don't often to be such a prick all the time."

I turn away, calling over my shoulder. "And you didn't have to flatter that the only girl I've ever brought to meet the family."

so." A

do you

rops his

vampire in

icularly

like her.

A lot. There's no reason for you to feel those things for a human unless she's special."

"She *is* special."

His features flare with annoyance. "Then why wouldn't you think it's possible to have a perfect match, Sam? Someone who makes you *feel* when you otherwise wouldn't."

"I believe in perfect compatibility. I believe there are some individuals who just click. I *don't* believe a fraudulent, maddened vampire who sells other vampires knowledge about mating bonds just so they can feel better about their miserable, long lives."

Francis lets out a low, guttural hiss, his chest flaring. "The man was kind. He sold me nothing but the truth when I needed it most." His eyes flare red before fading to their normal dark shade. "Just think about it. You don't have to be such a prick all the time."

I turn away, calling over my shoulder. "And you didn't have to flirt with the only girl I've ever brought to meet the family."







The air is thick with anticipation until Samuel returns. I'm perched on the isolated, worn-down couch in front of the fire, and Matthew is completely still beside the bar separating the kitchen from the living room.

Matthew is completely silent and motionless, not even breathing. *Unnerving.* His long inky hair falls down to his shoulders, framing his equally dark eyes.

There are still so many things I don't know about my current situation, and I wonder who this man is that they're so afraid of.

I've been wondering about the process of becoming a vampire. Samuel used to be human, fighting in the Mexican-American war, and I wonder how he probably lead a decent life before his transformation.

I want to know more about his world. About him.

The door opens with no indication that someone is on the porch. No footsteps, no knocks. It swings wide to reveal a disheveled Samuel and his cocky younger brother. I'm *assuming* Francis is younger, anyway.

Francis is the wildest of the men, with a snarky attitude and a smile that can dazzle almost anyone. He's sweet, cute, and comfortable to be around.

he isn't Samuel. A single glance from him isn't enough to set me racing.

Like the look Samuel is giving me now.

His gaze moves up my body until his eyes meet mine, and a wariness spreads across his face. The orange light from the fire illuminates his features, making him appear dreamlike. "Miss me?"

My lips twitch, but I keep a straight face. "You, um. You have blood on your hand." I wince, gesturing to the bright red stain smeared on the back of his hand.

His eyes dart down, examining himself. "That I do." He arches both eyebrows, shrugging apologetically.

Matthew finally moves, his statue-like presence crackling to life. "I need to get for us to leave. Sun will be up in a few minutes."

Francis stands in the open doorway. He nods to Matthew before sending me a wink my way. "Have a good day, ma'am. Keep my boy safe."

I bid them both farewell in a small voice. I've always had a bit of a streak in me, but working customer service gave me enough practice being bold and cheery. That training has seemed to disappear in the presence of this band of vampiric brothers.

Matthew shuts the door behind him, leaving me alone with Samuel.

He's in the kitchen, running the faucet over his bloody hand.

"Did you eat... deer?" I ask, balking at the mental image of him drinking from a stag.

He turns the sink off. "No."

My eyes widen. "A hiker?"

He laughs, his stark white teeth flashing. "No. A boar."

"That's worse than a deer, I think."

y heart Samuel saunters toward me, eyes darkening with each step. “How feel?”

I swallow the sudden knot in my throat. “Like I’m dreaming.”

n smile Sighing, he collapses on the couch beside me, our thighs touching. ites his that way for me sometimes, too.” He leans back, lacing his hands behind head.

lood on My finger traces circles over the fabric of my pants. “If the sun is back of up, shouldn’t you go find a coffin to sleep in?”

Samuel barks out a laugh, his eyes squeezing closed. “A coffin? / . brows, serious?”

My lips curl. “How am I supposed to know how you sleep? Vampi t’s time coffins are a thing, you know.”

“If I need to sleep, I can do so anywhere. Here, on the couch. In t nding a Outside with the sun shining down on me.” He shrugs, his eyes danci my face. “Like I said before, the sun doesn’t hurt me. I might *look de f a shy* I’d be fine the moment night returned.”

to fake “Are you going to sleep today?”

resence He shakes his head, slowly moving it back and forth. “We in automatic shades when we bought this place. They should still work. I up and watch over you.”

A shiver works over my spine. “Tell me about the man who’ll con rinking you when he realizes you left the city.”

Samuel’s arms drop, and he sits a little straighter, his gaze dar “Rune. He was my Lord’s brother.”

“Your Lord?”

He inclines his chin, nodding. “My maker.”

I tuck my fingers between my thighs, preventing them from shaking

do you my answers are so close. “You said he was your Lord’s brother. Is he anymore?”

Samuel’s face blanks. “My Lord is dead.”

“Feels “Oh, I’m so sorry—”

mind his “I killed him.”

He freezes, a strange expression crossing his face, as if he hadn’t expected to speak the admission. His lips press tightly together.

Though his words are raw and powerful, I lean in closer, letting my shoulder rest on his. “Can I ask why?”

Samuel sighs, his exhale long and slow. “Because he wasn’t a nice person and his shoulders droop. “He changed me after our time spent in the war.

He’d taken up arms merely for amusement, but when he saw what I was capable of, he kept me around. We were alone for a long time, and he only offered me two paths; death or consumption.”

“I’m sad, but Samuel studies my face, looking for a hint of discomfort or distress. I remain composed. This exchange is helping me to determine who Samuel is for better or worse.

“Eventually he got bored. Matthew was next. He inflicted the most gruesome acts on Matt that he had on me. We were both victims of his cycle of need and addiction, with Matt getting the worst of it. He got me after weeks in chains, with no explanation.” He shakes his head, his eyes glazing over as he remembers the horrors of his past. “But Francis was the last straw. He changed him on his nineteenth birthday, kidnapped him and imprisoned him for a week. He revealed his sick plan to me.” His eyes squeeze shut. “I wanted to release him in his home village, near his family’s sharecropping claim. He claimed that murdering everyone he knew in life would make him the strongest of vampires.”

he not “That’s terrible.” I place my hand on Samuel’s knee, squeezing.

He nods, his jaw tightening. “Yes, it is. So I killed him. That night, him a girl, and when he bit into her neck, I wrapped a metal cord around his throat and squeezed until his head hit the floor.” He shakes his head. “That bastard was still alive, even then. So I bashed his skull in with his unexpected grand piano.” He makes eye contact with me, placing his hand over mine. “It was a very brutal scene.”

ing my The chill of his hand soaks into mine, but I don’t care. The sadness in his gaze reveals the depths of his grief. Does he regret killing this monster? “The man?” it sorrow from simply having to explain to me what happened? “And why did he had why Rune called you to New York? That’s why he’s coming for you?” He raises his brows. “No, actually. Rune never discovered the truth about his brother’s death. We told him Barros flew into a rage and punched through the wall, causing the piano to crash through the upstairs banister and crush the waitress. I He had no evidence to prove otherwise, but...” His lip curls on one side. “Samuel is, “He’s always suspected me. The man hates my guts. He wanted me to be at the Night Order meeting in New York, so I’d be forced to visit him. He’s the same he’s a Lord, a maker, I’m obligated to do his bidding. I spent my first year in this cruel city chasing new vampires and making them report back to him.”

ot three “So, he’s like a vampire ring leader?”

lossy as Samuel snorts. “Something like that. The problem is that we left them alone. He before the meeting, a meeting to which I was *summoned* to attend. The Night Order takes their rules seriously, so the moment I slip, Rune will have Barros down.”

ick. He “And me, too.” My words aren’t a question. I see things clearer now. “I know this man has it out for Samuel, and he finds out Samuel helped me, *she’ll tell secrets with me*, then it’s all over. I’ll be the first to go.”

Samuel's hands are on me then, touching my chin, caressing my
I gifted "We swept your place clean, and we didn't leave a trail. It's unlike
und his connect us together, and even if he does, this location is secluded. He
d. "The find us. He *won't*."

favorite I stare into his dark eyes. "I trust you."

line. "It He sighs, relieved. "Good."

His hands drift down my neck and arms, and I feel a different kind
s in his wash over me. No longer fear, but something else entirely. "This gro
r? Or is Night Order... they have regulations that prohibit you from informing
l this is about your true nature?"

' He nods, and I lean closer toward him. "Then saving me condemn
h about but you did it anyway."

hed the Samuel doesn't answer, and the longer he stares at me, the more m
sh him swells.

ie side. "Will you take me to bed?" My voice is soft, but I'm no longer nerv
o attend As soon as I saw Samuel, I knew without a doubt that I
l. Since extraordinary, and by some miraculous luck, he felt the same s
week in something special in me. He *cares* about me.

His gaze flashes a deep, searing crimson. "Would you like that?"

I nod, biting my lower lip. "Yes."

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The moment we enter the bedroom, Samuel opens the closet and reveals a pile of bedding. Hanging behind them are all of my new clothes, including my new underwear. *Who the hell put those there?*

My heart Matthew had disappeared after stocking the fridge, and imagining sifting through my new panties causes my cheeks to heat.

Samuel grabs a bundle of blankets and tosses them onto the bed. When my back is turned, I slide into the closet and snatch a new bra and panty set with a thin, stretchy nightgown. The gown isn't exactly sexy, but the lace underwear will make up for it.

"I'll, um, be right back," I mutter, before closing myself into the bathroom.

My reflection stares back at me from the large mirror spanning the width of the door. I wasn't able to brush my hair this morning, and it's unruly with its naturally wavy texture. I attempt to tame it with my fingers, but it stubbornly stays wild. I hadn't thought about putting on makeup, and now I'm in the other room. Now I wished I had grabbed it. My cheeks are burning, and my forehead is dotted with freckles, standing out against my pale skin. Defeated, I sigh.

I undress and spin, taking in my figure. My shape is something I've been self-conscious about. My former partners had no issue with Samuel is a work of art - perfect in every way. A literal *vampire*. Would rolls and dimpled thighs be a problem for him?

I think about locking myself in here forever and not coming out, but that would be even more mortifying. Plus, Samuel would just break down the door.

Pushing away all insecurities, I shimmy into the lace undies. The briefs are high waisted, so they wrap around my fupa like a security blanket. The bra pushes my large boobs up so that they're the center of attention. Scanning myself again, I'm impressed. *Not bad.*

Quickly, I shrug on the gown and leave the bathroom.

Samuel sits on the bed, facing me. His eyes burn bright as they trail down my body. "Better?" he asks, smiling.

I thread my fingers in front of my waist, nodding.

He pats the bed beside him. "Come. Sit."

I do as he says, nervousness squirming in my belly.

He reaches toward me, his hand skirting across my jaw as he trails down my skin. "You still aren't scared of me? After everything I've told you?"

"No, Sam." My voice catches. "Can I call you that? Your brothers call you Sam."

He grins briefly, displaying his pearly whites. "My *friends* call me Jane." He leans closer, eyes flashing. "Are we friends, Jane?"

The long strands of his hair hang over his forehead, emphasizing the intensity of his gaze. I swallow hard, struggling to find my voice. "So."

Sam's eyes narrow. "Here's the thing, Jane. I don't want to be your friend."

always friend.” One of his icy hands lands on my bare thigh, and a gush of pleasure radiates from my core. “I want to be something else to you, Jane. I want to be something more. Do you understand?”

It’s getting harder to breathe, harder to think. I nod in agreement. “Yes, but that wants me as much as I want him.”

Our noses are inches apart, and I can feel his breath as he speaks. “Your words, sweet Jane. Tell me you want me, and I’ll give you everything you want. Relinquishing every thought except my feelings of need for him, I whisper my answer. “I want you.”

His eyes spark red again. “Good girl.”

Before I have time to think, Sam is on his knees in front of me. I have no time to be nervous or insecure. Samuel simply *takes me*, and by giving me up the control, I’m allowing myself to just *feel*. His hands press my thigh, causing my nightgown to ride up to my hips. My lace panties stretch over my cunt, but he loops his index finger under the material and shoves it to the side.

We gasp at the same time. He stares at my pink wetness with the same starved gaze I’ve seen all night, only now it’s untamed, primal. His eyes are fixed toward mine, captivating me. “Have you done this before, sweet girl?” I brace my hands on either side of me, gripping the edge of the mattress. “A few times, but-

He drops his face between my thighs, placing his mouth on me. “Go ahead, Jane. I want to taste you.”

His tongue parts my lips, traveling upward in a torturously slow lick. His tongue reaches my clit. He feathers my intimates with feverish kisses, lapping at my wetness. “I think you’re so beautiful, Jane. Stunning. A-

Watching him is the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen. His chin glances over his shoulder as he looks up at me. “You’re so beautiful, Jane. Stunning. A-

f warmheartthrob.” His hand moves up my inner thigh, leaving goosebump to you.wake. He rubs his finger through my slickness, wetting them. “Is this than the vibrator? You think I can make you come just as hard?” His Samueldips inside my channel, stretching me.

Holy shit. I nod my head. “Y-yes.”

s. “Use He smiles his devilish smile. “Let’s find out.” And then he lowers his hing.” again, placing his mouth over my clit as his finger works inside me.

breathe Never in a million fucking years did I think I’d be here with this his knees in front of me. I think back to the elevator when we first n how out of reach he had seemed. *Look at me now.* I spread my thighs ave npushing my hips down to get more friction. My core hums with pl ng himbuilding with each stroke of his tongue.

is wide, My head falls back, a moan escaping my lips. Samuel groans betw i acrosslegs, causing his tongue to vibrate. *More.* I want him touching me, it to theme, hammering into me like I’m a rag doll. “More,” I whimper.

