



Bite Me

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Eddie

When my best friend drags me to a vampire dinner club as her wingman, I'm determined—I won't end up on the menu. No eye contact. No flirting. Definitely no biting.

Then he appears. Deadly attractive with a voice smooth like velvet, he murmurs into my ear, his lips graze my wrist, and I forget my resolve. The rush of his venom in my veins feels like falling off the world's edge. The lust consumes me, intoxicating and irreversible.

I leave in a daze. I shouldn't have succumbed so easily, and I won't come back.

Except Monday morning, I walk into work, and the vampire who ruined me is sitting in my boss's chair.

Russel

Feeding is a transaction—no names, no attachments. The older I get, the less I crave a second bite.

But Eddie changed the rules. His blood wrecks me.

I should let him go, like the hundreds before him, but I can't. He's sincere, vibrant, unforgettable... I search for him like a fool.

Then fate throws him back into my life in the cruelest way.

The most enticing man I've ever fed from is within arm's reach every day, but I'm not allowed to touch him.

Total Pages (Source): 22

1

AT AGLIO

RUSSEL

“You look like death,” Levi said, flashing his teeth in an exaggerated, creepy smile.

I scoffed at the old joke.

He turned his wineglass, making the ruby liquid swirl. He pretended not to look at me too closely, even though he had surely analyzed every micro-expression the second I stepped into his hotel.

The excellent wine—Levi only had the best—should have improved my mood. It soothed my throat and tricked my empty stomach. But this odd apathy persisted. I was so used to the feeling that I rarely noticed it anymore. Maybe it was just who I was—a sad, lonesome creature of darkness, who apparently enjoyed feeling sorry for himself.

“What’s up with you?” Levi asked.

“Nothing’s up with me. Nothing’s the matter, nothing matters, nothing’s happening.”

My friend nodded solemnly. “Ah. The April blues. The prolonged daylight always gives me an existential crisis. The experts recommend feeding more often in smaller doses to combat seasonal depression.”

“I’m not depressed. The sun doesn’t affect me.”

Levi lifted his sculpted eyebrows. “I assure you that it does.”

“I don’t have seasonal depression, Levi.”

“Are you becoming a grump with old age?”

I gave him my most annoyed look, but he just laughed.

“Russel, my friend, you need to feed more often. You deny your body the most basic of needs and then complain about the consequences.”

Levi’s solution for everything was more blood and more sex. It worked for him. “I’m fine.”

“Come to the club.”

“Thanks, I’m good.” All that hassle. Flirt, seduce, negotiate. It used to be exciting a decade ago, but the more I knew about human nature, the less I enjoyed conversing with my food. I was good for a few more days.

Levi finished his wine and set the glass down. “You’re about to start at Fowles he wanted the rush of a vampire bite and nothing more. Was it hypocritical to berate him for it? I could just take him to the room Levi had booked me and get it over with. In less than half an hour, I could have my dick in this man’s ass to the hilt and my stomach full of his blood. I’d be fine for another two weeks.

He stepped closer, pushing his knee between my legs until our thighs rubbed together.

“I’ve seen you here before.”

“Possibly. I don’t remember you.”

A flash of irritation passed over his face but disappeared quickly. “So, you in or what?” Faking innocence, he tilted his head to the side, exposing his throat. His pulse fluttered under his fragile skin, his warm human scent like blasts of hot air over my face. But the chemicals he’d doused himself with ruined it.

No, I wasn’t hungry enough for this. I shouldn’t have let Levi drag me up here.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m good.”

“Go fuck yourself,” the man mumbled and pushed off the bar counter.

I turned my back to the room and finished the wine. After tipping the bartender, I stalked out of there, careful not to make eye contact with anyone.

It would have been a smooth exit had I not bumped into Levi by the elevators.

“You’re done already? Don’t tell me you fed in the toilet stall.”

“I did not.” I pulled the key card out of my pocket. “Thank you. I really appreciate your help, but I won’t be having dinner tonight.”

Levi scrunched his eyebrows together. “What the fuck, Russel? You’re basically gaunt, your irises are paler than my ass, there’s a pot full of young blood right under your nose, and you’re leaving ?”

It occurred to me I could say something about him serving junk food at his clubs, but I stopped myself at the last second. It would have been a vile comment in more ways

than one. Instead, I wordlessly shoved the key card into his jacket pocket, much like he'd done to me.

He lifted his arms and shook his head. "I don't understand you, man."

One elevator opened, and I sidestepped Levi to get inside.

I waved as the door began sliding shut. "The wine was great!"

It took a while to get downstairs, with the elevator stopping on several floors of the high-rise hotel, letting people in and out. When I finally got out on the ground floor, my nose was full of aggressive scents. Outside, I looked up at the sky and took a deep breath. Levi's hotel stood in a prime location at the edge of the park, and the stench of the city was weaker here, diluted by the smell of trees and freshly mowed grass.

I walked home, soaking up the relaxing effect of the night. In a few days, I'd be working a day job again, drowning in traffic and sun-induced headaches. To face it, I would have to feed soon, I knew. But I wasn't desperate just yet.

2

A KISS

EDDIE

I watched my roommate paint mascara on her lashes with an enviably sure hand. Sheri did everything with confidence. She screwed the cap on and dropped the tube into her make-up bag, then adjusted a pin in her hair, the corner of her lips curving up. She looked amazing, and she knew it. Me? I just wanted to peel off those tight jeans she made me wear and cower under a blanket.

“I’m not sure about tonight,” I told her. “It’s been a rough week at work. I’d really rather chill at home.”

She waved her hand in the air, making a blah-blah gesture at me without even looking my way. “Your weeks are always rough. You’re coming with me, Eddie.”

Sheri was a nurse but earned good extra money as a plus size lingerie model. Not only did she have impeccable skin, big perky boobs and a gorgeous round ass, but she had perfected that sexy, come-get-me smirk that made people of all genders stare at her with confused longing.

Tonight, she wore a frilly skirt and a decadent corset straight out of a burlesque show. She ran her tongue over the thin gap between her front teeth—even that looked hot on her—blew herself a kiss in the mirror and palmed her tits.

“I look like a snack.”

She would be a snack, alright. A four-course dinner if she’d get her way.

“Why is it called a dinner club when they serve no food?” Aaron asked. He didn’t lift his gaze from his computer screen.

Sheri rolled her eyes. “Is he joking, or is he really this clueless?”

“The human guests are the dinner, Aaron,” I said.

“Oh. That makes sense.”

Aaron was the lucky bastard who got to stay at home. Sheri never tried to drag him out, only me, which was unfair—and my own fault for being a pushover.

“Sheri, I’m tired. Maybe I’m coming down with something.”

She glared at me as she fiddled with my hair.

“Don’t give me those puppy dog eyes. You’re going.” She patted my cheek. “I’m ovulating. I need to get fucked.”

“Why do I have to come with you when you’re going to drop me as soon as you find someone?”

“I can’t go there alone. That would give out desperate vibes.”

“Because dragging your nervy gay roommate with you is cool as hell?”

“I’m introducing you to the scene. Showing you the ropes. I’m cool.”

“I don’t want to be shown any ropes,” I muttered.

“Stop whining. You promised, Eddie.”

I did promise her, and I deeply regretted it.

“And change into the shimmery top I gave you. Not only do you look hot in it, but I need to make it obvious you’re not my date.”

“Eddie can dress as butch as he wants,” Aaron quipped from behind his computer.
“Nobody will ever mistake him for a straight man.”

“Shut up,” Sheri told him.

Aaron was right, but I wore the skintight purple top anyway. Like I said: pushover.

“This is gloomy as hell,” I hissed.

My friend laughed. “It’s atmospheric. Loosen up.”

The long, assessing look the towering bouncer had given me by the entrance still unnerved me. The club decor only added to my unease: dark-red curtains, black velvet wallpaper, and candlelight... Very gothic, all of it.

“Why does it look like a horror movie set? I thought the vampiric community was trying to move away from those stereotypes.”

“I like it. What do you want to drink?”

“Anything aside from a Bloody Mary, thanks.”