Sam adds another finger, stretching me. “You like it harder, bat e sameRougher? Faster? Tell me. Your wish is my command.”

yes dart I reach between us, rubbing my clit in his absence. He growls, pu away. “Tell me.”

mattress. “Just fuck me.” I whimper, pressing closer. If he doesn’t give m soon, I’ll be a puddle of nothingness on the floor.

ddamn. Samuel’s eyes burn bright red. “Fuck you?”

until it My head bobs eagerly. I reach up, stretching the hem of my gow g at myuntil it’s tucked beneath my bra, enticing him. He stares at the bla filled with curves that beckons him. His jaw goes lax, unable to look stens as “Take it all off,” he whispers.

fucking “What?” His fingers slide out of me, and I grieve their de

is in itsthoroughly.

s better Instead of answering, Samuel stands. He maneuvers me like a s fingertugging my nightgown over my head as he bends over my chest. With precision, he releases the clasp of my bra, letting it fall to my waist.

When my breasts are revealed, he pauses. “Did I say you were beautiful? He drops to his knees again. “What I mean to say was seductively tantalizing.”

An absolute succubus.” He shoves his hands beneath my knees and man on upward, folding me.

ret, and And then his mouth is on me again. His arm snakes up my chest, kissing wider,my breast. My nipples stand to attention, and he clasps one between pleasure,fingers, tugging as he feasts on me. The sensation is a shock to my system,

causing a fresh wave of pleasure to overtake me. I tremble above him, my pleas slipping from my lips. “More, Sam. Please. I’m so close.”

fucking He moans against me, his voice vibrating through my clit. That sultry noise sends me over the edge. My body tenses, tightening on my girl?level as the pleasure bubbles over. I cry out, gazing down at him with

eyes. His stare captures me, forcing me to maintain eye contact as I lose my sense of self. My release is violent, made more explosive by Sam’s constant

moans against my clit. I come until I see stars, and then keep coming, my orgasm stretching out longer than it ever has before.

He moreorgasm stretching out longer than it ever has before.

Sam takes my cues as I fall from my high, slowing his pace as he licks me clean.

My breaths come out ragged. “You didn’t give me what I wanted,” I accuse. “I asked you to fuck me, Sam.”

His lips trail over my thigh, peppering my skin with kisses. “You come yet, princess.”

My chest warms at his term of endearment. This man is... more than just a man.

deserve. Even still, I want him. Now, tomorrow, forever. His lips
puppet, searing eyes, the silky tone of his voice.

expert “And now that I have?”

His fingers trail up my hips as he lifts himself, hovering over me
utiful?” that you have, we get to continue the fun.” He grins, his black locks
alizing over his forehead.

pushes When his lips meet mine, I am surprised by the tenderness. Inst
feathers over my lips with a shocking gentleness. His mouth opens s
reading and I can taste myself all over him. Warmth spreads through me, an
een his want to do is kiss him like this until the sun sets, preferably while he’s
system, deep inside me.

, needy But there’d be an imbalance there. If he wouldn’t take me until
first, then he should get the same treatment.

t single Braver now that he’s tasted me, I push him away. Shock flashes
n every eyes, but it evaporates once he sees my expression. “Take off your p
th wide order.

ose my He cocks his head to the side, arching a brow. “Aren’t you going
ntinued please?”

ng, my I reach between us and begin to do it for him. He doesn’t stop me.

have the black denim slid down to his thighs. A large cock-sized lump
icks me to attention between us, concealed by his gray boxers. I glance up
suddenly a little nervous.

ted,” I He places his hand on my head, trailing his fingers through my ha
okay, sweet girl. I promised you’d be safe with me, and I meant i
hadn’t there.” As we stare at one another, an overwhelming sense of tru

comfort passes over me. His expression is soft, gentle. Encouraged, I
: than I boxers down, too.

His cock stretches out between us, and God, that *girth*. Carefully, my hand around him, barely able to touch my middle finger to my Samuel steps closer, letting out a low groan.

“Now I want to please him, to make him feel just as good as he made me skating Those throaty, deep moans are intoxicating, and I want to hear so many of them.

I stroke over his length once before placing my lips over his head, slightly, the soft skin there. He grips a handful of my hair, holding me tightly and all forcing my movements. After a few sweet kisses and one hungry lick I buried as much of him as I can into my mouth.

Samuel’s hold on me grows firmer, and he groans again. “Prince I came don’t have to keep doing this.” But even as he speaks, he rocks into hips swaying. I hum with satisfaction over his cock.

“Dear fucking God, Jane. Do that again.”

I continue to moan, staring up at him through my lashes as I loosen and take more of him.

“So warm, so fucking warm.” He mutters. The crimson fires in his eyes ablaze, brighter than I’ve ever seen them. His hips sway more feverish Soon, he was about to succumb to his innermost desires. He’s on the brink of stands control.

at him, *Good.*

I reach up, touching my breasts as I suck. His eyes dart to my hand, his. “It’s groans again, leaning his head backward. “Jane.”

I keep going, moaning, touching, sucking his cock. The next time I glance down, his pupils have dilated, his eyes more vivid than a sunset. He yanks his hips back, pulling away from my mouth. “I can’t grits, but his words are muffled.

I wrap Muffled by the two long, deathly sharp incisors dipping below his thumb.lip.

He takes another step away. "It's okay. Everything's okay." He senses how he feels. His eyes closed. "Put your gown back on."

Why more I slump into a sitting position on the floor, frowning. "Did I do something wrong?"

kissing His nostrils flare, but he keeps his eyes shut. "No. I thought I could kiss you, but not but I can't."

Why, I take A searing flash of shame settles in my gut. Does he... not like me? Does he just not like me? "Oh," is all I manage to say.

Yes, you His eyes snap open, and their hue dims. "It's nothing like that, Jane. I know, but his He grimaces. "I haven't drunk enough human blood to resist you while I got too excited, and I really, *really* don't want to bite you."

"You just ate," I say numbly.

my jaw "Sex brings out my dark side, Jane. I can normally control it, but not with you." His eyes narrow, gaze darkening. "You're something else. So sexy. So *warm*." He groans again, closing his eyes. "If we were truly, as if going, I'd bite you. Drink from you."

of losing My hurt lessens, but only a little. "Would that be such a bad thing? In the paranormal romance novels I've read, a vampire wanting to bite the heroine during sex is erotic. It might hurt, but I have a knack for being able to withstand discomfort. I could take *him*, all of him.

Samuel pulls up his pants and kneels before me. Gently, he touches my cheek, the coolness of his finger chilling over my skin. "Yes, Jane. It might be a bloody bad thing. Do you see these teeth?" He bares his fangs.

"No," he Eyes widening, I nod, mesmerized by the deadly points. His fangs are serrated on the edges like a shark, clearly designed to be lethal.

s upper “They’re coated with poison. If I bite you, my venom will seep in
bloodstream and make you feel like you’ve been sedated with a conco
queezesparty drugs.”

I swallow, still engrossed by his incisors. “Would it hurt to be bitten
nothing “Maybe at first, but the poison is meant to soothe the victi
submission.”

do this, Suddenly, Sam swoops his arms around me, pulling me against hi
As he cradles me in his arms, I feel weightless. He gently places me
humanmattress. “I’ll make it up to you, I promise. We’ll try again after I’ve
satiated my appetite.” He slides into bed beside me.

I just,” I divert my gaze, focusing my attention on the patterns on the b
e we...“Will you drink from someone else?”

Sam places his hand on the back of my neck, craning to look at me
He inches closer to me. “Matt has blood bags. I’ll have to be careful, i
ut withThey make me a little... *unhinged*, you know? But it’s better than not
o damnany restraint when I finally get to ravish you the way you deserve
to keepJane.”

I press myself against his body, cuddling into his chest. “I can wait
” In allas you want, Sam. All I ask is that you keep being this tender with r
oite theI’ll be yours.” I close my eyes, breathing in his scent.

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“You already are.”

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“They’re coated with poison. If I bite you, my venom will seep into your bloodstream and make you feel like you’ve been sedated with a concoction of party drugs.”

I swallow, still engrossed by his incisors. “Would it hurt to be bitten?”

“Maybe at first, but the poison is meant to soothe the victim into submission.”

Suddenly, Sam swoops his arms around me, pulling me against his chest. As he cradles me in his arms, I feel weightless. He gently places me on the mattress. “I’ll make it up to you, I promise. We’ll try again after I’ve fully satiated my appetite.” He slides into bed beside me.

I divert my gaze, focusing my attention on the patterns on the blanket. “Will you drink from someone else?”

Sam places his hand on the back of my neck, craning to look at me. “No.” He inches closer to me. “Matt has blood bags. I’ll have to be careful, though. They make me a little... *unhinged*, you know? But it’s better than not having any restraint when I finally get to ravish you the way you deserve, sweet Jane.”

I press myself against his body, cuddling into his chest. “I can wait as long as you want, Sam. All I ask is that you keep being this tender with me, and I’ll be yours.” I close my eyes, breathing in his scent.

“Oh, my sweetness.” Sam presses his lips against mine, kissing me softly. “You already are.”







I remain still, perched on the edge of Jane's bed, not wanting to disturb her slumber. The moments seem to stretch on forever, but I savor every second of having her in my embrace. Her body warms mine beneath the covers, heating my skin like a personal furnace. As she sleeps, I count a freckle on her face. There's forty-three of them. After that, I notice a droplet of saliva dribbling from the corner of her lips, and I wipe it away with my thumb.

My precious human is unlike anything I've ever seen. So innocent, so pure, and so easily tarnished.

My fingers trail through her hair, scratching her scalp once I realize it makes her moan in her sleep. I'd do anything to bring this woman a moment of pleasure. Anything.

Just picturing her mouth on my cock, and the way she swirled her tongue over my head. Fuck. She's divine. And her taste. The taste of her tongue is like a blissful blend of sunshine and wild abandon.

When she kicks me in the shin and then rolls over, I decide it's time to get up. I have duties to attend to before she stirs from her sleep.

The sun is at its highest point in the sky, and despite the shades covering each window, I feel weakened as I move through the cabin. My body feels like it's made of lead, as it does every time the sun is shining. I consider getting back into bed and being with Jane until nightfall, but I must pass the temptation.

In the living room, I restart the fire that died earlier in the day. By the time Jane rouses, it should be warm enough in this home to make her comfortable. After that, I snatch the new phone I bought for Jane. She hasn't even opened it yet. Removing it from its packaging, I set the device up and text her number.

Be here at sundown. Bring a blood bag.

A few minutes later, the phone pings.

Matt: For you or her?

I roll my eyes.

Me, you idiot.

Matt: Just making sure. Never know these days.

Whatever. Add this number to your phone. It's Jane's.

After sending the last message, I delete the conversation and place the new device on the coffee table.

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Matt's



I sit the plate of steaming eggs and sauteed mushrooms on the bar just as she stumbles out of the bedroom, her feet pitter-pattering down the hallway.

She strides right past the kitchen and stops in the middle of the living room, scanning her surroundings.

“Boo.”

Her body lurches, and she spins on her heel to face me, hand covering her heart. “Shit, Sam!” Her face is pale, but one of her cheeks has a rosy mark plastered on it from sleep. “I didn’t see you. You need to make more noise or something,” she grumbles.

I simply smile at her, observing the way her nightgown tightens around her thighs as she approaches the bar. Delicious.

“Sit,” I say, gesturing to the plate.

She does as I ask, plopping herself onto the swiveling barstool. She takes a bite of the eggs a second later. “Did you make this?” she asks, before placing another bite into her mouth.

I ignore the sight of her scarlet tongue and the memories it conjures.

“Yes.” I stroke my jaw. “You like it?”

Her throat bobs as she swallows, nodding. “It’s good.”

I turn away, busying myself with tidying the kitchen. Watching her made me want to melt, and I can’t do that right now. It’s like Jane has been imbued with a newfound allure, and everything she does mesmerizes me. My desire to drop to my knees in worship of her is overwhelming.

A knock sounds at the cabin door.

Thank fucking God. Maybe a taste of human blood will wash away my obsessions.

“Come in.”

Matthew opens the door, with Francis standing just behind him. “/ ready?” he asks, voice gruff.

I turn to Jane. “Would you be okay if we left you alone for a few minutes?” I nod toward the coffee table. “I updated your phone. You need to download apps for it or something.”

Jane glances over her shoulder to look at her phone. “You set it up?”

Screwing the lid off a carton of orange juice, I pour her a glassful and set it beside her plate. “I didn’t think you’d mind. But,” I arch one brow, in a serious tone to my voice. “You can’t try to call your family or anything.”

She takes another bite of her eggs, chewing slowly as she stares at me. Eventually, she swallows. “Yeah, I understand. I’ll be fine for a few nights. The shower is calling my name, anyway.”

I bite my lip to prevent myself from groaning aloud at the thought of her voluptuous body, glistening and soaking wet in the shower. My voice is choked when I reply. “Great. We’ll be back before you know it.”

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y these

Are you We're lucky tonight.

At the border of our land, a herd of deer graze the grass in a small c
r thirty Matthew and Francis flank me as we creep closer, marking our targets.
u could We hunt best like this. As a pack, each anticipating the others' actio
reacting on impulse. As we inch closer, we share a concentrated look.

' Before the animals sense our presence, we snatch hold of the creatu
nd slide fangs elongate, excited the moment the warm doe is bucking in my ;
adding bite deep into its neck, silencing its cries.

friends. I gulp down the hot liquid, feeling it scorch my throat and ignite m
from within. Yes. This is what I've been craving; what I wish I cou
at me. with Jane. If I could taste her, drink her essence until it becomes o
minutes. mine...

The creature's neck snaps in my arms. Shit.
t of her I drop it, scowling at it as if it's the reason I have no control. "Matt?
sounds My brother lifts his head from his catch, chin bright red. "What?"
"Give me the blood."

He pats his jacket pocket, shoving a hand inside and pulling free t
“Catch,” he says, before tossing it through the air.