She snorted an unladylike laugh and leaned on the bar counter, blatantly ogling the muscly bartender. He was hot. Playful smile, nice hands, powerful chest... He wore a simple white T-shirt, leather cuffs on his wrists, and piercings in his ears. His aura said, “I fuck like a demon but won’t call you the next day.” Way out of my league and probably straight.

He moved toward us, and I saw the subtle clues in his features, his gestures, and the metallic hues in his irises. The bartender was not human.

“Hi there. What can I get you?”

“Hi! Aperol spritz and a negroni, please,” Sheri said.

“You got it, beautiful.” His warm golden eyes went straight to Sheri’s ample cleavage and lingered even as he reached for the cocktail glasses.

As the bartender prepared our drinks, his hands moved distinctly faster and with greater precision than a human’s. It looked impressive and a little disturbing—a subtle reminder that he was the predator while we, humans, were the prey.

There was someone on a podcast I’d listened to last week who joked that vampires would be incredible surgeons if more of them could be convinced to do the job. Obviously, dipping their hands in fresh blood and human tissue for hours without the possibility of taking a bite was too distressing for most.

The bartender handed Sheri the card machine, and she blipped her phone above it.

“Thank you,” she sang, and the bartender winked at her.

“Where do you want to sit?” I asked, eyeing the booths. Most were occupied, but I saw two empty ones near the back.

Sheri threw me an annoyed glare. “I’m not hiding this body in a corner. Let’s stay by the bar.”

I sighed and followed her to a couple of stools in front of the beer taps. When I climbed on one, my feet dangled like a child’s. I hooked them around the legs and sipped my Aperol.

“How does it work, anyway?” I had to speak directly into Sheri’s ear over the beat coming from the speakers.

“I guess it’s the same as cruising at a gay bar.”

“That doesn’t narrow it down for me, cherry pie.”

Sheri glanced at the ceiling, as if asking higher powers for patience. She did that a lot with me. “Jeez, Eddie, how can you be so confident about your work and so hopeless in any other social situation?”

“I’m confident about the things I know how to do! This?” I circled a finger in the air. “No idea. If you leave me here alone, I might cry.” Okay, I was exaggerating, but only a little.

She looked at me with her unique mix of empathy and condescension and sighed. “It’s all about eye contact. If you’re not interested, you look away. Hold their gaze long enough, and they might come over to talk to you.”

“And then?”

“There’s some sort of code,” she said dismissively. “No biting when the prey is drunk, no full-on fucking in public, stuff like that.”

“But people are getting bitten in here?”

“Well, duh. It’s a dinner club.” Sheri craned her head and smirked. “There’s a couple having fun in the booth right behind you. The dude is gorgeous.”

“But...”

“Relax, Eddie. Nobody will drink your blood without your explicit consent.” She patted my cheek and wrapped her plush lips around the black straw in her drink. Her eyes scanned the room while I kept mine on her and my glass.

It didn’t even take ten minutes. Sheri was in the corner booth with a dashing older gentleman, and I sat by the bar alone, trying not to make eye contact with anyone.

I would have left already, but Sheri asked me to stay for half an hour in case her conquest turned out to be a creep.

“One more for you?” the bartender asked.

I exhaled. “Sure. Why not?”

He smirked and picked a glass. “First time at a dinner club, eh?”

“It’s that obvious?”

“Nah. You’re fine.”

Ice clanked into the glass.

“The guy over there has been checking you out.”

Bewildered, I spun around on the stool. “Who?”

Then I remembered that I was not supposed to make eye contact if I didn’t want to hook up with anyone, but it was too late.

Pale golden eyes locked on mine, like jewels shining from under thick dark eyebrows with deep lines between them. He had the most perfect cheekbones I’d ever seen. At first, he was frowning, which made me feel strangely helpless even though he sat across the room from me. Then his lips curved with an ageless, sardonic smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and suddenly, my stomach plunged.

Evolution, boy. You’re programmed to find him attractive.

Breathless, I turned back to the bartender, gazing at him as if he could save me. From what, I had no idea.

“I’m not here as dinner. I just came with a friend.”

The bartender shrugged. “He’s coming over.”

“Shit.”

“Chill, my dude. You say no, and he’ll leave you be.”

Okay. That’s easy. Just say no.

“Hello.” A deep voice with velvety undertones.

The bartender set my drink down, and before I could do anything, the man next to me flashed his phone.

“That’s on me.”

The bartender raised his eyebrows at me. I said nothing, too stunned to protest.

The stranger paid for my drink and settled on Sheri’s stool. I fixed my gaze on the shelves with bottles behind the bar. My heart was fluttering around my ribcage like a hummingbird.

“My name’s Russel. Can I have yours?”

“Eddie,” I piped up.

“Nice to meet you, Eddie.”

In my peripheral vision, I noticed the offered hand. It would be rude not to accept a handshake.

I glanced at the vampire again, and the room seemed to grow quiet around us.

I couldn’t look away. His eyes were changing color, gleaming like liquid metal. His hand wrapped around mine, broad and surprisingly warm.

Russel had a neat, short beard and a thoughtful forehead with just enough lines to make him look mature and interesting. I’d always liked older men—and if I could ever afford a therapist again, they’d have a field day with that. But of course this guy didn’t age the same way a human would. There was a sprinkle of salt at his temples, yet his skin was impeccable and his lips smooth. Broad-shouldered but lean, he looked powerful and agile, with a sort of quiet strength in his posture. His cologne wafted toward me, and he smelled like a forest in the spring.

He stroked his thumb over my wrist, and I realized I was still staring at him, holding

his hand.

“Oh. Sorry. I...” I pulled my hand away and dropped my gaze.

“You’ve never been here before, have you?”

“A friend dragged me with her. She’s the redhead over there...” I gestured aimlessly behind me. “I’m not here to...um. I’m not here as food. Sorry. Was that offensive? I don’t mean to be offensive.”

I could feel his gaze on me like a laser beam. When I peered at him from the corner of my eye, he was smiling softly, his eyes roaming the side of my face.

“Nothing offensive about being on point,” he finally said. “Your friend seems to be having fun.”

I glanced back at Sheri and almost swallowed my tongue. She was draped over the guy’s lap, kissing him like mad while he inched his hand up her skirt. I promptly looked away.

Russel cocked his head to the side. “Do you mind my company? Am I making you nervous?”

“No. No. It’s okay.”

I waved my hand around and almost knocked over my drink. Russel steadied it with his superhuman reflexes, and I blew out a breath.

“Yes. I’m nervous as hell,” I admitted.

“This is a safe space with hard rules. Even if I wanted to do something against your

will, I wouldn't dare do it here."

His blatant acknowledgment of the danger he posed made me feel oddly safe. "No, that's not..."

He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Attractive men make me nervous," I blurted. "You're attractive."

His smile widened. "You're the most beautiful man in the room, Eddie."

I scoffed. I worked in communication, and I knew a line when I heard one. He saw me as easy prey. And even so, my heart thumped faster and my cheeks heated from the compliment.

For heaven's sake, could I summon at least some of my workplace confidence? Just imagine he's a new client. Because that's not weird at all...

"Do you come here often?" I asked, loud and clear, without the slightest stutter. I gave myself an imaginary pat on the back.

"No," he replied. "I don't like dinner clubs."

That didn't make sense. "Why are you here then?"

His smile grew sad. "Because I need to feed."

"Do you need to drink blood every other week?"

"More or less, yes."

“You sound like it’s an inconvenience.”

Russel raised his eyebrows. “I don’t have to pretend with you, do I?”

“Pretend what?”

Smiling to himself, he shook his head as if something had occurred to him and he dismissed it. “Depending on who I’m feeding from, it can be a chore, bland, or pleasant.”

Drinking blood led to sex. I knew that . It was the point of dinner clubs—a mutually beneficial exchange between humans and vampires, a compromise honed by centuries of tension. It was a little disturbing to hear Russel call sex a chore—did he fuck people just because he needed to feed from them? That sounded miserable.

“You’ve gone quiet. What are you thinking?”

“Sorry. It’s just that...” I moved the straw around the melting ice in my glass.
“Nothing.”

“What? Tell me.”

“You don’t like the sex part? You just need the blood?” I could feel my ears growing hot. My blush must have been visible from space.

“I love sex, Eddie. I love getting my dick sucked and fucking a guy’s tight hole. Coming inside a man with the taste of his blood in my mouth is the best feeling I know. But some men are less enticing than others. Only rarely, when I’m really lucky, do I meet one who’s irresistible.”

I stared at him with my mouth open. His words made my stomach clench and my

pulse go haywire. My brain conjured a picture of me on my knees with Russel's dick in my mouth. How did vampire cum taste? Did it contain the same aphrodisiac as their saliva? He must have seen me going all red in the face—did it affect him? My blood, close to the surface...

His eyes seemed to glow, gold turning to lava. He parted his lips, and I glimpsed his pearl-white teeth. His nostrils flared.

Abruptly, he looked away and gestured around.

"This place is much cozier than the posh clubs in the business district."

"Oh. I wouldn't know," I stammered. "I've never been to any dinner club before." He'd scrambled my brain, dammit.

His smile was tender and not patronizing in the least when he said, "That's not a bad thing, Eddie."

I exhaled, no idea what to say next. Russel leaned closer.

"Your friend has left, but I hope you'll stay with me a little longer."

This vampire wants to drink my blood. When am I going to run?

He gently brushed my hand with his fingers, and a flurry of tingles ran up my arm. "Can I?"

Whether it was my curiosity or plain stupidity, I didn't know, but I gave him a tiny nod. He lifted my hand to his face. What if he was about to bite? Why didn't I rip my hand away?

He sniffed my wrist and hummed.

“You’ve really never done this before, have you?”

Volunteered to become a vampire’s dinner in exchange for a sexual high? “N-no.”

He gently played with my hand, gazing at me.

“That’s a rare thing. Many of my kind would be all over you if they knew.” He leaned closer and whispered, “Virgin blood.”

I sucked in a breath. “I’m not a virgin.” Lord, I really was socially incompetent.

Russel laughed at my outburst, but not unkindly. “But you’ve never been bitten.”

“No.”

“Have you ever thought about it?”

“Nope,” I blurted on automatic, shaking my head too fast. With Sheri going to clubs once a month at least, of course, I had thought about it. My companion continued looking at me patiently while his fingers played with mine.

“Okay. That was a lie,” I admitted. “I just didn’t think I’d want to try it.”

“You used the past tense.”

I opened my mouth and closed it again.

“I won’t force you into anything,” Russel said, and I believed him. He had that certain ease some people possessed that just made you trust them. I hadn’t known it

worked with vampires too. “I’m just letting you know that I very much like your scent, the way you look, and your soft voice. I’d love to taste your blood.”

He said it just like that, as if he were ordering a dessert. I could feel my pulse in my ears. Which made me think of my blood again—pulsing, churning, heating up. Sheri said the effect of the venom was immediate. The world’s most powerful aphrodisiac, intravenously...

I had to look away from his eyes before I was capable of forming words again.

“Do I have to answer now?” I asked.

“We have all evening.”

“What if you’re wasting time with me?”

He shrugged one shoulder. “I can get a quick dinner anywhere, but you, Eddie, would be a rare treat. I’ll take the risk.”

He was stroking my wrist, and I still hadn’t removed my hand from his grip. His touch was nice. Exciting.

Only melting ice remained in my glass.

Russel caught my hand in both of his, then brushed his fingers up the inside of my forearm. Along the veins. His golden eyes were mesmerizing.

“The booth in the back is empty. Will you come with me?”

It would be crazy to agree.

“Yeah.”

He stood, holding my hand, and led me to the very last booth. We passed two couples making out, but I didn’t look too closely.

Russel went in first, leaving me the outer seat—an easy exit if I wanted to leave.

Then he faced me fully. He brought my arm to his mouth and skimmed the fragile skin on my wrist with his lips.

“I won’t do anything you won’t agree to.”

“What do you want to do?” I whispered. The two drinks could make me brave but wouldn’t make me lose judgment. I hoped.

“I want to sink my fangs here.” He kissed the spot on my wrist. “And take a small sip. Then I want to watch you become aroused as my venom spreads through your system.”

Oh Jesus. Why did that sound so fucking hot? “I’m afraid of losing control.”

“Unless I keep biting you, the rush passes in under a minute.” He smiled sheepishly. “But I promised I wouldn’t pressure you.”

His hard body, his scent, the warmth coming off him... I wanted him without even a trace of his venom in me.

I was going to do it.

I was already half hard in my pants, Russel must have sensed my arousal. He kissed up and down my forearm, tenderly and torturously slowly. The skimming touch was

designed to make me beg for more.

“Tell me what you like in sex,” he murmured.

“I...like oral, both giving and receiving. I...prefer to bottom. Sensitive prostate.”

He lifted his eyes and grinned. “Good.”

“I’m vanilla,” I added in a rush. “The wildest thing I’ve ever done was doggie style on the bedroom floor. Seriously, I’m out of my depth here. I’ve only been with two people.”

Smiling, Russel put a finger on my lips. “We’ll stay here for a bit. If you want me to taste you, I will. But just kissing your skin is lovely. There’re no expectations other than to feel good.”

He skimmed his fingers down my jaw and to my neck.

“Can I kiss you here?” He stroked the side of my throat, making my pulse spike.

But I gave him a nod.

He leaned closer and assessed my eyes once more. I had no idea what he saw in them. Then he bent his head and nuzzled my throat. A rumble groan escaped him.

“You smell so good.”

A kiss. Just a soft, dry kiss. Another. And another.

I tilted my head to the side, and he roped his arms around me, pulling me close. His scent enveloped me.

Then he licked my skin, and I moaned.

“I want to try it.” I was going crazy.

But Russel leaned back and brushed his lips over mine.

“Kiss me, Eddie.”

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3

A BITE

EDDIE

Oh wow.

I'd never been kissed like that. So careful and soft, yet focused. The tender nips grew in intensity until he prodded at the seam of my lips with his tongue and tilted my head back. My mouth parted, and his tongue touched mine. He tasted divine . Better than any cocktail, any dessert.

He didn't even have to bite me, and I already felt as if a magic aphrodisiac was coursing through my system. Could the venom from his saliva affect me already? But vampires couldn't intoxicate people just by kissing them.

When he broke the kiss, I chased after his lips in a daze before I caught myself.

“Sorry.”

“You're irresistible, Eddie.”

He traced the vein along my throat with a fingertip, and I gulped.

“Will it hurt?” I breathed, feeling childish for asking that.

“A little at first. Then not at all.”

Watching my face intently, he brought my left wrist to his lips and kissed my skin there.

His mouth hovered right above my wrist when his fangs descended. They were smaller than I'd expected but sharp like needles.

He waited, holding my gaze, his fangs only a breath away from my skin.

This couldn't be real, could it?

Seeing the two white tips near my flesh, imagining how they would break through my skin, pierce a vein...

My cock gave a needy throb. Did I... like this?

Really? Of all the things in the universe, this?!

But my body screamed a resounding yes .

Those fangs about to bite me were the most arousing thing I'd ever seen.

I'd always been wary of vampires. When the cool kids at college used to go to interspecies parties, I stayed behind, finding excuses. If it hadn't been for Sheri's relentless nagging, I would have never ventured into a dinner club. A book on prejudice between the predator and prey species my boss had recommended to my team lay untouched on my nightstand. Not that I had time to read after working overtime nearly every day, but maybe I avoided opening it for other reasons I didn't want to analyze.

Had I been afraid of vampires or of my own subconscious desire?

And now I was here, a second away from being bitten. I could still stop it from happening.

Russel's golden eyes shone brighter as his fangs touched my skin. The softest contact, a tease.

I swallowed a needy whimper. "Do it."

Russel grinned, and with those fangs exposed, his smile looked sinister as fuck. Then he pressed his mouth to my wrist.