Once I have it in my grasp, I feel a little lighter. This is the cure
insatiable appetite. I’ve fought my demons for a long time, but maybe
have to. Maybe blood was never the problem. It wasn’t what trained
a killer. Barros did that.

My brothers drink from human women on the regular, usually after
become acquainted at a bar and the woman is already intoxicated. I
never felt the thrall of bloodlust like it’s a physical chain wrapped
their throat.

learing. But... maybe I’ve punished myself for long enough.

With my teeth still sharpened, I bite into the bag, draining it. As the
ons and flows into my system, a wave of delight washes over me, a sens
haven’t experienced in what feels like an eternity.

res. My I slouch against the trunk of a tree, closing my eyes as euphoria take
grasp. I The beast within me retreats, tamed by my new sense of relaxati
craving is still there, but it’s not as demanding.

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he bag. By the time we make it back to the cabin, I'm tottering around like
who has had one too many drinks. Francis makes a joke, something at
to my Night Order and their need for control, and I laugh, my smile stretch
I don't twice that my cheeks ache. Matt kicks open the front door, startling me
me into sweet Jane with his rudeness. I shove past him, approaching my tan
human.

they've She's stands from the couch, meeting me halfway. When I reach her
They've hands rub over her arms, her shoulders, her neck. Her gaze flickers o
around face, eyebrows knit together in confusion.

"Has anyone ever told you that you look like a sexier version of *Amanda Seyfried*?" I feel emboldened by the blood, more confident than I have been in the liquidages.

ation I Yes, I'm a monster. I have the power to rip a beating heart from another's chest and consume it. I've done terrible things, experienced horrid scenes as hold. And yet all I want is her.

on. My If I commit any further offences in this life, it will be because of safeguarding this human. *My human.*

Her head jerks to the side, trying to capture the attention of my brothers. I place my finger below her chin and turn her to face me again. *My girl.*

"Who the hell is *Amanda Seyfried*?" she asks.

I gape, appalled. "Love, please tell me you've seen *Jessica's Body*."

Her lip quirks up. "The blonde girl? She's cute, right?"

Trick question? "You're cuter."

She averts her gaze and looks toward my brothers, raising her eyebrows in their direction. "Is he drunk?"

Matt rubs the back of his neck, sighing. "I guess an entire bag of blood is a little too much for his first feeding."

a sailor Francis snorts. "He's fine. Let him live in the clouds for a few hours. The feeling will fade once he builds a tolerance." Francis pats me on the shoulder as he passes us, and I wrap my arm possessively around Jane, my eyes narrowing. I still haven't forgotten how touchy he had been with me yesterday.

Jane's hand rubs over my chest. "So he'll be..." She clears her throat, my "Accustomed to human blood soon?" I smile, biting my lower lip. My head dips to her ear, brushing against her strawberry scented hair. "Very soon." I press my lips over the tip of her earlobe. "I'll be able to fill you so full you're screaming, and nothing will stop me this time."

Her pretty cheeks turn a bright shade of red. "Oh, my God." she mutters. Matt rolls his eyes, but luckily my girl doesn't see. No doubt she'll be embarrassed if she knew they overheard me.

Francis opens the fridge and grabs a six-pack of canned beer. "Care to join me? I'm chill for a while?"

I'm just about to tell them to leave, that way I can take my pretty girls to the bedroom, but Jane speaks before me.

"That sounds nice."

Ugh. Nice.

Francis tosses a can through the air, and Matt catches it. Behind the bar, the fire crackles. Francis nods toward me. "Want one?"

I let out a sound of resignation and lead Jane to the couch, catching a can of beer tossed in my direction.

Even though alcohol has no effect on vampires, old habits die hard. It was with my boys, sharing a cold one... Well, it's not what I desire to be doing this moment, but it's nice.

rs. This Jane ends up with a beer too, and she cracks the top open. I pull her
shoulder into my lap, and soon we're all gathered in a circle around the fireplace.

My eyes “So, Jane. What did you want to be when you grew up?” Francis asks
with a boyish grin stretching wide.

“An artist,” she answers confidently.

throat. “Ah,” Francis nods his head. “So you're one of those artsy girls? The
one who paints shit all over her wall in high school just to piss off her parents?
Her eyebrows rise, a playful smile appearing on her lips. “How
do you know?” She teases.

ing will “I dated a sculptor ten years ago,” Matt says. “God, she was so smart
no one ever tells you how the creative types get all philosophical after s
rumors. had me thinking about String Theory for hours.”

he'd be Francis barks out a laugh. “I feel that. I dated this comic artist once
she was literally the smartest woman I've ever met.”

he if we Matt snorts.

“No, it's true. Smarter than the chemist from 1997.” Francis continues
talking another long sip of his beer.

Jane shifts in my lap. “And you, Sam? Have you ever dated a girl
before?”

I shoot my brothers a tight-lipped smile, hating them for leading
the conversation to past flings. “Maybe once or twice. I haven't been
with anyone in a very long time.”

ing the Her eyes narrow. “Hm,” she hums. “How long?”

Damn.

Sitting Francis coughs into his fist.

loing at My knuckles skate over Jane's arm. “Are we talking relationships or
She rolls her eyes. “When was the last time you slept with anyone?”

er onto I snap my fingers, grinning. “Last night.”

She jabs me with her elbow. “I mean *slept* with.”

sks, his Matt cracks a smile. Dick.

“Oh, thirty years or so?” I squint my eyes, rubbing the base of m

“Something like that.” I silently will her to drop the topic.

he kind She takes another sip of her beer, features lost in thought.

nts?” Francis tosses his empty can onto the coffee table. “What about yo
r’d youJane? How long has it been since you slept with anyone?”

A growl rumbles in my chest, but Jane’s sputtering cough drowns
art. NoShe pulls her beer away from her lips, covering her mouth.

ex. She What an *interesting* response.

She glances between my brothers and me, surprise in her voice. “Me

ce, and I tighten my hold on her, making sure she can’t run away. “I’d say
acceptable question.”

She shifts from side to side, and I ignore the surge of lust bl
ntinues, beneath my jeans with her movements. Her fingers thrum over the alu
of her can. “Six months?” she finally says.

n artist Jealousy flares in my chest. “Is that so?”

“It was one of those dating app things, you know?” She laughs, stu
ing theover her words. “Meaningless. He was only in the city for a business tr

n with I stare at her, emotions battling within me.

Jane and I hadn’t met yet. I didn’t know such a beautifully exotic
existed on this Earth, and therefore, I had no claim on her. But a man
her meaningless sex while on a business trip? Fucking her for a ni
then leaving her lonely? My body buzzes with a mixture of rage and l
r...?” Jane deserves so much more. She deserves endless nights of soul-s
toe-curling pleasure. She deserves to be caressed, kissed, cherished.

Matt clears his throat. "We're, um, going back to our cabin."

I keep my stare locked on Jane. "Good idea."

She wiggles her hips again. *Bad idea.* I grip her ass, holding her steady. The front door opens and shuts again.

Her throat bobs. "Y-your brothers were nice tonight, right?"

"Let's not talk about my brothers right now." I lean into her, inhaling a heady, missheady aroma. "Why don't you tell me more about this man? Did you screw him like you did for me last night, Jane?"

She shrugs. The beer in her hand trembles. I remove it from her grasp, placing it on a table beside the couch. She licks her bottom lip. "I don't remember drunk."

"Drunk? And he took you home? Fucked you?"

"It was just a way to relieve stress, you know. For me and him. I can't remember his name."

I press my nose against her throat, nostrils flaring. God, she smells so good. "But you'll remember mine." I whisper. "Because I'm about to take you into the bedroom, peel these clothes from your body, and make you my sweet love to you, Jane." I push the hair away from her shoulders, massaging the muscles there. "And I'm not going to stop. I'm going to make you come so hard that your limbs go numb. Would you like that, Jane?"

She nods, lashes fluttering.

"Would you like to know what I'm going to do to you?"

"Yes."

I groan, my cock aching. I sweep an arm beneath her legs, pulling her closer to me. Her cheeks are tinted pink, but she's watching me, anticipating what I'll say next.

A satisfied smile spreads across my face, and I lean down, brush

mouth against her cheek. "I'm going to nestle my head between beautiful thighs and wrap my lips around your clit until you beg me to
ill until Her jaw drops, breath trembling.

"And when you do," my voice cracks. "When you beg, I'm going my tongue inside you, refusing to relent until you come."

ing her She moans, and the sound does me in.

uck his I stand, clutching her against me. Slightly unsteady from my blood i stupor, I trail a hand along the wall to keep myself steady.

t on the My lips dart over her cheeks, down her throat. I nudge the bedroo : I was open with my foot and blur to the bed, ready to devour her.

I yearn to taste her, to touch her. All I want is to continue our passio last night without any hindrances. Laying her gently on the bed, I stuo r't evenline and curve of her body.

She wears a plain white sleeveless shirt and pale pink shorts.
tells so The first article of clothing to be removed is her top, reveali to take beautiful curves and full breasts. Her body is exquisite and feminin : sweet, rose-colored nipples and attractive thighs.

ssaging A primitive growl rumbles deep inside me, spurred by my possessiv u come to have her as mine and mine alone.

Her chest flutters, her breathing unsteady.

Jane watches me, lashes lowered. "Take off your shirt," she whispers. I oblige her request, loosening the buttons and shrugging it off.

And then I pull her pastel pink shorts all the way to her ankles, tak ing her panties with them.

closely, She squeezes her thighs shut.

"No, no, no." I chide. "Don't be shy, Jane. You're beautiful. Th ing my gorgeous woman I've ever seen." I drop to my knees, gently spread

1 those legs. "Let me prove it to you."

stop." I trail my hands up her inner thighs, moving my face close. My lips
her skin, and she shivers.

to slide Her scent drifts over me, sugary sweet.

"Do you know what I want?" I ask.

Her fingers entwine in my locks. "What?"

induced "I want to lick every inch of this body, and I want to taste you until
begging for more."

m door Her hips buck. "Please."

I slide my fingers through her folds, and she releases an angelic plea
on from A low, rumbling chuckle rushes from my lungs. I push her thighs
ly each part, gently nibbling the area surrounding her most sensitive spot. "S
I murmur.

"Sam, please."

ing her I meet her gaze, my listening to the pound of her heart. "Please what

ie, with She tightens her hold on my hair, pulling me closer. "Please make
me."

ve need My fingers are shaking, and I have to pause to steady them. "¿
cielo."

She closes her eyes as I stroke her clit. She's so wet, so ready.

s. "But first, I need to make sure you're ready." I press my lips again
breathing hot air between her thighs. Her scent is a heady, intoxicating
ing her mixture of sweetness and lust. My tongue flicks over her clit, and she
her hips rocking up. I grip her thighs, steadying her as I slide two
inside.

ie most She moans, nails digging into my scalp. "Oh, my God. Sam."

ing her I suck her clit between my lips, pulling softly. Her scent is surround

now, filling my head. She shudders, crying out my name. My fingers brush in and out, increasing their pace as her need rises.

“Are you going to come for me, princess?” I twirl my tongue around her clit, applying just enough pressure to drive her crazy. “Come for me, princess. I promise I’ll slide my cock so deep inside you that you’ll forget your name. I’ll make you speak.” My head buzzes, and nothing exists but her and our shared pleasure. *You’re Jane. So perfect. So sweet.*

Mine.

Her grip on my hair tightens, tugging my head closer. She needs me to lick her harder, finger her faster, giving her exactly what she asks for. I go further. I watch her, mesmerized, as she reaches her climax, muscles tensing, head arching back in pleasure. Her cries of bliss fill the air, sending a shiver through my body as I feel her inner walls grip tightly around my fingers. The sight of her orgasm nearly causes my undoing.

“She’s breathing hard by the time she opens her eyes again, whispering my name with love so softly. “You’re too damn good.”

I remove my fingers from her, licking them clean. My brain is wired to take her. “You’re mistaken, Jane. It’s you that’s good. So good.” I grip her thighs, spreading her legs. The blood from earlier flows through my body, strengthening my resolve. “Are you ready for me, princess?”

She nods, biting her bottom lip. I want to savor her, memorize every moan, every breath. I yearn to watch her fall apart beneath me over and over. Placing my knees on the mattress, I crawl over her, pressing kisses on her stomach, her breasts, her neck. When my lips touch hers, our tongues meet. Jane’s arms wind around my neck, her touch silky soft.

She’s so fucking *warm*.

stroke “I want you,” she whispers.

The moment my palm lands against her soft breast, I bite back a sound and her “How much?”

and I Her legs wrap around my waist, heels digging into my lower back. “How do you want to be with me, Sam.” she says, panting.

assure. “I want that, too, princess.” She hums with satisfaction every time she touches me by the endearment, and it makes my cock jerk each time.

I kiss her again, my chest against hers. “I want to make you mine.” more. I “You already have.”

The intensity of my desire overwhelms me when I hear her confessing and without a second thought, I direct my cock to her slick opening. When I shivers with a swift thrust, I’m balls deep inside her warmth, enveloped by it.

groans. The I groan, pressing my forehead against hers. “It feels like I’ve found home forever for this, sweet Jane.” I slide out slowly, thrusting deep again. In the supporting part, her breaths coming quicker.

“Feels so good,” she whimpers, her nails digging into my shoulders. My hands slide down her body to grip her hips, keeping her still. The way she fucks she clings to me, so trusting and giving...

Her legs wrap around my waist, pulling me closer, wanting more.

for me, “Look at me,” I demand. Her eyes cut open, dazed and hazy with pleasure. “I want to see you, Jane.”

I want to see all of her. My entire body is on fire, like I’m alive for the first time in my life. With our chests pressed together, her heartbeat thumping over her against my skin, it’s like I’ve been reborn.

collide. My balls tighten, my hips hammering into her harder. Jane kisses me, moaning against my mouth.

Fuck.