At first, I felt his warm lips and tongue. Like an open-mouthed kiss. I sucked in a breath.

Then came the sting.

I knew the little snippet of pain was coming but it still shocked me. And God help me, but I liked that too.

"Mmhmm." Russel closed his eyes, and his shoulders lifted with a heavy sigh.

The suction was tender. A slight chill spread along my vein—my blood leaving my body. I watched Russel swallow.

A mere heartbeat later, he swiped his tongue over the twin wound, and it was over. The two red dots on my wrist closed as if I were looking at sped-up footage of a healing process.

He kissed my palm and brought my hand to his neck. His irises glowed with a

warmer shade of gold, and his pupils grew. He looked strangely surprised as if searching my face for something. Then he cupped my head and pulled me closer for another kiss. I expected to taste my own blood in his mouth, but I didn't. Only him.

He kissed me deeply, thrusting his tongue into my mouth.

And then...

Oh!

A wave of heat rushed up my spine. I arched in Russel's arms. My cock was throbbing, my balls aching, and my nipples itched.

Oh my fucking God!

Whimpering, I rubbed myself against him. I needed to come. I needed to come so badly I could weep.

Easily, as if I weighed nothing, he lifted me into his lap so I straddled him. I moaned, but he silenced me with another deep kiss. With both hands on my ass, he urged me to thrust against him.

I rutted in his lap, humping his hard cock through the material of our pants. I couldn't stop.

"Take what you need, I got you." His low voice filled my head as his teeth scraped my earlobe. "Will you come for me?"

I did.

It had been seconds.

I stiffened in his arms, and he tucked my face into the crook of his neck just in time to muffle my cries. I'd forgotten I was in public.

Twitching, I filled my briefs with my release. Then I slumped with my head on his shoulder.

Holy shit .

Did that really happen? I panted against Russel's neck, my limbs like jelly. He stroked my back up and down and kissed my forehead.

"Are you okay?"

"What happened?"

"That was all you. You react beautifully to my venom," he said with a smile in his voice.

No shit. I'd dry-humped him in public. My cum soaked my underwear. I was a mess. From one little bite? Was that normal?

"And I like the taste of your blood. I like it a lot, Eddie." His voice sounded somehow deeper. Darker. "Let me feed from you, sweetheart. I'll make you feel so good."

I felt his erection on my inner thigh. It was big. Threateningly so.

My body was thrumming, my skin tight as if I was about to burst. Russel pressed his lips to the side of my neck and licked the soft skin there.

I moaned, imagining he'd bite me there and drink in long, deep gulps.

Another teasing lick. My dick was painfully swollen even though I'd just come.

"Bite me," I heard myself say.

Russel didn't need further encouragement. The sting came immediately, followed by a cooling sensation at the base of my throat. This time, he stayed there.

My eyes fell shut.

Warmth spilled in my underbelly, surrounding my balls and asshole and throbbing in my cock. Russel tightened his hold on me, swallowed, sucked, and swallowed again.

My body remained locked in a pre-orgasmic state, the last second before the release, and I hovered there, poised above the precipice. I couldn't breathe, couldn't move...

Until it all crashed down on me.

I groaned from deep in my gut, my cock pulsating in my pants, heat spreading from my groin all the way to my fingers and toes. I'd never come so hard in my life, yet I was fully clothed and unmoving.

Russel hummed into my skin. He kept drinking.

The orgasm slowly weakened into a soft tingle in my lower body. The firm press of Russel's lips on the side of my neck felt like an endless kiss. He seemed to be drawing all tension and unease out of me until I became boneless with relief.

Then I got lightheaded and a little cold. The room felt darker. I wanted to cuddle closer to the warm body holding me, but my arms and legs felt too heavy.

I heard a muted whimper. Was that me?

Russel jerked back. The wound on the side of my throat stung in the cool air. He stared at me, his eyes glowing orange. His expression looked positively feral.

Pure instinct made my stomach heave. This creature can suck me dry. He can kill me.

But Russel's face softened. He leaned in and tenderly licked the wound. Then he hugged me to his chest, stroking my nape and back.

"You're delicious. Thank you."

I could only hum in response. I was so sleepy.

"You'll be tired for a bit, but it'll pass."

Good to know. With my eyes closed, I lay draped over him, unable to move a muscle.

"Eddie?"

My head lolled. He cupped my face and frowned at me.

"Are you feeling dizzy?"

"Just sleepy," I slurred. It was nice. Mellow. Warm.

He said something to someone else, and I closed my eyes again. He kept petting me like I was something precious.

"Here, drink this."

A straw poked my lips. I should have questioned what it was. He could have drugged me—except he already had. In my relaxed state, I simply parted my lips and drank.

It tasted like a fruit smoothie.

“It’s a recovery cocktail. You’ll be back on your feet in no time.”

A lingering kiss to my forehead.

“What happened?” I mumbled, slowly regaining my faculties.

“It’s my fault. With how strong your first reaction was, I should have...held back. I think I got carried away. I’m sorry.”

“Could you have drained me?” One vampire couldn’t do that, right?

He let out a soft chuckle. “No, Eddie. I can’t drink a gallon of blood in one go. It’s just my venom messing with your system, then the orgasms, together with alcohol and what looks like low blood pressure. It’ll pass in a minute.”

I was already feeling much better.

Not that it had been bad before. I liked the high, but now I was becoming nervous again. I shouldn’t have made myself so helpless with a stranger. Hell, I came twice, in public, into my underwear! My groin was a soggy mess. Ugh . I needed to get a cab home asap.

Using the table for support, I climbed off Russel’s lap. I shivered with the loss of his warmth just as my brain yelled at me to get the hell out of there faster.

“That was intense,” I said, sounding dumb to my own ears.

I tried to stand but wobbled. I ended up leaning on the table awkwardly. Inching toward the end of the bench, I wondered if I could walk without swaying like a drunk.

“Eddie, wait. Would you like to come home with me?”

I blinked, stunned. Russel gazed up at me, his changeable eyes gaining a coppery hue. His arms were spread, one hand palm up on the table, the other on the seat’s backrest—the embrace I’d left was still open for me, luring me back. Then there was the bulge in his pants. He was hard as a rock.

My mouth went dry. He still wanted me? Heavens, I was an idiot. He’d made me come twice but hadn’t gotten off himself. He’d just...eaten. He was gorgeous, looking at me with such longing. I could spend the night in this man’s bed. And then what?

“Eddie?” The voice came from behind me, loud and shrill.

Sheri .

I’d forgotten about her.

“Jesus, Eddie. Are you okay?”

I staggered out of the booth. “I’m fine.”

Sheri caught me around my waist, steadying me. I sagged against her. Wow, my knees were weak.

“What the fuck, man?” she cried. Oops . She was yelling at Russel. “How much did you take from him?”

“Barely two cups. He had a strong reaction to the venom, and he’d had alcohol.”

“I’m not drunk,” I protested. I spread my feet wider and straightened, looking at the

scene in front of me with a strange detachment. At least my eyesight was normal.

Russel was glaring at my friend.

“I’m talking to the staff,” Sheri hissed. “I’ll have you blacklisted.”

He threw his hands in the air. “I didn’t break the rules. I had no idea he’d be so sensitive.”

“He’s barely standing, for fuck’s sake!”

“I’m fine,” I repeated.

With my hand on Sheri’s shoulder, I bounced on my heels, testing my balance.

“See. I’m good.”

Russel smiled at me, and I grinned back.

“Everything okay here?” It was the bartender. He appeared by Sheri’s other side, looking us over with concern.

“All good. I got a little dizzy, but I’m fine now.”

Sheri scowled at me, then she threw one last glare at Russel.

“I’m taking him home.”

Russel opened his mouth as if to say something, but Sheri tugged on my arm, and I stumbled after her along the booths and up the stairs.

The cool air outside felt like a punch, but it finally cleared my brain.

“Why did you come back?” I asked Sheri. I didn’t mean it to sound accusing, but it probably did. “Where’s your date?”

“Bit me and fucked me in the back of his car. Great dick, I came a few times, but I have a crick in my neck.” She grabbed my hand and marched down the street. “What the hell was that, Eddie? I leave you alone for an hour, and you get yourself sucked dry.”

“He wouldn’t. You know they can’t do that.”

“You looked like you were going to pass out. What happened?”

“What he said. Alcohol, the venom, and, um, coming. Twice. And blood pressure can drop after orgasm, right?” She was a nurse. Surely, she knew that.

Sheri harrumphed. “How did you end up with him in the first place? I thought you weren’t interested.”

“He was...” Who was Russel? How did he seduce me so easily? And he wanted me to come home with him.

He kissed like a god, and I’d never see him again. How he held me and called me sweetheart... A pang of regret made my throat close. I slowed my steps, tempted to go back.

But it was just as well. He had only wanted to feed.

“Eddie?”

“Can we take a cab home? Cummy underwear.”

Sheri burst out laughing.

4

LOST AND FOUND

RUSSEL

I moved out of the booth, but the bartender stood in my way.

“Excuse me.”

He didn’t budge. Putting his hands on his hips, he shook his head at me. “I wouldn’t do that, man.”

“Let me out.” That woman was dragging Eddie away from me. They were disappearing up the stairs, and I was wasting time. I took a step forward, but a firm hand on my chest stopped me.

“Dude, chill,” the bartender warned. “We don’t want any trouble.” His golden eyes told me he wouldn’t be easily threatened or overpowered. He looked well-fed and younger than me. If it came to it, he’d crush me like a bug.

“I’m not causing any trouble,” I said, keeping my tone even. “I’m leaving.”

He raised his eyebrows doubtfully. Then he stretched his arm toward the bar counter and presented me with the card machine. “You owe me for the recovery cocktail.”

“Forgot about that. Sorry.” I added a generous tip and blipped my phone over the

machine. “All good?”

“You tell me. Do I have to warn my bouncer about you?”

I exhaled, gathering the scraps of my patience. It seemed I had to explain before he’d let me go. “The boy was a newbie. He came twice in a row, just from a couple of bites, and got a little overwhelmed. The recovery cocktail was already kicking in when his friend returned and freaked out. He’s cute and tastes amazing, which is why I want to ask for his number. I won’t harass them.”

The bartender hesitated for a second, scanning my face. I had no idea what he saw since I didn’t feel like I had myself under control. The longer I stood here, the higher the chance I’d never see Eddie again.

Finally, the vampire moved to the side. “Good luck.”

Barely dodging a man with two beer bottles in his hands, I sprinted up the stairs and out on the curb. The street wasn’t busy; only a few humans straggled about in various stages of inebriation. A car passed, the windows tinted, then a cab stopped on the opposite side of the road, and two giggling girls stumbled out.

I couldn’t see Eddie and his friend anywhere. The bartender, however, had followed me and was now talking to the bouncer, no doubt telling him to keep an eye on me.

Without any idea in which direction they’d gone, I jogged back and forth to look around corners. Eddie had vanished.

They must have already taken a cab.

Fuck .

I walked home. My stomach was full, and my muscles were warm with fresh strength, but the usual relief of being fed didn't come. Instead, a vague sense of dread niggled at my consciousness.

What had just happened?

I saw a young man at a bar. He tucked a strand of wavy chestnut hair behind his ear, and his slender, fragile wrist looked so... kissable. His green eyes were skittish but bright, and he blushed easily. He seemed out of place, just like I often felt. He didn't belong to the dinner club—he stuck out like a white dove in a murder of crows. The longer I watched him, the brighter he shone, the rest of the room fading into shadows around him, and I imagined a connection, a kind of kinship, as if maybe our wrong souls that didn't belong anywhere could sense each other.

Yes, I let my fantasy run wild just looking at Eddie from across the room. Maybe it was hunger clouding my mind. I hadn't eaten in two weeks.

When Eddie turned around and noticed me, I shot up as if electrocuted. I had to taste him. It was imperative.

He acted so unaffected and sweet, his nervousness painfully obvious. One look at his blushing, youthful face, and I felt layers of my frosty cynicism thaw away. The genuine wonder in his eyes, his surprised arousal, even his fear... How beautiful was simple honesty? I'd forgotten.

I thought men like him had gone extinct along with the poetry of nineteenth-century Romanticism, but there he was, a sole daisy growing from a crack in the sidewalk...

What if I never see him again?

Blue-balled and bursting with energy, I jumped up and down in the elevator to my

apartment. As soon as I unlocked my apartment, I headed straight into the shower. With steam gathering around me, I closed my eyes and recalled Eddie's muffled cries, the sensation of his breath on my neck, and his clumsy, jerky movements as he came in my arms.

My release got washed down the drain, and the high subsided too soon. I could have had him waiting for me naked on my bed, dammit! Would he have said yes if his friend hadn't arrived?

Eddie's blood was exquisite. I couldn't compare it to anything. It had felt like distilled joy in my mouth, like lust and passion pouring down my throat and bliss settling in my stomach. With my lips on his neck and my arms around his shivering body, I wondered if he was human. Maybe he was some celestial being, and if I drank from him long enough, the fucking meaning of life would dawn on me.

What was it about his blood that had tasted so unique? Trying to remember the exact flavor was causing my dick to stir even though I'd just come.

I had to feed from Eddie again. But finding one boy in a city of three million people was nearly impossible without any clues. I could come to that dinner club every weekend. Unless the experience put Eddie off, maybe he'd turn up one night.

He was gay. Or bi or pan. Was he on any dating apps? How much scrolling and swiping would I have to do to find one person? I already knew I'd go through them all for a chance to taste him again.

I was addicted after one bite.

On Saturday, I spent hours on gay dating apps trying to spot Eddie's face. The sheer number of bare torsos I'd seen and ass pics I'd received left an aftertaste of desperation and had me questioning the pursuits of mankind. Did anyone out there

still look for a real connection?

When I returned to the club on Sunday night, the bartender told me to wait while he served another customer. Then he poured me a glass of red and put it in front of me.

“No, he hasn’t been here,” he said before I could form a question.

I gulped the rich and smoky wine. Maybe I could drown my disappointment in it.

“He tasted that good?” the bartender asked. He leaned on the counter, shoulders bulging threateningly, but eyes sympathetic. His interest seemed genuine.

“I’ve never felt anything like it. Blew me away.”

“Sometimes it happens.”

“What?”

“That you just find one who’s much better than anyone else, and then you only want that one flavor.”

“Has it happened to you?”

“Nah. But I’ve heard about it.”

“Well, if he comes by...”

“Give me your number. I’ll let him know you’re looking for him.”

“Thanks, man.”

He shrugged. "I thought you were one of the creeps, but you're okay."

I laughed. "Depends on how desperate I'll get. I haven't been getting much sleep."

He straightened and patted the counter. "You'd better keep looking then."

The wine soothed my throat. I licked my lips as I shook my head. "I need to put the search on pause. I'm starting a new job on Monday."

"Ah. What are you doing? You look like a big deal. Finance? Or law?"

"I'm in public relations."

"Fancy. Good luck, then."

"Thanks."

He pointed at the wine. "That's on me. It's my fault you lost the boy. What's his name?"

"Eddie."

"Eddie. Like I said. Wine's on me."

"Thank you."

He gave me a friendly nod and moved to the other side of the bar, where a couple of young women waited to place their orders.

I finished my wine and went home, hoping to catch more than two hours of sleep. I always struggled to fall asleep during the night, but since I had a day job, I didn't

have a choice. I'd get used to it again after a few weeks.

* * *

On Monday, I paired my black shirt with a simple dark suit and headed to the business district.

The early morning sun burned all the colors off the streets, bathing the city in a sickly white glare. I wore my darkest shades, but even so, by the time I arrived at the Fowles Lilly and Rory, the media analysts; and the young woman in the colorful outfit was surely Catrina Wilkes, the copywriter. I shook their hands one by one. They must have been nervous but hid it well. I'd be the first vampire working for Fowles & Tito—it was bound to be a little awkward at first. I did my best to smile warmly.