I'm driving face first over a cliff, and there's nothing I can do to s
groan. smooth the hair away from her slick forehead, cradling her cheeks as
into her. "Jane." That's all I manage to say before I lose myself.
A lot. I I kiss Jane's neck as I come, burying myself deep inside my girl. I s
her neck, tasting her skin and-
e I call My fangs spring free, piercing her skin.

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ses me,

I'm driving face first over a cliff, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. I smooth the hair away from her slick forehead, cradling her cheeks as I pump into her. "Jane." That's all I manage to say before I lose myself.

I kiss Jane's neck as I come, burying myself deep inside my girl. I suck on her neck, tasting her skin and-

My fangs spring free, piercing her skin.







Two icy cold pricks touch my neck, but I barely notice. Sam is holding me, my core clenching around him as I come harder than I ever have before. I'm writhing, holding him close. His skin is cool, but it feels like it's burning against the fire consuming me.

"Shit, princess," Sam whispers. His hands are on my neck, rubbing me. They feel... slick.

And my head feels weird. Like I'm floating, soaring through the air with nothing to ground me except Sam's firm grasp.

"Jane?" Samuel cups my cheek, his other hand still holding my neck. My lashes flutter as I focus on his eyes. They're burning a bright red color of molten lava. "Your eyes are pretty when they glow." I'm smiling. Then my gaze travels lower, to his lips.

They're coated with blood.

Sam's face is filled with alarm. "I... I bit you." His tone is unsteady.

"You did?" I hadn't felt any pain. Nothing but pleasure. Earth-shaking, ground-breaking pleasure.

“It was an accident.” His face crumples, and he drops his forehead against my chest.

I wrap my arms around his neck, holding him close. “Am I going into a vampire now?” The thought doesn’t scare me as much as I imagined it would. If I were like Sam, we’d be equals. He wouldn’t have to worry about saving me, because we’d be protecting each other.

He moves his head from side to side, still buried against me. “It doesn’t work like that. But... my venom. Shit. You’re gonna be out of it soon.” He lifts his eyes to meet mine. There’s a silent, desperate plea in the depths of his stare. “I’m sorry.”

The room is bright, and my vision blurs around the edges. My lips feel heavy, relaxed. “Don’t be sorry,” I smile, tracing my finger over his cheek. My touch swipes over the warm liquid coating his lips, smearing it against his skin. “Everything is really...” I look past him, at the ceiling. Multicolored lights dance across its surface, twirling around one another. “*Good*,” I finish.

Sam places his palm on my forehead. The coolness feels absolutely wonderful against my skin. “You’re hot.”

“Thank you,” I purr, pushing my bare breasts against him. A fresh surge of lust gathers in my lower belly, readying me for another round of touch.

Samuel rolls his eyes, face all business. “I mean, you feel warm against my touch. We should get out of bed for a while.” He gives me a scrutinizing stare, his forehead wrinkling with worry. “There’s a couple of hours until sunrise. Let’s get you dressed and we’ll take a stroll.”

I look past him again, my focus returning to the dancing orbs. I wonder if I can dance like them, too. “A stroll?”

Sam nods, helping me sit up. “Fresh air will do you good. Come on, let’s get dressed.” He gets up from the bed and takes hold of my hand, urging me to follow.

l to myto follow him.

I stumble a little as I try to stand, but Sam catches me. I'm grateful to turnsupport as we make our way to the closet. It's difficult to focus on gined itdressed- everything feels surreal and hazy.

y about Sam pulls out a pair of leggings and a sweatshirt for me, helping them. He dresses quickly himself, then takes my hand.

doesn't The hallway outside our bedroom is dimly lit, but as soon as I step on." Heshadows, my stomach lurches. A black, endless corridor stretches c s of hisspinning like those stupid maze spectacles in amusement parks. I grip arm, holding onto him as I keep myself balanced.

nbs are We make it through the tunnel-like hallway by sheer luck, and w ain. Mystep out, we materialize on the front porch. *What the...* The cool n : away.rushes against my skin, and I take deep breaths, trying to clear my head orbs Samuel squeezes my arm. "Come, I want to show you something."

I glance up at him, and his irises transform into twin black holes, ab solutelyeverything that dares get close to its horizon, me included. "O murmur, resisting against the pull.

urge of He helps me down the stairs and across the lawn. At the edge of the ing. a wide gap reveals a trail. Twisting branches gently curve in a circul u to thearound the entrance, like a wicker basket weaved with sharp thorny vir tinizing "Is this real?" I grip Sam's arm tighter, my nails digging into his fle before He looks down at me, his features even more concerned than the before. "What do you see?" he asks.

ider if I I squint, looking deeper into the tree line. After a moment, the recede, and the arch is nothing more than two bare limbs curving c m, let'sanimal trail. "Oh. I see a passage."

ging me Sam's face relaxes. "Good. Come on."

We enter the forest, my feet crunching over leaves with each step. The woods are alive with sounds, but they're not the familiar whispers of crickets or rustling animals. They're almost like whispers, faint and eerie. The trees loom tall above us, their boughs twisted and gnarled. The air grows colder and I shiver, my breath misting out in front of me.

Sam leads me on, his hand cool against mine. The trail winds through the trees, eventually leading us to a small clearing. In the center of the clearing, water glimmers in the moonlight.

Amidst the darkness, a tiny circular pond emerges. The pond's surface reflects the night sky, appearing as if all the stars in the sky have been captured within its depths.

"Wow," I whisper.

The sight takes my breath away. Everything around the water is so tranquil, soothing to my anxious mind.

Sam lets go of my hand, kneeling near the pond's edge. "Watch this," I say. He dips his finger in, breaking the serene stillness of the pond.

Ripples spread across its surface as the moonlight scatters into a forest of glimmering fragments. My state of mind morphs as the ripples transform into sound, vibrating through my body.

"Where are we?" I murmur, captivated by the pool.

"Near to the hiking trails that meander through our land. This is an ancient spring, once thought to bring immortality to the native inhabitants."

My eyes widen, refocusing on his face. His dark hair curls up on the back of his head, a thorn scraping over his pale cheek. "Did you drink from it? Is that what made you a vampire?"

Sam smiles at me, but his eyes are sad. "If only it were that simple, princess."

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By the time we return to the cabin, I'm no longer just relaxed. My limbs are heavy, laden as if they're filled with cement. Sam's arm is under my shoulders, supporting me as I stumble my way into the house.

He takes me to the bedroom and lies me atop the mess of blankets I left from our earlier lovemaking. My eyelids droop, but I smile at him. "Let me be gentle with me?"

Sam smooths his fingers over my forehead. "Of course."

He slides in beside me, hugging me close. I relish the sensation of his skin against mine and allow myself to snuggle even closer.

"You're too nice, Samuel," I murmur, nestling my head under the curve of his chin.

Sam chuckles, the vibration rumbling through his chest. "I'm not perfect, Jane. I'm..." His tone turns sour. "I'm bad for you. A monster."

I shake my head, pressing a soft kiss against his chest. "You're not a monster. You're just different."

He wraps his arms around me, holding me close. "That's very kind of you to say, my sweet Jane."

Silence settles over us, and I feel myself slipping deeper into the darkness.
“Just promise me one thing,” Sam whispers.

“Mm?” I hum, half-asleep.

“Promise me you’ll never leave. That you’ll always stay by my side.”
I smile against his chest. “Promise.”

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I wake to feather light touches on my chest, my neck. Sam is murmuring sweet nothings into my skin as he awakens me with pleasurable touches. His cool hands brush against my skin. “The sun has risen and set again, sweet Jane. Time to get up.” His hands move over my chest, stopping at the neckline of my shirt.

I moan against his touches, arching into him. “Sam,” I breathe.

As his hands trail lower, the previous night filters through my mind. It’s not nice, touching him, him touching *me*, making love, a chilling bite, Sam’s hands, and then finally, a cool walk in the woods. Some parts of my memory are not hazy, but I remember the way I felt. The way I still feel.

My eyelids flutter open, and I’m met with Sam’s passionate stare. His eyes are full of you, a desire to draw me closer. His hand slides under my sweater, cupping my bare breast. Slowly, he shoves the material

kness. dropping his lips to my nipple. “Tell me to stop, and I will.” His
tickles my skin, causing the buds to harden. “Otherwise, *this* is how I
spend my morning.”

.” My lips part, anticipation building. “But it’s night.”

His brow arches. “It’s *our* morning, isn’t it?” And then his mouth
my nipple, taking the delicate flesh between his lips.

Electricity jolts through me, from my nipple straight to my core. I
arching into his mouth. My hands grip his hair, pulling him close
sucks, licks, and teases.

Sam’s caressing touches trail lower, slipping beneath my panti
thighs open up as he trails his fingertips across my skin, teasing me
his fingers dip into my delicate folds, a pleased moan escapes me.
wet, so ready to accept him.

He pulls back, gritting his teeth. “I’m going to fuck you now,” he sa

Before I can process what’s happening, he slides my leggings
; there, pushes my panties aside, and thrusts into me. I gasp, my muscles
re. around him.

; mouth His eyes are on me, drinking me in. My legs quiver, but Sam ke
palms on my waist, holding me in place while he moves in and out.

I surrender myself to him, allowing my pleasure to build. His han
over the dip in my hips, over my stomach, and up to my bouncing bre
; regret, teases my nipple with his fingers, pinching the sensitive skin. I arch in
ory are begging for more. I need *more*.

“Please,” I beg.

His look His eyes darken, his thrusts speeding up. He’s pushing me, tak
der my higher and higher, until I can’t hold on any longer. I let out a loud cry
| aside,

breathpleasure crescendos. Sam grunts in response, his shaft convulsing. His want to slow, and I wrap my arms around him, holding him close.

“You didn’t bite me this time,” I grin, my body still humming with aftereffects of my orgasm.

Sam kisses the top of my forehead. “I drank more blood while you sleeping,” he confesses. “I think I have a handle on things now.”

For a moment, my weightlessness recedes. A feeling of pain builds as my stomach, but I know it’s not justified. Sam hated the thought of biting

Hurting me hurts him. But deep down, I think it brought us closer together. My “Oh,” I whisper. “I suppose that means you won’t get to taste. When anymore.”

His thumb skates over my brow, trailing down my cheek. “Does that hurt you?”

I avert my eyes, avoiding eye contact. “Am I wrong to say yes? If that last night gave me a taste of your world, and now I crave more?”

His fingers grasp my chin, pulling my gaze back to his. His irises like a storm brewing on the horizon, threatening to engulf everything heeps his wake. “My venom caused you to hallucinate. It’s unhealthy.”

I jerk against his fingers, shaking my head. “It wasn’t even about taste. Heone was about you *wanting* to bite me. About my blood, a part of *me*, being with you.”

His gaze softens, and his hold on me slacks. “There are... other ways to arrange that.”

“What other ways?”

He grimaces. “I could... cut you. Drink from you without biting you.” Shock and curiosity shiver up my spine. “You’d do that?”

His glower deepens. “I don’t like the thought of hurting you, I

thrusts brothers are right. If I take from the source, from *you*, I'd be stronger
able to protect you if the need arises."

with the A warm tingle climbs up my legs, heating my center. "Can we do it
His lips part, his stare growing heady. "I- "

ou were Just then, two knocks sound on the front door, echoing throu
surrounding space.

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His lips part, his stare growing heady. "I- "

Just then, two knocks sound on the front door, echoing through the surrounding space.

Samuel gives me an apologetic look. "Later," he promises.







I watch Jane and Francis from where I stand in the kitchen. Us enjoy thoroughly the process of making a warm, fragrant dish with ingredients. Today, however, I wish I could be engaging with her instead of watching Francis take up the spotlight.

Matt shoves my shoulder. “Stop moping.”

“I’m not,” I quip, tossing a handful of chopped mushrooms into the iron skillet.

He tosses me an arrogant look, crossing his arms. “He’s not trying what’s yours.”

I glare at him. “Jane isn’t a possession. She can talk to whoever she wants. My gaze shifts to Francis, who is seated on the sofa beside Jane. He is perched atop his knee as he smirks at Jane’s beaming face. “He’s flirting with her, though. She’s probably uncomfortable.”

I know she isn’t, though. She’s *giggling*.

Matt throws the cooked ravioli into my skillet, dowsing it with infused olive oil. “He’s doing you a favor. She’s tense around us. If you want her to be comfortable, then Francis’ charm is exactly what you need.”

Maybe he's right.

I plate Jane's food, garnishing it with sauce and a simple sprig of rosemary. "Brunch is served, sweet Jane." I grab a bottle of cranberry sauce out of the fridge and place it next to her meal.

When she's comfortably seated at the bar and eating, I join Francis by the fireplace. Matthew follows behind me.

I cross my arms over my chest, lowering my voice so Jane can't overhear. "What's our next move? Are we staying here for a few months or moving out of date up?"

Usually, I usually, I the most elite of the Night Order's members. If there's news about the disappearance, he'd have heard it by now.

Francis and Matt share a look. Matt clears his throat. "Actually, we've been taking and..." He runs his hand through his hair. "We think we should just change her."

My cold, dead heart sinks, and my fingers curl into fists at my sides. "What did you just say?" The remaining warmth from Jane's earlier embrace dissipates, leaving me with nothing but the chill of my bones.

Francis raises his palms in warning. "It's just a suggestion. I'm thinking that if she's like us, she'll have a greater chance of escaping should she discover this location."

I take a step toward them, my vision blurring with a red tinge. "How are you going to find us. *She doesn't need to die.*"

Matt stares at me, his face blanking. "Turning her isn't the same as killing her, Sam."

"Yes, it fucking is." I turn my back to them. "Both of you can leave. Storming back into the kitchen, I busy myself with the mundane

dishes. The front door opens and shuts, meaning Jane and I are alone a
prig of *Killing her?* It's just something I can't do.

ry juice In the beginning, when I chose to save her, I realized this possibil
on the table. But now? After knowing the beauty of her humanity?

is near How could I take that away from her?