A thin figure hid behind Frank Cook and a middle-aged woman who must be the family law expert, Vivian Mendoza. Anthony beckoned the person forward.

Seeing the man's face, I froze.

"And this is Benedict Perkins. Don't be fooled by his harmless appearance. He's one of our most talented creatives."

"Eddie has a devious mind," Frank stated proudly.

Benedict. Eddie .

What were the chances? I'd spent the weekend searching for this boy!

He was pale as a sheet. His hand trembled when he put it forward to accept mine.

"Good to meet you, Mr. Greenwood."

“Please, call me Russel. Great to meet you...Benedict?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Eddie.”

I squeezed his hand and gave him a neutral smile. He looked like he’d keel over any second. But then he pulled his hand back, squared his jaw, and straightened. Eddie wiped his face clean of any emotion with a remarkable show of self-control.

Dammit, this little human was my holy grail. I’d found him. Those delicate lips quivered, but then he pursed them and lowered his gaze.

You’re staring, Greenwood. Snap out of it!

I didn’t have time to ponder what having him on my team would mean for me. Not with Anthony breathing down my neck. But I had to talk to Eddie in private as soon as possible.

“I don’t want to keep you from your work for too long,” I said to the group as I stepped back. “We’ll have your standard meeting at 10:30. Then, I’d like to meet each of you individually for lunch or breakfast during the week. Eddie, are you free today?” He’d been the last one to be introduced and still stood closest to me. It wouldn’t seem suspicious to anyone that I chose him first.

He nodded, his face blank. I looked to his left.

“Then Vivian, if you’re available tomorrow morning or at lunchtime?”

Vivian gave me a tense smile. “Breakfast tomorrow works for me, thank you.”

“Wonderful. After the regular team meeting, I’ll book times with the rest of you.”

Anthony patted my shoulder. “Welcome aboard.”

He excused himself, and I saw Eddie trailing out of the conference room right behind him as if he couldn’t get out fast enough. I didn’t blame him.

Frank showed me to my office, which thankfully had solid walls and a heavy door. As soon as he left, I pulled the blinds down. They were the thick, blackout kind I’d requested but hadn’t expected to get so fast. Anthony must have had them installed over the weekend. I sighed with relief as I sank into my new chair. My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and my headache evaporated in seconds.

My mind circled back to Eddie.

The situation was most inconvenient. A delightful surprise, but definitely inconvenient. I hadn’t studied the company’s anti-fraternizing policy in detail because it hadn’t occurred to me that I’d need it, but I could imagine what it said.

As my direct subordinate, Eddie was off-limits. The most delicious blood I’d tasted in a decade, maybe ever, and he was off-limits.

Then why the hell was I excited about seeing him again?

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5

MY NEW BOSS

EDDIE

I was going to be sick.

“He seems okay,” Cat said as we walked down the hallway. “I think I’ve heard the name before. Anthony was all but melting. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so thrilled. He almost smiled. Did you notice?”

“Yeah.” I choked out the word, looking away so Cat couldn’t see my face.

“Eddie, you’re not upset that our new boss is a vampire, are you?” she whispered as we took the sharp turn toward our little aquarium of an office.

“No. Of course not.”

“I bet it’s strategic. Frank said we lost a couple of big accounts last year because we lacked expertise in the specifics of vampiric socialization.” She used her fingers to make quotation marks in the air. Then she pushed our door open. I walked in behind her and sank into my chair.

Cat pointed a finger at me. Her eyes were shining with sudden understanding. “That’s why Anthony asked us to read the book on vampires! He wants to widen our clientele. But man, those cases can get messy.”

“Messier than what we’re already dealing with?” I asked, my voice wobbly.

She didn’t seem to notice. “I dunno. The details always seem a little juicier when a vampire is involved.” She wagged her eyebrows, the tip of her tongue peeking out.

I had to keep it together. Cat was the nicest to me but also an incorrigible gossip. I could never tell her that I knew Russel Greenwood from before or how I’d met him. I could never tell anyone.

This was a PR crisis management agency. To quote the great Anthony Fowles, discretion and impeccable ethics were the cornerstones of this organization. It was a miracle I’d landed this job, and as the youngest, wildest card on the team, I’d been sitting on the edge of my chair since day one. The tiniest misstep, and I was out.

And now my new boss was the vampire whose lap I’d humped at a dinner club last Friday.

Oh my God, I’m screwed.

My stomach heaved again, and I swallowed against it. I thanked the stars and Sheri that she’d gotten me out of the club before I could have gone home with Russel. I couldn’t imagine the terror I’d feel meeting him this morning after a weekend of actual fucking.

“Eddie. Hello. You in there?”

“I’m sorry, Cat. I think I feel a headache coming on. I slept like shit.”

“Do you want an ibuprofen?” She began rooting in her bag. “I have some left from my last period.”

Not having the brain capacity to come up with an excuse, I took the pill and chased it down with water from the bottle I kept on my desk. Then I went to the bathroom to refill it. I needed a moment alone.

During the ten-thirty meeting, I kept my head down. I answered when asked, but otherwise, I tried to blend in with the pale wood paneling behind me. I could barely look at him. It didn't help that he was frighteningly handsome in his suit and black shirt, and everything he said was thoughtful and on point. I met his eyes once and all but puked from anxiety, which the attraction I felt brought me. I would have to get myself under control eventually, but right then, all I wanted to do was curl up in a corner and stay in a fetal position until the world went under.

I was just leaving when Russel called my name.

"Eddie, lunch at twelve. Come into my office, please."

My throat was dry just from his use of my name. I tried to swallow. "I'll be there."

"I'll order in. What would you like?"

"Um. Whatever you're having. I'm not picky."

Russel's lips twitched, and I wanted the ground to swallow me. He didn't eat human food. In fact, I knew firsthand what and how he ate. I was most thankful that he didn't say anything but waited for me to catch up.

"I apologize. Please, forgive me. I... Sushi. A California roll. I can order it myself. Sorry. Thank you."

"No need. I'll take care of it. See you at twelve."

“Thank you, sir. Russel. Sorry.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake! Could I act less like a bumbling moron?

I hurried out of the meeting room with my ass on fire. Cat wanted to dissect our new boss, but I didn’t trust myself to talk about Russel and keep a poker face.

“I’m sorry, Cat, I need silence. The headache is killing me.”

“Eddie, baby, that’s stress. You should try yoga with me.”

“I might. Just...I need a short break before lunch.”

“I got you.”

She made a zipper gesture over her mouth and scooted closer to her desk. She grimaced apologetically when her chair screeched against the floor.

The shock was wearing off, but the sheer dread in the pit of my stomach persisted. What if Russel decided that having me on his team would be an inconvenience? A few words between him and Anthony, and I could be unemployed by tomorrow.

I spent the next forty-five minutes staring at my screen, pretending to focus while replaying every possible horror scenario in my head.

“Thank you for coming, Eddie. Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you.” The door clicked shut behind me, and the walls of the office seemed to be closing in on me. It didn’t help that the blinds were down, the room dark aside from a weak lamp on Russel’s desk. The lighting looked way too intimate and a little ominous.

I worked hard to hide my rising panic.

Of course, Russel was smiling, completely at ease. “Sorry for the blackout. Too much daylight gives me migraines, and I didn’t want to cover half of my face with shades when meeting my team.” He gestured to the chair across from him, and I sat.

“It’s okay. I understand.” My voice came out shaky, dammit. I slowly breathed into my stomach, an exercise I’d learned to calm down when I felt exposed. It was a discreet trick, supposedly unnoticeable, but this man, with his heightened senses, must have seen through me. He’d be able to hear my heartbeat from across the hall.

He eyed me as if he expected me to bolt, then said, “I’m as surprised as you must be.”

I doubted it, but I stretched my lips in what I hoped resembled a polite smile.

“I’m also rather disappointed,” he continued. “I was hoping to meet you again, just not under these circumstances.” His golden eyes were warm, his tone kind. He leaned forward, assessing me with obvious interest. Jesus . He wouldn’t flirt with me, would he? Did I want him to?

“I went back to the club,” he said. “I spent the weekend looking for you.”

I blinked. He...what? I felt myself leaning forward as if he had me on a string.

Are you insane? He’s your boss!

I mentally slapped myself and straightened in the chair. I’d have to be tougher than this.

You’ve been through way worse. You’re a professional. Act like it!

“My job is very important to me.” My tone was as steely as I could muster, and the words had an immediate effect. Russel moved back, and his expression fell.

Seconds ticked by, and I tried like hell not to squirm. He stared at me, unblinking, his expression giving nothing away.

“You’re very good at it,” he finally said. “I’ve read your profile and the case reports. Anthony is correct, praising your talent.”

“He gave me a chance when I was fresh out of school and without any connections. I’ve been trying not to disappoint him.” Russel was a communication and PR expert. Surely, he could read between the lines.

“I know that you finished your MA on a partial scholarship and that while you have a modest salary, Fowles & Tito is paying off your student loan.”

“Anthony has been very kind and generous.”

His lips pressed into a thin line, and I knew what he was about to say next. “Julia Perkins is your mother.”

I could only nod in acknowledgment.

“I’ve read about the case,” he added.

He and the rest of the damn country. But I couldn’t let my irritation show. Did Russel have any idea how much I owed Anthony Fowles? When my mom was sentenced to seven years in prison and the government had seized my family’s assets, I had been sleeping on couches, relying on my dwindling circle of friends. Sheri was the only one who’d never let me down. Then Anthony saw something in me and gave me a chance despite the train wreck my life had become.

Russel's expression didn't show much as he stared at me, but when he finally spoke, his tone was kind.

"Eddie, I won't put you in a difficult position. We can forget we've ever met before today."

Was that sadness in his changeable eyes? It couldn't be. We shared a fumble in the dark, nothing more.

"Thank you for your understanding." The formal sentence sounded awful, but what else was I supposed to say?

Russel exhaled and shifted in his chair. I could tell the smile he offered was fake.

"Well, then. You must be hungry."

He moved a paper box my way, and I opened it. A fresh California roll with all the trimmings, a cup of miso soup, and a wakame salad. This wasn't from the cheap hole-in-the-wall around the corner. Pushing through my nervousness, I ate while we talked.

For the next half hour, we discussed cases and approaches. Russel remained professional, and it would have been incredibly stupid of me to be even the least bit disappointed about that.

* * *

After work, I went to the gym and spent half an hour on the treadmill and twenty minutes in the sauna, first trying to run off my nervous energy and then cooking it. I made it home at nine, still feeling like a breakdown was just a breath away. Knowing I wouldn't be able to focus on anything else, I joined Aaron in the living room for a

bit of mindless destruction, playing Goat Simulator. Except it left me hyped and jittery.

When I lay in bed, my heart thumped and I felt too warm. In another attempt to distract myself, I reached for the book that Anthony had once recommended to us before he hired Russel. It had been lying unopened on my nightstand since I'd brought it home.

Common Vampire Myths and the Truth Behind Them . I opened the book on a random page and read.

The idea that a vampire can be incinerated by direct sunlight appears already in Egyptian hieroglyphic writings from 2700 BC and probably existed in oral legends even earlier.

Like in most ancient civilizations, with the notable exceptions of Greece and Rome, the Egyptian vampiric community stayed hidden and fed as nocturnal predators. Written legal proceedings preserved on papyrus document cases where a vampire was accused of killing and sentenced to death in the sun. The unfortunate soul was thrown into a cage and left in direct sunlight until they perished. Historians agree it's highly unlikely that actual vampires were captured and punished this way. Most probably, the prisoners were humans who died of heatstroke and dehydration after a few days.

Since vampires almost only fed at night, it's plausible their human victims assumed vampires could be hurt by light. Jewels depicting the sun were used as charms against a vampire attack. In contrast, those who experienced the effect of vampire venom might have sought a repeat of the experience by visiting certain places at night. A part of the port in Alexandria called the Bed of Sekhmet was rumored to be such a place. While there were likely many nightlife establishments and brothels in the area, it is unknown whether actual vampires frequented them.

Even though they live openly and feed consensually, most vampires report they avoid daylight when they can. The vampiric eye can distinguish millions of colors, with the spectrum stretching to infrared wavelengths. Due to their extreme sensitivity to light, most vampires experience impaired vision in direct sunlight. Long exposure to sunlight can cause migraine-like symptoms.

I kept thinking about Russel, the blinds in his office, and how hard it must be for him to have a day job and only sleep at night. How would I fare if I had to work nights and barely ever see daylight?

Hell, if I kept reading, I'd only fixate on him more. Annoyed, I put the book away and turned off the lamp.

It was past eleven. I should sleep if I was to function at work tomorrow. Jerking off could help, but then I would inevitably fantasize about Russel Greenwood, who was my boss .

I tossed and turned, going in circles in my head.

I thought of Cat, Anthony, and Frank—people who trusted me and vouched for me, who stood up for me with clients whenever someone doubted me. I felt like a liar and a fraud, and I hadn't even done anything wrong.

Yet .

When Russel had leaned closer, his breath fanning my face... I spent the weekend looking for you.

He did look sad.

And I was too. I had been toying with the idea of going back to the club this Friday,

hoping to meet him again. I could vividly remember the sensation of his lips on my throat, his hand on my ass...

I rolled on the bed, kicking at the blanket to spread it out better.

No lusting after Russel Greenwood. My self-control was better than that.

* * *

I walked along the line of glass cubicles—we called them terrariums for us gerbils. Only execs had actual walls, except they had exchanged some of them for mirrors. Strange. I glimpsed my own image in one and froze. My eyes wide with shock, I stared at myself.

I couldn't be naked at work, for fuck's sake!

I covered my groin with a hand and looked around, panicking. Where were my clothes? At my desk? Where was my desk? This looked like a different floor. I didn't recognize any of the furniture. There were no plants and no pictures on the walls.

I stopped in front of another mirror. A twin wound sat at the base of my throat, two pin-pricks of red. As I stared at them, they began oozing blood. Bright red, it trickled down my torso.

Russel stood behind me. His shirt was pristine, and it occurred to me he'd never get the bloodstains out of it if he touched me. His hands covered my belly. He tugged me closer, and I could feel his hard dick against my ass through the thin material of his slacks. He stroked up my chest, over my nipples, until he clasped my throat with his strong hand. He smeared the blood around. Red seeped into the cuff of his white shirt, but he didn't seem to care.

I met his eyes in the mirror. Their color was copper and sunset. He petted me, painting my body with my blood, as he nuzzled my earlobe. Then he circled his bloodstained hand around my cock.

I moaned, bucking into his hold.

“Please.”

We were at the office, where anyone could walk in on us. But I had lost my job, and nobody would want anything to do with me ever again. Russel licked my throat, humming, as he jerked me off.

“I’ve been looking for you, Eddie.”

The blood kept flowing. When I glanced at my feet, I stood in a pool of it.

Gasping for breath, I sat up on my bed. I grabbed my throat and blinked into the pale morning light. I wasn’t bleeding. I was at home in my bedroom, and I still had my job. I was fine. Just a dream. A bonkers, disturbing, sexual dream about my new boss. No biggie.

I fell back on the bed with a groan. My dick was throbbing in my pajama pants. I gave up. I took them off, fished the lube out of the nightstand, and lay on top of the covers. If I fingered myself, I’d come harder. I needed a good one to drain the sexual frustration.

With one slippery hand around my cock and two fingers pushing into my opening, I closed my eyes. I didn’t think about the dream.

Instead, I imagined what would have happened, had I gone home with Russel last Friday. I visualized a nondescript sofa in a dark living room, me kneeling on the floor

with my ass pushed out, hugging some pillow. Warm lips brushed the crook of my neck and shoulder, and a thick cock inched into my body.

He would fuck me slowly and shallowly to rile me up, just tickling my cockhead with his fingers.

And then he would push his dick into me to the hilt and bite me.