If I turn Jane into a vampire, she'll never have children, a legacy, c
verhear.beneath the sun.

ving the She'll be cold, and inevitably, she will kill.

Jane will become like me. Lost.

me and I heave the pot into the sink and slump against the counter in exasp
out myraking my fingers through my hair.

Jane's voice is soft. "Is everything okay?"

l, Sam, I smile at her, my lips tight. "It will be."

ink you She stabs another ravioli and slides it between her pink lips. "Yo
arguing with your brothers again, weren't you?"

. "What Sighing, I approach the bar, bracing my elbows against the top as
mbracetoward her. "Yes. They think I'm being unreasonable, and I think
being overly rash."

hinking She chews her food carefully and then swallows, her throat b
d Rune "Because they said you should turn me into a vampire," she declares.

A flash of fear chars my stomach. "Did you hear us?"

le's not Her lip quirks up on one side. "You aren't as silent as you think, esp
when you get angry."

. killing *Shit.*

"I won't do it." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop
." shake my head with vehemence, unwilling to entertain the idea further

task of She purses her lips together, her forehead creasing as she stud

gain. carefully. “Why not?”

“Because it’s not fair to you,” I say, my tone firm. “You deserve a better life, a future, and a chance to live it on your own terms.”

Jane sets her fork down and takes my hand in hers. Her touch is gentle, her eyes warming as she stares into mine. “Samuel, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but you don’t have to protect me from everything. I can make my own decisions.”

I squeeze her hand. “I’m not trying to dictate your choices, Jane, but this isn’t just about us. It’s about your life, and the future you could have without me. I don’t want to see you frown. “If I don’t *kill* you.”

She tilts her head, studying me. “What life would that be?”

“A human one,” I reply. “A life where you can have children, grow old, and die peacefully in your sleep. One where you can bask in the sun without ever having to worry about feeding on others for survival.”

She grabs her cranberry juice, twisting the lid off. “I don’t want a life without you, Sam. I want to be with you. If you change me, then that’s one less rule they’ve broken, right?”

I stare at her, my eyes darting over the blush in her cheeks and the ketchup smeared on her bottom lip.

She doesn’t realize what she’d be forfeiting.

I grab her empty plate and take it to the sink. “I’m going to kindly and respectfully disagree with you, Jane.”

them. I

.

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carefully. “Why not?”

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Hours after Sam's brothers leave, I find myself with nothing to do but lie on the couch and play with my phone.

Well, I *could* be riding Sam like a cowgirl, but he's being an ass.

Why does he care if I become a vampire? Will I be useless to him if I'm not? Or is he only interested in me because my heart beats? Or because I bleed?

So, yeah, I'm not really in the mood to make sweet love to a man who only wants to keep me if I'm edible.

Sam's busy, anyway. Since we '*agreed to disagree*', he's been in the basement pulling dusty old boxes from the spider infested stack upstairs. I hadn't known there *was* an attic until he yanked on a string and caused the ladder to fall down.

I'm not sure if he's searching for something, or if he's trying to distract himself from the truth.

Becoming a vampire should be my choice, and he knows it.

Regardless, my phone is distracting enough. This new model is just like the one I used to have. Search results load in seconds, and I have space to download every app on the play store.

I'm sorting through my e-book library at the moment, re-downloading romance novels on the top of my to-be-read list and ranking them from exciting to least.

The one on the top of my TBR is a spicy retelling of Dracula. *It's re* I tell myself. I'm swiping through the first chapter when two quiet sound on the front door.

I wait for Sam to indicate that he's coming to answer, but he must n heard the noise. He's *definitely* distracted.

I toss aside the quilt I covering my legs and stride to the door, ope do but Francis stands there, his hands in his jacket pocket.

He glances over my shoulder. "Sam in there?"

I step outside, closing the door behind me. This is my chance to get hen? Is answers without being shut down. A cool breeze drifts past us, and I cardigan tighter around my arms. "I need to talk to you."

Francis frowns. "Where's Sam?" ho only

"He's in the attic, ripping apart old boxes." I step closer toward h he takes a step back. Lowering my voice, I ask the question burning ie attic, me. "How does someone become a vampire?" i't even

Francis raises an eyebrow, a smirk playing on his lips. "Are you t idder to of joining the undead club?" His words drip with amusement, but I ca a hint of concern hidden underneath. distract

I shrug, trying to keep my voice steady. "I just want to know." Nai my eyes, I add, "And don't act like you hadn't already suggeste Samuel. I heard you." nothing

He pauses for a moment, studying me. "It's not an easy proces: enough Changing involves a lot of pain and blood. You do *die*, quite literally. something to be taken lightly."

ling the I nod, my heart pounding in my chest. “I understand. Tell me most Francis.”

He sighs, his eyes softening. “You’d need to be drained completely *search*, drinking the blood of a host vampire. It hurts, but if you’ve been bit knocks properly anesthetized, the pain is less intense.” Francis relaxes against the wooden beam supporting the porch roof and crosses his arms. “It’d not have easiest path, but I understand why he doesn’t want to do it.”

“Why? Why doesn’t he want to turn me?” *Is it because he had been thinking of hurting me, even if that means we’ll be together forever? because he doesn’t want a forever tied to me?*

Francis smiles a sad, cheerless smile. “You want this, right? Your honesty should matter, but... it won’t be what you think. There will be time when you wish so desperately that you could die, and it’s so fucking hard to do anything but rot in that feeling.” He looks away, staring toward the sky and the crescent moon that hangs there, suspended among the stars. “Sometimes the emotion lingers, and you’re just here, fantasizing about an insideworld where you aren’t.”

He pauses and turns back to me, scanning my features with purpose. “Jane, Sam has felt that for a long time. He was stuck in that pit before he came to New York. You brought him back. Don’t judge him too harshly for refusing to condemn the only light he sees to darkness.”

I suck in a breath, feeling like I’ve been punched in the gut. “I.. I didn’t know that.”

He nods, reaching into his pocket. “You weren’t expected to. No one is, Jane. how fiery this romance between the two of you is, it’s still new. You’re young. It’s not time to work things out, to learn about each other.” He pulls free his

he how, offering me a bag of blood. “Now take this. I was supposed to give it to you, but I’ll let you do the honors.”

before And then Francis leaps off the porch, bounding away with a speed I’ve never witnessed before. His movements are unnatural... Predatorial. Against a Vampiric.

be the I stand there for a moment, watching his blurring form disappear down a stretch of dirt road as I think.

ites the Does he hide this part of himself from me, too?

Or is it Francis sprang across the lawn like an animal freed from its cage. I’ve only seen glimpses of Sam’s strength.

choice Are there other secrets?

s when Lost in my own headspace, I re-enter the cabin without noticing Sam. And to do He’s there, sitting on the couch with his hands tightly clasped around his knees.

stars. I shove a lock of my hair behind my ear. “Hi.”

about a He doesn’t say anything.

I approach him carefully, slipping my hand into the pocket of my coat. My lips are cold. “Francis brought this for you.” My fingers close around the cold metal of the left blood, and I pull it free, offering it to him.

hly for He takes it, but he wraps his hand around my wrist in the process. Suddenly, I’m being pulled down to his lap.

. didn’t “I’m guessing you heard our conversation.”

“Yes.” He says, pronouncing the word sharply. He tosses the bag of blood to the side table, still staring at me. “And I don’t care.”

ou have I swallow hard. “I’m sorry that I- “

s hand, “I don’t want to talk about it.” Sam’s voice is tight, hard. I’ve never heard him speak like this before, so *cold* and commanding. “I don’t want

to Sam, about what was said, what I think, or why I don't want you to be a mo

His hands grip my waist, and he pulls me closer to him, so close that I feel his ragged breath on my lips. "I just want you." He breathes, his teeth cracking.

My chest tightens, and I close my eyes, surrendering to Sam's power. His lips crush against mine, consuming me.

In the same moment, he hooks his finger beneath the belt of my pants, tugging, ripping the fabric as if it's tissue paper. My bare knees press into the cushions of the couch on either side of his hips, straddling him.

"I want you here." He kisses me again, stealing away my breath. "I want you now." His tongue slides against mine, tasting me. "Every second of every day, I want you, Jane."

I open my mouth to say something, but he silences me with his lips, intensifying the kiss until I'm moaning against him.

When he breaks away, I'm breathless. He stares into my eyes with such intensity that it's hard to look. "For tonight, princess, let's just be together." I nod, more than willing to let our issues rest if it means I can have him against me again.

His eyes flash a wicked crimson, and his hands slip around my hips, seconds lifting me up. I cling to him as he moves between our legs, unbuttoning his jeans and unfurling the cock trapped beneath them.

He gathers my wrists in his hand, pinning them together before wrapping his arms behind my neck. Carefully, he guides my hips down with his fingers, staring at me as I take him inch by inch.

My body stretches to accommodate his size, and my head drops back as I hear him growl my name as he thrusts upward, and a wave of pleasure washes over me as my eyes flutter closed.

master.” Groaning, he presses his lips below the sensitive area under my ear. “At least, I can say this is better than those fantasies you had about me, sweet girl.”

His voice I whimper, pressing my bare chest against the rough fabric of his sweater. Shreds of my shirt sway as he pounds into me, each stroke fiercer. He deliberates. “So much better,” I whisper, my lips feathering over his cheek.

He wraps his hand around my hair, tugging until my head is forced against his chest. He opens my eyes and finds his blazing red gaze staring into me. “What do you want to imagine?” He pushes deeper. “All those nights of touching yourself—did we even kiss? You must have conjured something special in the back of your head of yours.”

He grips me tighter, and I arch my back, sinking onto him. He groans, and my body trembles. “Tell me what you thought.”

“I…” My words escape me, my head swimming. He pounds harder, causing my body to tremble with each new wave of pleasure. “I don’t know what I would do…”

“Yes.” He growls, thrusting deeper. “Tell me.”

“You would…” I trail off again, my breath shortening as I struggle to get the words out. “You would touch me.”

“Where?”

“Everywhere.” I gasp, gripping him tighter. “My neck, my breasts…”

He leans forward, kissing my throat. “And where else?”

“My thighs.” My body rocks, my hips desperately undulating as I feel his hand, tension in my muscles winding up. “My pussy.”

He inhales sharply, and his thumb grazes my clit. I moan, clenching my back. He smiles as sweat prickles down my spine.

“And losing control?” He growls. “Did you ever imagine me losing control in you?”

r. “Tell “Yes.” I hiss, digging my nails into his neck. My body tenses, the p
building so intensely.

is wool He groans, and suddenly he’s grabbing my hips, shoving me down
rce andhe buries his cock to the hilt. “Fuck, Jane.”

ek. I cry out in release, my cunt spasming around him. He buries himse
back. Ireleasing a guttural sound as he erupts within me, his grip on my hips t
did you I collapse against him, my body trembling.

before Sam makes an appreciative sound against my skin, his lips graz
t prettycheek. “You’re amazing, Jane,” he whispers, dropping his mouth
neck. I tilt my head to the side and close my eyes, savoring his touch.

ns, and He pulls back, his eyes searing mine. “Would you like for me t
from you?” His gaze darts over my face, examining my features.

harder, Giving him a piece of myself feels like an honor. “Yes, Sam. Drir
... Youme.”

We remain locked in a stare for a moment longer, but then he bri
wrist to his lips and presses a single, light kiss there. “I’ll make it as p
e to getas possible.”

I believe him.

He reaches beside the couch, and soon, a thin razor materializes b
.” his fingers. He holds it to the light, watching to be sure I comprehen
he’s doing. I nod, giving him permission.

feel the He touches the sharp edge of the blade to my skin as delicately as

A fleeting pain burns over my wrist, and then it’s gone. His piercin
aroundnever leaves mine as he lowers his mouth to the wound site.

A drop of my blood decorates his lips as he savors me. I lean in
myselfclutching his shoulders. He pulls on my wrist, sucking deeply.

And then he’s pulling back, licking away the smeared blood

pleasure whispered promise of how good it tastes.

Watching him is so erotic that I rock my hips on impulse.

hard as He groans, latching onto my cut again. I bury my face in the crook of his neck as his velvety lips trace the sensitive flesh of my inner wrist. He thrusts deep, jerks, and he grips my hip with one hand, guiding me to move.

right. Sam's lips come away red with blood, but he's smiling, his eyes sparkling with mischief. He wraps his hand around my mussed blonde locks, gripping me firmly so that I'm exactly where he wants me. "I feel so much better on my purrs. "Do you want to feel good again, too, princess?"

I bite my lower lip, nodding.

to drink Sam hugs one arm beneath my hips and the other around my back. When he's joined, he stands, lifting me like I weigh nothing more than a grain of sand. He staggers, and I realize my blood must be having an effect on him. "You all right?" I ask, gripping his shoulders more firmly.

ing my His nostrils flare, smelling me. "Better than okay." He crosses the threshold painless and shoves the front door open.

"What are you-"

He silences me with a crushing kiss. "Shh, Jane. We're going to make love right here, on the porch." His hands rub down my bare back until they reach the curve of my ass. "And I'm going to make you scream so loud that the beasts of the forest, the moon, and my brothers can hear how good you can be when you belong to me."

ing gaze Moments later, he is driving into me. The porch's wooden railing bites my skin as I arch to meet his thrusts.

to him, He makes good on his promise, because when I come, the world hears

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I think I've discovered my new favorite hobby.
Holding Jane as she sleeps.

She's nestled into my arms, likely dreaming of distant lands. Her cheeks are rosy and her wavy hair is mussed up, with a faint line of dried up seeping from the corner of her mouth.

Utterly gorgeous.

I've always enjoyed being near her warmth, but right now, when her breath is hitting my skin in soft little puffs, I feel completely at ease. Content.

I can feel her running through my veins, causing my body to buzz with newfound energy. Her blood is binding, forcing me to admit how she's changed my existence.

Visions flash through my head. Of me, taking Jane to faraway places I've only ever read about in books. Hawaii. Peru. Even the Alaskan wilderness. I envision her skin sun-kissed from spending her days on the beach and her nights with me. I imagine building a home from the foundation up, every brick with her approving smile in mind.

I exhale a long, contented sigh as I hold her close. Tonight, I'll give her a glimpse of the life we could have together in the years to come. I'll promise her that being human is what makes her, *her*. That she shouldn't have to change to make our relationship work.

Mental lists formulate in my mind. I will need to purchase candle and a fancy dress from a designer store in town. Matthew will have to run in to get the supplies, but it'll be worth it. He'll be careful not to reveal my location, just a quick trip to the nearest city and back.

I'll put together a dinner that'd make any queen proud. And before, during, and after, I'll cherish her body with all the attention it deserves.

Silently, I vow to make this evening an unforgettable one.

I plant a whisper-soft kiss on Jane's forehead before standing from the table, taking care to make as little sound as possible. Her phone is on the table, and I snatch it on my way out.

She's added a lock to the screen. My lip curls up. *Smart girl*. I hold the phone at an angle until I can see the smears from her finger dotting over the screen. 1999.

Once I enter the code, I dial Matt's number and lift the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Matt, hey." I whisper, closing the bedroom door behind me. "Look, I'm sorry for being an ass earlier." *Not that my brothers didn't deserve it, but I did.* "I hope you've forgiven me, because I need a favor."

Matt sighs. "Of course you do, Sam."

"You know I'm good for it."

This is our way. One of us fucks up, and we clean up the mess as a team. Like when Francis got into a bar fight and nearly shoved a human through a pool table, or when Matt's ex-girlfriend Charlotte became obsessed and

re her ato blackmail him into admitting he was involved in some sort of org
rove tocrime. Now... I'm the one with a problem, and I trust my brothers to b
need tofor me, no matter how deep in shit we have to trudge.

“We understand your dilemma, Samuel.” He pauses, taking a swig o
s and akind of liquid. Blood, perhaps. “We’d be shit brothers if we didn’t
to townbring it up.”

real our *Right*. I frown, but continue with my question. “Can you go into to
me?”

during, Matthew groans. “Are you serious?”

I grit my teeth. “A *quick in and out*. Can you do this for me, Ma
important. If we have to leave sooner rather than later, then so be it.”

he bed, Matthew goes quiet for a minute, debating. “Fine. What do you need
bedside “I’ll have a list ready. Meet me here the moment dusk arrives.”

e phone
the pin.

ear.

ok, I’m
it. *They*



Twilight creeps closer, and as soon as the sun dips below the h
family. Matthew approaches the cabin. I step outside, a folded sheet of
ugh thebetween my fingers.

nd tried “Got the list?” He asks.

ganized I toss it through the air, letting the wind carry it eastward. He blurs the speed, catching it before it can get away. With a glare, he unravels the note and reads the scrawled handwriting.

of some His brows arch. "All this for her?"

at least I cross my arms over my shoulders, leaning against the porch railing. "Yes."

own for He nods, refolds the note, and slides it into the pocket of his shirt. He tries to turn away, but then hesitates, his eyes scanning me curiously.

"What?"

att? It's "We're happy for you, you know." He cocks his head to the side. "Jane isn't like before. Jane isn't some cute girl you've seduced to snack on. The way you look at her..." He shakes his head. "The emotions you feel aren't stilted; they aren't fake." Matthew bows his head. "I just wanted you to know that we see this. We're not going to fuck up the only thing that's giving us peace since Barros."

I swallow, overcome by my brother's words. I didn't know how much I needed to hear them until now.

"Thanks, Matt. I needed that." I offer him a smile. "I'll see you in a few hours."

horizon,

f paper

rs with
e page

railing.

le starts



3. “This Jane still isn’t awake by the time I return to her bedroom, so I decide
on. The an elaborate morning routine, just for her.

I aren’t In the kitchen, I open and shut cabinet doors, searching for the
o know tools. I return to her room with an arm full of Epsom salt and herbs.

ven you I creep as quietly as possible around her bed and into the bathroom
carefully fill the tub with steaming hot water. The heat from it radiates
much I scorching my icy skin, but I know it will be the perfect temperature
comfort. Then I add the salt, rosemary, garden sage, basil, and cinnamon

1 a few a final touch, I add a pump of her strawberry shampoo to the running
Matt hadn’t thought to grab her any bubble bath while we were at the r

Jane’s blankets shuffle, and she groans, throwing her arms over her head
and shielding her eyes from the bathroom light with her elbow. “What
it?” she grumbles.

“Time for you to awaken, princess. I have something special planned
today.”

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“**T**ime for you to awaken, princess. I have something special for you
for today.”

The silky, smooth velvet of his voice is enough to make my heart race. I lift my arm, squinting in the direction of Sam’s words. “Special how?” He grins. “Special. Get up.” He maintains eye contact with me, making it difficult to focus on anything else.

I roll over, resting my chin against my hands. “Can I have a hint?”

He arches one brow. “The hint will come after you’ve stripped naked and soaked in this tub for a while.” He leans his shoulder against the wall, studying me intently. “Has anyone told you how beautiful you are when you sleep, sweet Jane?”

My cheeks blaze. Tossing the covers away, I roll out of bed. “Okay, get up. Now what?”

Samuel pushes away from the wall and stalks forward, approaching me like a predator closing in on its prey. “Like I said, princess. Naked. Now.”

Samuel leaves no room for argument. Still hazy from sleep, I slip n over my head and shimmy out of my panties, kicking them aside.

His gaze turns hungry, raking down the length of my curves. “Very he murmurs.

I brush my fingers through my hair, suddenly aware of how inte stare is. Samuel has a way of seeing into me. My darkest desires. The keep hidden away from the world. I squeeze my thighs together as h hand to my cheek.

He places his thumb against the edge of my lip, and I open my slightly at his touch. Leaning forward, I wait for his kiss to land, bu realize he’s wiping away a trail of drool.

Shit.

Sam’s face stretches into an impish grin. “Take a dip before the wa cold, my love.” In a flash of movement, he rushes by me, leaving me a the bedroom.

Still reeling from his sudden disappearance, I stumble into the bathr

Sam has made me a bath. Greenery floats on the water’s surface, t around clusters of bubbles.

I step in, audibly expressing my satisfaction as the hot water hits my can feel all the tension melting away from my body, and I take a deep to savor the delightful aroma of herbs in the steam.

Minutes turn to hours as I soak in the water, my mind wandering to before meeting Samuel. It’s a shame that some of my brightest me come from my time in the city, alone and completely free. Su apartment wasn’t the fanciest and my working conditions at the café little sketchy, but I lived my life.

Before that, I was my father’s daughter. My mother’s child. The

ny shirtwho was two farms away and resembled any other girl in our smal

And that's all I was expected to be. All I was told to be.

good," "Be a good daughter and God will bless you," my father would say.

"Be a righteous wife one day, and you'll live in peace," said my mo
nse his Those things chipped away at my pristine image for so long that I

things I broke. Leaving was bittersweet, but I never regretted it. Not even once

e lifts a I have the same feeling now. That same nagging push telling me

something better on the other side of the fence. The urge is so strong, i

mouthan invisible force propelling me forward.

t then I My life brought me here, to Samuel.

I have found the one, my person, and I'm ready to commit myself to

A realization dawns on me.

ter gets His surprise, the cheery awakening, my pampered bath.

alone in He never brought up our disagreement from last night... and mayb

because he's turning me into a vampire.

oom. Maybe he's discovered that he can't be without me, either.

wirling

7 skin. I

) breath

my life

emories

re, my

were a

student



I town. I linger in the bath until all the warmth has dissipated, mulling over it and what could lie ahead.

What if Samuel decided I'd be safer as a vampire?

Francis said the change would be brutal. I'd die, and then reanimate as a finally colder, more dangerous version of myself. I'd still be myself, though, in a way.

Would my stretch marks disappear? Would my boobs even out, or would there's one of them definitely sags further than the other. Will my features transform into a more uniform beauty, or will the changes be subtle?

Eventually, I pull myself out of the tub, watching as the water spirals down the drain.

A shadow moves beneath the crack of the bathroom entrance, and then, a door opens and shuts briefly after.

Curious.

I wrap a towel around my breasts and shuffle to the bathroom door, cracking it.

The room is empty, yet the bedsheets have been freshly arranged. Sprawled across the comforter is a stunning scarlet gown. The fabric is finer than any I've ever seen, with a fitted bodice and sheer mesh sleeves. It's cut in the front, perfect for flaunting an alluring figure.

Sitting above the dress is a pair of delicate black sandals, and a note has been placed on my pillow. I tiptoe into the room, gripping my towel around my chest.

Grabbing the paper, I unfold it and read.

Sweet Jane

I've bought a dress to accent your natural bewitchment. You could have even better, but for now, it's the best I could find.

I rub my finger over my lower lip, grinning as I read further down.

ny pastpage.

You wanted a hint, right?

Well, you, sweet Jane, are the best thing that's happened to me in a long time. Maybe ever.

I'm not going to let you feel like the girl I swooped up from civilization because to conceal deep in the woods. You're everything. You deserve to be bitten out of the world and eat it eagerly.

You, Jane, are mine. My heart.

Tonight, I'll prove it.

Yours truly,

Samuel Gravenson

I study the note carefully, reading and rereading as I analyze each word. Carefully, I refold the page, making sure the creases line up as to not cover his words. *You deserve to take a bite out of the world*, he wrote. *Tonight, I'll prove it.*

Sam, *Samuel Gravenson*, is going to change me into a vampire. Tonight, I let the idea sink in fully as I clutch the folded square sheet of parchment to my chest. I, Jane from rural North Carolina, am going to be transformed into a mythical creature.

Shit.

I'm going to die tonight.

I'll be reborn as something else. Something fiercer, more powerful.

I take a deep breath, shaking off the fear. I remind myself that Samuel is a novice. He's been a vampire for decades, and I trust his capabilities. **I deserve** hating the thought of hurting me, he's offering to give into my wishes. I back out now and, in fact, I don't want to.

Firmly resolved, I throw the towel aside and grab my dress. The

hugs my curves like a glove, clinging to me in all the right places. I
moment to admire my reflection in the mirror, marveling at how beau-
ne in a look. For once, I feel like a true goddess.

I slip on my sandals and take one last look in the mirror. My hair
lization wet, clinging to my neck, and slightly wild from the humidity, but n-
take a are burning brightly, full of determination. I'm ready for whatever
next.

Trembling, I head towards the bedroom door, my pulse pounding
chest.

Samuel is waiting for me.

When I exit the room, I walk directly into a candlelit world. The lig-
phrase dimmed, but the fireplace in the living room is burning bright, s-
damaged dancing beams of amber light through the hallway. Gripping the edge
ght, I'll dress, I continue down the hall, stopping when Samuel comes into view.

He's standing in the center of the room, his eyes fixed on me. He l-
ight. handsome as ever, dressed in black denim pants and a white button-u-
chment the sleeves folded up to his elbows. His shaggy hair is parted in the
formed the wavy locks framing his deep, dark eyes.

"You look stunning," he says, voice smooth. "I knew the dress wo-
you."

My cheeks go warm under his gaze. "Thank you." After a p-
continue. "So, what happens now?"
el is no Samuel approaches, taking my hand in his. His touch is cold, but it
Despite unsettle me. I'm getting accustomed to his coldness. It's f-
. I can't Comforting, even.

"Now, we dine," he says. "And then, we..." His fingers trace over m-
e fabric and he smiles a smile so charming I think I might faint. "Celebra-

I take another.”

Beautiful I Samuel links our arms, leading me deeper into the scene laid out before me. The living room has been converted into an inviting, alluring space. It is still dark, but the candles are strewn about the room, providing a romantic ambience. The center of attention is the coffee table that’s been turned into a dinner table, complete with two cushions on either side. Enchanting tea lights, lush red roses, and sparkling silverware decorate the tabletop.

As we settle onto our pillow seats, Samuel pours me a glass of red wine, and I take a sip, letting the rich flavors roll over my tongue. He watches me, his eyes shining with delight.

“I’ve been thinking about this moment for a long time,” he says, his voice low and seductive.

I nearly choke on my drink. “Oh, yeah?” I ask, still coughing.

His lip quirks up. “I bought wine in the city, before we were anything more than neighbors. I was trying to justify inviting you over, getting close to you. It seems fate has a way of forcing things to happen when we can’t take control, leap ourselves.”

I hide my smile with another sip from my glass.

Samuel reaches between us, unveiling a dish from beneath a silver cloth before placing it in front of me. It’s something I’ve only ever seen at a formal dinner, like when the butler offers Ariel food after she arrives at the castle for dinner with the prince.

You deserve better, his note had said.

I grab my fork, holding it over the plate. This meal is a combination of flavors I’ve never had before. There are slices of brisket wrapped in a thin, crispy skin, asparagus, petite croissants accompany roasted potatoes sprinkled with herbs, each of varying sorts, and something that resembles sautéed spinach.

“This is amazing.” I take a bite of the brisket, savoring the taste before outdid yourself, Samuel.”

g oasis. He grins as he pours himself a glass of red wine. “I’ve had time to p ce. They cooking skills,” he remarks, his eyes fixed on me. “And I wanted setting, to be perfect.”

ses and He reaches toward me, and my heart races, anticipating his touch his fingers graze mine, I can hardly breathe.

d wine, “Why tonight?” I whisper.

hes me, His eyes flash with heat. “This.” He holds up his hands, gesturing surrounding room. “Hasn’t been the best example of what our life t is voice could be.” He leans across the table, capturing my gaze. “I want to sh everything I have to offer, Jane.”

My mouth curves over my fork as I take another bite of food. ing but watches me, his eyes fixated on my lips as they move, and then on my ou... but I bite into a potato, slowly letting my lips slide over it.

ake the He makes a strangled noise.

I tear off a piece of the croissant, dipping it into a small dish of o and balsamic vinegar. As I eat, Samuel’s eyes roam over my body, ta cloche every inch of me. The air between us thickens, turning electric.

on TV, I finish my meal, setting my fork down with a clink.

and has “Um,” he smooths a hand over his chest, clearly flustered. “ something else for you.”

I place my elbows on the table, hoping my cleavage diverts his at tion of Seeing him rattled is quickly becoming my new favorite thing. “ around exciting,” I say, my voice husky.

h herbs He stares at me for a moment longer, lips curving upward. After a n he reaches beneath the table and brings forth a box.

3. “You A black, velvet jewelry box.

My fingers clench around a bundle of my dress. “Is that-“

practice Samuel lifts the lid to expose a necklace, an exquisite silver t
tonight pendant attached to a thin chain. Set in the center of the teardro
gleaming ruby gemstone.

. When The room quietens, and the fire’s hissing seems to dim in the backgr
“I realized I hadn’t bought you anything yet.”

I take the box from him, my fingers trembling. “You bought me
; to the things, Sam. The clothes, the phone... you didn’t have to do this.”

together “I didn’t have to,” he agrees, stroking his chin. “I wanted to.”

ow you Being careful not to damage the chain, I unravel it from the box an
it against my neck. “Would you secure the clasp?”

Samuel Samuel moves closer to me, his cold fingers grazing my neck
r throat. attaches the chain. My senses are on high alert as he leans in, his breat
enough to make my skin tingle.

The ruby pendant rests in the hollow of my throat, catching the can
live oil and shining like a beacon.

king in “It’s beautiful,” I say, my voice soft.

Samuel smiles, his gaze never wavering. “It pales in comparison
beauty that adorns it,” he murmurs, as his lips brush against my collarb

‘I have I want him to touch me, to embrace me and do whatever he
Tonight, I’ll make love to him as a human.

tention. And tomorrow, I’ll be something new. *Someone* new.

Sounds Twisting, I capture his mouth with mine. I want him to touch me, a
sensing my desire, he does. His hand rakes up my stomach, caresses c
moment, breast, and comes to a stop over my throat. He holds me there, keepin
place as he turns the kiss into his own.

I moan, the sound muted by our intertwined mouths. My hands tangle in his hair, and I pull him closer. The heat of his arousal presses against my stomach.

Samuel breaks away, his eyes dark and hungry. "I need you." His voice is thick with desire.

Nodding, I move to stand, ready to follow him to the bedroom.

He stops me, placing his hands on my shoulders. "No, princess. Right now I imagine you sprawled out in front of the fireplace, your body bathed in flickering shadows from the firelight."

He slips his finger beneath the fabric of my sleeve, pulling it down to my elbow. His dark eyes sear mine, observing each of my responses as his fingers trail over my skin, causing goosebumps to rise.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, pressing his lips to the sensitive skin of my neck. His hands move over my body, pulling at the fabric of my dress until it falls to the ground in a heap.

I sit before him in nothing but my lingerie, my body exposed to his gaze. He leans back, his eyes sweeping over my curves.

"Damn," he breathes, his hand dipping beneath the padding of my dress to shove it aside, dipping his head close to my breast. I suck in a sharp gasp as my fingers tangle in his hair as he takes one nipple into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it.

The warmth between my legs increases, and I can feel my body aching for him. I want him to touch me, to ignite my passions, to make me feel alive. "Samuel," I moan, my voice trembling.

He pulls away from my breast, his eyes blazing. "Say you want me."

"I want you," I gasp, working my fingers around the buttons of his shirt. He takes over for me, stripping the material away from his muscles.

ngle ingrabs the pillows from around the table and places them both bene
inst myhead. “Relax, princess. Let me revere you.” His fingers scrape o
stomach, sliding lower.

voice is My breath hitches as he pushes my lace panties to the side, his
sliding into my folds. My back arches as I press against them, despe
more.

ht here. He glides down my body, lowering his head between my legs. “I can
thed into taste you again, sweet Jane. Will you let me lick you?”

I bite my lip and nod, gazing down at him.

1 to my His smile is wicked. “Good girl.”

as his Pushing my panties aside, he places those delicious lips on m
devouring me. As his finger enters me again, I lose it, diving headfi
skin ofthe edge. Sam laps at me, kissing my clit as I come.

y dress “Thank you,” he murmurs, planting another kiss over my delicates.
you.”

hungry I pant, my chest rising and plunging. “Thank me? Thank *you*, Samu
“Don’t thank me yet, princess.” He rises, his mouth glistening, and r
bra. Hethe button of his jeans. His cock unfurls, hard and ready for me.

breath, He pulls the pillows from beneath my head and tucks them under m
wirling “I want to see all of you.” He leans over me, placing his hands on eitl
of my head. I can feel his cock pressed against me, throbbing. “I v
ing forwatch those pretty lips swallow me when I take you.”

ive. I inhale sharply, my stomach fluttering.

With one hard thrust, he’s buried deep as I stretch around him. H
” slides in and out of me, his skin brushing against my clit with each r
hirt. Spurred on by my cries of pleasure, he quickens the pace.

les. He His hands are on my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh. My

ath myclaw at his back.

ver my “Come for me, Jane.” His voice is low and commanding, and I can’t

I let myself go, crying out as I give into the pleasure. My muscles
fingersaround his cock, shockwaves tensing my entire body.

rate for Sam groans my name, rutting into me. His cock twitches, filling n
his essence and spilling over his shaft.

n’t wait He’s still thrusting as a blade materializes between his fingers.

Oh.

His eyes dart over my face, looking for an answer to his un
question.

y cunt, *It’s time.*

rst over I nod, accepting my fate.

The blade slides along the curve of my breast, and as the blood flow
“Thankdrops his head. He laps at my skin, sucking the wound. I’m expect
teeth, hoping for them.

el.” Francis said the bite would make the process less painful. Maybe
releasesdoesn’t think I want to feel the effects of his venom again, but I w
mind the high if it saved me from whatever suffering happens next.

ry hips. But his fangs never touch my skin. Samuel raises his head and swi
ner sidethumb over my wound. “I’ll get you a bandage in a moment,” he w
want tohis eyes glowing red.

“What? But,” I shake my head, sitting up on my elbows. “You
taken enough. Francis said you need to take a lot of my blood before
is cockme yours. A transfusion.”

motion. Samuel’s jaw clenches. “He said what?”

The atmosphere in the room suddenly changes, becoming tense a
fingersHe stiffens, his eyes flashing an intense shade.

Is he *mad* at me?

I resist. I've been his perfect little captive, going along with his every word, not questioning his motives. And now *he's* angry?

I straighten my back and scowl at him, mimicking his energy. "Are you going to change me or not, Samuel? Because whether it be tomorrow or seventy years from now, I will die, and what we've shared will be nothing."

He leans forward, gripping my chin between his fingers. "I'll never let you go, Jane. Tonight was about showing you how important your humanity is. Not about destroying it."

I narrow my eyes. "You'd sacrifice my life instead, then? Leave me at the mercy of some vampiric killers' fangs?"

"What?" he scowls. "No."

I rise to my feet. I can't stand another second in this cabin, where the scent is as strong as our recent lovemaking. The mood is tense and oppressive, as if I'm being smothered.

I grab his long black coat from the hanger, wrapping it around my shoulders. "I need some air."

Sam takes a step backward, shaking his head in astonishment. "You can't leave."

My body turns rigid. "Yes, I can." Our eyes connect, and I let every emotion of my fury burn through the stare. "I'm getting air. If you come after me, I'll give you a good reason to find your brothers and make them drive me to the city."

His eyes turn to slits. "They wouldn't dare."

"I guess we'll find out, won't we?" And then I turn, storming out of the cabin and letting the door slam shut behind me.

I rush down the stairs, my bare feet slapping against the smooth,

wood. *Asshole*. A flood of obscenities filter through my mind as I stalk
l, neverthe lawn.

By the time I reach the deer trail leading to the spring, my mood
is sadder. I slow my steps, clutching the jacket, *his* jacket, tighter around
my waist.

I mean Samuel doesn't care about our love if it means I'll stay human. He
doesn't care if I die, as long as I bleed for him until then.

My feet make crunching noises against the dead leaves, and I regret
not having remembered to bring my phone for a flashlight. Fortunately, the
moon is full, so I manage to stumble my way through the brush until I reach
the glowing spring.

I thought Sam's venom had made the waters more ethereal than they
were, but I was wrong. The tranquility remains untouched, still reflecting
Sam's night sky with a beautiful accuracy.

I collapse at the water's edge, staring at my reflection in the dark pool.
The moon is so large, swallowing the top of my head like a halo. I realize
myself. "I'm wet, and I wipe at my cheeks, ashamed.

It isn't like Samuel is breaking up with me. He just... can't decide
how long he plans to string me along.

The crunch of a twig near the forest's edge causes my tears to dry,
my spine straightens, prickling with goosebumps. My senses go on hyperdrive,
I listen intently, wishing I had Samuel's hearing.

The howling wind causes the trees to rustle, making it difficult to
hear any sounds other than the whistling breeze, but
the "Hi, there."

I squeak out a cry, twisting to face the strange voice.

An older man wearing khakis and a plain white shirt stands before

crosshair salt and peppered and cut short. He's wearing a large rucksack secured to his back, smiling warmly.

But it's dark, and he's staring at me, his eyes unreadable.

"Um, yes?"

He offers me his hand. "I apologize for startling you. I was on the wrong side of the road and seem to have taken the wrong route. Do you know any places nearby where I can get a new map? A cabin or rest area, perhaps?" I take a few seconds to process what's happening before finally placing my hand in his.

His grasp is like a block of solid ice.

I tug away from him and take a step backwards, my heart hammering. A really large stature looms in front of me, blocking my only escape route. Muttering the voice commands me to flee, to conceal myself, to do something- anything.

He cocks his head to the side, a smile growing on his wrinkled face. "You're Jane Johnson, aren't you?"

I shake my head, taking another step back. My foot lands in the mud, soaking the bottom of Sam's jacket.

The man's nostrils flare, and he chuckles. "Oh, yes. His scent of *bet* is all over you." He sizes me up, advancing menacingly.

Before I have time to scream, an excruciating pain strikes my skull. I fall into darkness.

Wake out

me, his

hair salt and peppered and cut short. He's wearing a large rucksack secured to his back, smiling warmly.

But it's dark, and he's staring at me, his eyes unreadable.

"Um, yes?"

He offers me his hand. "I apologize for startling you. I was on the trail a while back and seem to have taken the wrong route. Do you know of any places nearby where I can get a new map? A cabin or rest area, perhaps?"

I take a few seconds to process what's happening before finally placing my hand in his.

His grasp is like a block of solid ice.

I tug away from him and take a step backwards, my heart hammering. His large stature looms in front of me, blocking my only escape route. My inner voice commands me to flee, to conceal myself, to do something- anything.

He cocks his head to the side, a smile growing on his wrinkled face. "You're Jane Johnson, aren't you?"

I shake my head, taking another step back. My foot lands in the water, soaking the bottom of Sam's jacket.

The man's nostrils flare, and he chuckles. "Oh, yes. His scent of *betrayal* is all over you." He sizes me up, advancing menacingly.

Before I have time to scream, an excruciating pain strikes my skull and I fall into darkness.







I pace from one end of the cabin to the other, hating the world, my life, and myself.

How did this wonderful night turn so sour?

And what was Francis spewing to make Jane so confused?

I *told* her I wasn't going to turn her into a vampire. What does she has changed since now and then? The transition from alive to dead simple afternoon decision. It's a soul altering choice.

Her life *means* something. To both of us.

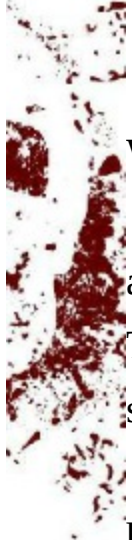
And yet I let her down. She ran from me like all the other women scarred. Like I had burned her. *Hurt* her.

What the Hell did Francis tell her?

One hand claws through my hair as I take a deep breath, trying to handle on myself. I'm debating on storming to my brother's cabin so I off steam by smashing Francis' head in, but I worry Jane will return I'm gone.

So I pace.

And I continue to pace.



I pace so long that the sun is nearing its return, and Jane *still* isn't back. My concern for her grows with each passing moment. What if she's gone? What if something happened to her?

Fuck it. She can be mad at me if she wants, but I refuse to sulk anymore. I throw my shirt over my head and stalk into the frosty night. The forest is silent as I follow the path that Jane took earlier. It's the one she knows, leading to the spring.

God, she looked so beautiful the first time I brought her to the water. I had stared at the rippling current with wonder in her deep green eyes, I had mused around her face. Now, when I fetch her, she'll be angry. Her disappointment will replace the memory of that first scene.

Damnit, Jane.

I slap branches out of my way as I stomp through the woods, not caring that my footsteps echo or that the forest creatures scurry away, frightened by the angry predator. The forest silences as I push around the last of the overgrown greenery, exiting into the hidden clearing.

My eyes travel over the edge of the bubbling spring, searching for the sweet Jane. I'm desperate for her, ready to drop to my knees and beg for forgiveness.

But she's nowhere to be seen. "Jane?"

There's no answer.

I take a step closer to the water, noticing her foot print stamped in the mud. Kneeling, I scan the ground, piecing together where she may have gone next.

Perhaps she was startled and ran into the wilderness. Images of her naked and stumbling through the woods cause my dead heart to s

ick. What if she's gotten lost? I sniff the air, willing some of her scent
's hurt? lingered.

Vampire.

tay put Vices grip my throat as I struggle to inhale more of the scent, push
ght air. surge of panic away.

aly trail Then I see the other prints. Boots.

And Jane's dainty toe prints disappearing, vanishing mid step.

ers. She *Taken.*

her hair I rise to my feet, my body trembling with rage.

er bitter *This is my fault.*

I let her down, left her alone, and now she's been kidnapped. *I'm a
idiot.* I should have been there to protect her, to keep her safe.

icaring My anger boils over, and I clench my hands into fists at my side.
ened by *takes what's mine without paying the price.*

of the The slimy bastard found us. Rune sent his mediocre watchmen to tr
down, and instead... They took the only thing that could ever really hu
for my *I'm such a fool.*

for her I follow the boot prints, my thoughts whirling. The footsteps t
further into the woods, and as I go along, it becomes difficult to s
evidence in the dirt. The abductor is moving quickly with a clear ob
It's obvious they've put a lot of thought into this.

nto the *How?*

ve gone My mind is deep ravine, and I'm shouting into the abyss of it. Fea
hold of me, seizing my stomach and any semblance of warmth it holds

ic nearly Jane's blood.

queeze. *It's all I have left of her now.*

No. This is *not* how her story ends.

to have I'll go to any lengths necessary to find my sweet Jane, no matter takes.

When the tracks run cold, I circle back, blurring with speed across the property until I arrive at my brother's cabin. I use the force of my momentum to slam through the door.

Matt knocks over his drink, the liquid seeping across his cherry wood table top. "What the fuck, bro?"

"She's gone." I say, chest heaving.

I can't breathe. *I can't breathe.* Fuck, I don't even *need* to breathe.

I lean against the door frame, struggling to keep myself upright. What the fuck is wrong with me?

Composure, Sam.

No one I need to keep my head straight. It's the only way we'll find her.

"What do you mean, she's gone?" Matt asks, rising from his stool.

Just then, the door to one of the bedrooms swings open. Francis storms into the room, his forehead wrinkled in concern.

My teeth ache, mouth pooling with venom. "*You fucking asshole.*" I lunge toward him, fangs parted and ready to strike.

I grab him by his shirt and shove him against the wall, pushing me closer to his. I lock eyes with him, looking him straight in the face. "One good reason not to kill you right now, Francis."

He wears a mask of confusion, glaring at me like *I'm* the one who's taking up. "Because I'm already dead?" he mutters.

I wrap my hand around his neck, squeezing. "Wrong answer." My fist comes out, hitting him square in the nose. A sickening series of cracks ring out. Francis' face pours with dark blood.

"*Enough,*" Matt growls.

what it Suddenly, I'm pulled backward. Matthew's arms encircle my
holding me tight. His gaze focuses on Francis, who's busy wiping the
oss myfrom his upper lip. "Francis, what did you do?"

otion to My brother looks oblivious. "I didn't do a fucking thing!"

"*Liar,*" I spit. "You told Jane I'd change her. She got upset with m
ood barvoice breaks.

Fuck.

The breathlessness returns. I yank against Matt's hold.

He releases me, but my legs feel weak. I lean against the wall, ru
/that thehand over my eyes. "She said she just needed air. Told me not to con
her. But when I did, she was *gone*. Someone *took* her."

Francis glares at me. "I didn't tell her you'd change her. She ask
someone was changed. *I'm* the one who told her to give you time."

Matt looks between the both of us, but I don't even care what he
auntersWe're wasting time. Jane is out there, naked, and possibly injured.

I push away from the wall. "It doesn't matter. We just need to find h
I lunge Matt holds up his hands, halting me. "Wait. Just wait a fucking n

He sighs, crunching his knuckles, something he always does wh
y bodynervous. "How do you know she was taken? Did you see someone w
ive meShe might have just wandered off, got lost-"

I shake my head. "There were tracks. Someone was with her by the
fuckedHer footprints go cold mid stride, and I lost the bastard's scent in the v

I stare at Matthew, making myself very clear. "*Someone* took her.
ist fliesmen, most likely. Whoever it was is carrying her on foot."

out, and Matt and Francis share another stupefied look.

I grit my teeth. "We need to *go*. *Now*."

Matthew looks behind me and shakes his head. "We can't, Sam."

torso, “The fuck we can’t,” I snarl. My body is phasing between tense and a liquiduseless panicked feeling.

Stay alert, Sam. Find her. Protect her. Keep her safe.

Francis pats my shoulder. “Look, man. We can’t.” He points behind me—” My I turn.

The shades are drawn tight, but behind them is the faint glow of sun
Fucking sunlight.

I give in to the sinking feeling, letting it swallow me whole. I slide
bbing at the wall, collapsing on the hardwood floor.

ne after *Useless.*

“I should have listened to her. She—” I pause, biting my lip as I find
ed *how*urge to fall apart. “She wanted me to change her so she could be st
more safe.”

thinks. Francis kneels beside me. “Lesson learned, then.”

I glare at him. “I could still slice you open, little brother. Don’t
ier.” won’t do it.”

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en he’s took her, then they’re hiding from the sun too. She’s nearby, and w
ith her?time to think this through. We need a plan. Information.” His eyes

slightly, his jaw feathering. “We won’t let anyone hurt her, Samuel.”

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woods.”world if we have to. *Together.*”

Rune’s

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Useless.

“I should have listened to her. She-” I pause, biting my lip as I fight the urge to fall apart. “She wanted me to change her so she could be stronger, more safe.”

Francis kneels beside me. “Lesson learned, then.”

I glare at him. “I could still slice you open, little brother. Don’t think I won’t do it.”

Matt squats in front of me, clearing his throat. “Listen, man. If Rune’s men took her, then they’re hiding from the sun too. She’s nearby, and we have time to think this through. We need a plan. Information.” His eyes narrow slightly, his jaw feathering. “We won’t let anyone hurt her, Samuel.”

Francis nods his head, agreeing. “We’ll rip through every vampire in this world if we have to. *Together.*”







Consciousness creeps into my body, alerting my senses one at a time. The first to become aware is my sense of hearing.

Someone is *breathing* nearby, and further away, a bird chirps.

I don't dare wiggle my limbs in fear that whoever is with me will catch me, but I can feel that the ground is slick and cold. Muddy?

"I know you're awake, little blood whore." The voice is hoarse, and it shivers down my spine.

I attempt to open my eyes, but they're leaden and unresponsive. A wave of cold washes over me as I understand my vulnerability. My recollection is hazy, and I strain to recall what took place before everything faded away.

The voice speaks again, closer this time. "Do not attempt to move. Your bonds are secure. No need to shout, either. Your cries of help are unheard." The voice cackles menacingly as he grows nearer, his footsteps ringing in my ears.

When my vision regains its focus, I see the ominous figure hovering just above me.

It's the man from the woods, the lost hiker. Only he isn't with his backpack anymore, and he's switched his khakis for a pair of black slacks. As he lowers his head, the scent of his breath wafts over my face. He reeks of alcohol and the coppery scent of blood, causing my stomach to churn.

"Who are you?" I croak out, my voice barely audible.

The man laughs cruelly. "Who am I?" He trails a finger over my neck, down my throat, lower... As his touch sears over me, I realize I'm still naked. My panties are intact, but Samuel's jacket is gone.

Samuel. I close my eyes, hating myself for being so stupid.

The man chuckles again, pulling his hand away. "I'm the man who's here to kill you. Slowly." He smiles, showing two elongated fangs. "No violence, child. We have time to play first. Samuel won't get here until nightfall, so I can't end you unless he's watching." The man mocks a pout.

I try to lean away, but it's no use. The man's presence is suffocating, wrapping around me like tendrils of darkness. I close my eyes, squinting them tightly together. "A-are you Rune?"

He leans away, and I open my eyes in time to see the surprise flash across his face. "He told you about me?" A slow, terrifying smile stretches across his face. "And what did he say, girl? Too much, I'm assuming. Seems he spilled our secrets to you."

I shut my mouth, pressing my lips together to keep them from trembling under his scrutiny.

Rune's gaze burns red. He hovers over me, his thin, wrinkled fingers flexing over my body. "Tell me, or I'll slice you up right now." His teeth dig into the flesh of my arms, biting into my skin until it burns.

My mouth opens in a soundless cry as I frantically search for a way to retreat. But my efforts are futile; the darkness wraps around me so tight

aring aI can't make out any escape. All I sense is the moisture from the dirt, cks. Asits scent into my nostrils. All that I can witness is Rune's distorted eeks ofleaving no doubt about his ill intentions.

“He just told me you were his maker's brother. That's all.” My v shaky.

cheek, “You're lying,” Rune growls, his voice deep and guttural. A second mostlyhe strikes, his fangs sinking into my neck.

The pain from the bite is overwhelming, like a hot knife through my It's more intense than when Samuel accidentally pierced me, and fa s goingthan when he used his blade later on. Rune's teeth dig further in, rele vorries, wave of agony that overwhelms my senses. I scream, but it comes c l, and Igarbled cry.

Rune drinks eagerly, sucking at my skin in the most invasive way. ocating, *Sam, please. Save me.*

ueezing Suddenly, Rune pulls away. He spits a steaming mouthful of bloo my chest, sneering. “You didn't tell me you were with child. *Ugh.*” F r acrossagain, but this time the blood lands on the mud beside me. “Sam enjo his lips.like this? All used and full of some other man's seed? You're sickenin lled all My vision blurs along the edges. I shake my head, but it's so heavy simply lops to the side. “I'm not pregnant. Can't be. No one.”

mbling He slaps me, hard. The crack sounds through the darkness surround echoing in my ears.

fingers *Funny.* I hardly feel it.

fingers “Liar. Why must you tell fibs when I can see right through you?”

It feels like I'm sinking. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness oute ofthat I can see the ceiling. It's *strange*, like a makeshift lean-to roof, r itly that

wafting sticks, leaves, and vines. Only a single sliver of light has made it through the face, weaved material, near the edge.

Where am I?

My voice is gone. Rune is rambling on like a madman, but I can't focus on his words.

I'm mesmerized by the way the leaves and vines are moving, weaving across the ceiling, cascading down the walls, twisting and turning in an ever-changing pattern.

My veins. As I look closer, it's clear that the walls comprise nothing more than porous, porous rocks.

My vision is blurring. I'm in a pit.

My vision is blurring. A grave.

Samuel. Please. Come get me.

The world goes black again, and I drift, floating.

Lost.

My vision is blurring.

My vision is blurring.

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My vision is blurring.

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A grave.

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PRE-ORDER BOOK 2

My Vampire, The Slayer (Shadowing Jane Book 2)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you didn't throw your kindle over that ending!

Trust me when I say I hate writing cliff hangers, but this is *exactly* this story needs to pause. Things get very interesting from here on out (no spoilers!) we're going to find out so much more about Sa and the forbidden world in the next installment.

I planned this series to be a duet, but I have a feeling that it might go further. Maybe not even with these characters. (If you want Francine's story as much as I do, leave a comment in your review! LOL.)

One more note about the next book in this series; the pre-order will be for a year out, but it WILL be coming much, much sooner. My schedule includes SoulBlood #7, a short alien dino-shifter anthology piece, and then because of Shadowing Jane.

This means two series are concluding this year! This one is the SoulBlood series. AH, so many feels.

If you've read my SoulBlood series, then you know we only have a few more couples to get through before the end has to be written. I'm hooked into Evelyn and Norvyc's book right this second!

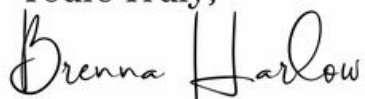
For my superfans (you know who you are), I LOVE YOU. Thank much for continuing to stick with me through this journey. This is c beginning. So many great things are coming soon!

If you're new to me, I'd love to connect online! I send newsletter month with bookish updates and personal notes. If you aren't in newsletter subscription thing, you can also follow me on social med most active on Instagram and TikTok right now, but my Facebook G always poppin'! You can find the links to these below the authors note

Thank you if you've read this far. :) Jane and Samuel came to r dream (like most of my favorite characters, *cough* Aldeon & *cough*). The only scenes I had in mind when starting were that / where hears Jane moaning through the walls, and then that he'd smash throug out, and to save her from an intruder. Those two scenes were pivotal, and I ho Samuel's were exciting for you to read!

t go on Sending you all so much love.

is' love

I be set Yours Truly,


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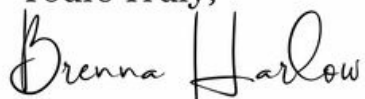
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For my superfans (you know who you are), I LOVE YOU. Thank you so much for continuing to stick with me through this journey. This is only the beginning. So many great things are coming soon!

If you're new to me, I'd love to connect online! I send newsletters every month with bookish updates and personal notes. If you aren't into the newsletter subscription thing, you can also follow me on social media! I'm most active on Instagram and TikTok right now, but my Facebook Group is always poppin'! You can find the links to these below the authors note.

Thank you if you've read this far. :) Jane and Samuel came to me in a dream (like most of my favorite characters, *cough* Aldeon & Kora *cough*). The only scenes I had in mind when starting were that Samuel hears Jane moaning through the walls, and then that he'd smash through them to save her from an intruder. Those two scenes were pivotal, and I hope they were exciting for you to read!

Sending you all so much love.

Yours Truly,


ALSO BY BRENNNA

The SoulBlood Series

Before The Darkest Hour (Prequel)

Books 1-6

The Blood in Me (Kora + Aldeon's pregnancy novella)

Coming Soon...

Blood Touches Twilight (SoulBlood #7)

My Vampire, The Slayer (Shadowing Jane #2)

The Sinner Lords Standalone Novels

Captured by The Shadow Demon

Bound by The Shadow Demon

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