With my fingers in my hole, as deep as I could shove them, I came all over my stomach. I panted, letting the reality creep back in. After wiping myself off with a few tissues and washing my hands in the bathroom, I checked my phone.

It was half past five a.m. Groaning, I buried my face in the pillow.

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6

PAPER CUT

RUSSEL

In the grand tradition of middle management, I was the last member of my team left at the office. Not that I had a family or a life to go to. Besides, going home would be much more pleasant after sunset.

Anthony walked by my open door at seven and peered inside.

“I had an interesting call. We might get a new client out of it.”

He didn’t seem keen to come in, so I rose and stepped around my desk to talk with him face-to-face.

“I saw the notification pop up in my calendar. Who is it?”

“Helen Snyder and Pierce Black. Confidential, of course. They’ve heard of you and asked for you specifically. You’ll be meeting them at a hotel room three blocks down.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Interesting.” I’d dealt with show business royalty before, but Helen and Pierce were the golden couple. They had been stable for at least five years, and their image was spotless, which was no small feat. With Pierce being a vampire, they faced more public scrutiny than anybody else—there were still plenty of staunch

conservatives on both sides who loved to watch interspecies relationships crash and burn, my own mother being Exhibit A. I was curious about what crisis Helen and Pierce might be facing. Huh . I could still get excited about my job sometimes. Who knew?

“Take Benedict Perkins. Due to his history, he has a...” Anthony fluttered his fingers in a nondescript gesture, apparently searching for a word. “...a special sensitivity that I think would be a good fit.”

Anthony’s cold tone irked me. I fumbled for something to say that wouldn’t come off as accusing him of callousness. “The unfortunate case of Eddie’s mother must have equipped a bright guy like him with valuable skills. I doubt he’d think the experience was worth it, though. It must have been awful seeing his world falling apart like that.”

Anthony blinked as if I’d spoken a different language. Empathy seemed a bit foreign to him—an idea he had to study in order to grasp the basic principles. But he seemed to like Eddie, which showed both good taste and sense. “He has always been professional. A remarkable young man.”

Yeah, Anthony either didn’t pick up on my careful reproach or chose to ignore it.

“He says you handpicked him for the team,” I said. “That’s unusual for a junior position.”

Anthony glanced around my office distractedly. “Are you leaving? Come with me, and we can talk. I’m already late for dinner.”

I grabbed my laptop and shoved it in my bag. “I don’t want to keep you.”

He waved off my remark as he walked down the hall toward the elevators. I hurried to catch up.

“Eddie applied for an internship,” he began, “but Frank would have dismissed him without giving him an interview. He only brought it up with me as an interesting anecdote because of the connection to Julia Perkins.”

“She’d already been sentenced by then?”

“Seven years. Deservedly, if you ask me. Such an extensive fraud scheme over so many years.” He tsked. “And if she hadn’t been greedy toward the end, she might have gotten away with it.”

“Why did you decide to take Eddie on? This is not my opinion, but I imagine some people would see him as a liability in this business.”

We stepped into the car, and Anthony pushed the lower garage button. I needed to get to the entrance level, but I wasn’t in any hurry. I could go with Anthony, then ride back up.

He glanced at me with a raised eyebrow. “Yes, he could be a liability. Or an extraordinary asset. A man with his background and inside knowledge of the elite but with nothing left to lose, highly motivated to work against the misfortune he’d been dealt... Such a man could bring a unique skill set to the firm. I got curious and checked the media coverage. After he fell from the highest one percent to the bottom, everyone expected him to be in pieces. But the way Eddie handled himself during his mother’s arrest and trial was outstanding. Despite the pressure he was under, his grades were impeccable, and he acquired glowing personal recommendations from several of his teachers. I met with him, and he left enough of an impression that I offered him the internship. He’s proven me right. I employed him without hesitation when his internship ended.”

“He’s that good?” I loved hearing the animated praise, especially from a cold man like Anthony. Eddie was a rare gem in more ways than one. I probably shouldn’t dig

deeper to find out why I already felt protective about him.

“The boy has a brilliant mind, a stable moral compass, and the strongest professional ethics. It’s rare among his generation. He’s on his way to becoming the youngest senior strategist we’ve had. Bring him with you tomorrow and see for yourself.”

“I will.”

I wondered if Anthony knew about Eddie’s sexuality—not that it should matter, but someone from Anthony’s generation might still have an opinion. I was trying to think of a way to ask without outing Eddie when the elevator stopped. Anthony ducked out with a brusque goodbye and strode off.

I rode back up to the main reception and got out onto the street. The business district was full of people rushing home from work. As I walked, the human crowd parted for me instinctively. After sunset, the city gained contrast and rich colors. I tried to imagine how it seemed to human eyes, all washed out and gray. I’d seen paintings like that. To my eyes, darkness was never truly dark; it was when I could finally see clearly. I breathed with relief, soaking up the life of the falling night.

Here and there, I caught a pair of golden eyes and nodded in acknowledgment. The vampire population in this city was the largest in the country. It had its perks. The people here were used to us, and I could blend in more easily.

My mind kept circling back to Eddie. Beautiful, shy, brilliant Eddie.

For the past few days, I’d been watching him at work. The better I got to know him, the more I berated myself for wanting to feed from him. But like a wasp trapped behind a window, I kept hitting the same invisible barrier.

To the blood drinker in me, Eddie was the single most tempting prey. My instincts

yelled at me to get closer, to coax, threaten, and seduce. I could corner him in my office or follow him home. I could sweet-talk him into offering me his throat. One little bite, and he'd melt against me.

My species spent the better part of the past millennium trying to find a peaceful way to cohabitate with humans. The law now equated a non-consensual vampire bite with sexual assault. But I didn't need those reminders to know that seducing Eddie would be a heinous thing to do.

A part of me wished I had never tasted his blood. My hunger grew every day, though, and sooner or later, I would have to feed.

From someone else.

* * *

Eddie had compiled a folder on Helen Snyder and Pierce Black—their relationship history, current media presence, recent publicity—it was all there, comprehensive and to the point. He must have worked long into the night to pull that off.

I was familiar with Fowles it was awful. But I had to tell the truth. It was the..." One corner of his plush mouth lifted in a smirk. "...most sustainable approach."

That clever little shit . "I'm sorry, Eddie. I didn't mean to?—"

"You did mean to question my integrity because it annoyed you that I wasn't completely aligned with you in the meeting and because I indirectly challenged your seniority in front of important clients. I shouldn't have made suggestions to the clients without conferring with you first. I apologize."

Fucking hell, he was amazing. Eddie was simply amazing. I exhaled, trying to keep

my shit together for a few seconds longer. “You did great. They’re both in awe of you.”

I wanted to hide from his smile as if it were direct sunlight hitting my face. “Thanks,” he said softly. “It’ll be an interesting case, and I’m glad I get to work with you. I’ll learn a lot from you.”

At this point, I doubted he’d learn more from me than I was already learning from him.

“Let’s just hope Pierce won’t show up with a kid of his own during the campaign. That could get messy.”

I meant it more or less as a joke, but Eddie blinked, completely serious. “Oh Lord. They didn’t mention any female vampire lovers, but we should double-check.”

He scooped up a pile of papers, about to put them in a folder, but hissed and dropped them back on the desk. He held his pointer finger to his face and winced.

“Dammit.”

The scent of blood in the air assaulted me only a second later. Eddie’s blood. My body propelled forward before I made myself stop. All the demons in hell, that was powerful. I forced out an exhale and inhaled carefully, locking my muscles in place.

Eddie still studied his finger. Was he about to put it into his mouth? Why was that so fucking arousing?

“You okay?” I barely recognized my own voice.

Eddie jerked, his gaze snapping up. “Yeah. It’s just a paper cut.”

Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't!

Oh hell.

"Can I?" I stretched out my hand toward him.

He hesitated, then showed me his finger. His eyebrows drew together, a little crease deepening between them.

Since I was tremendously stupid, I took his hand in both of mine. The cut was razor thin, with a few tiny red drops lining it like a string of pearls.

I couldn't resist. I closed my lips over the wound and sucked it clean. Only a few particles of dust marred my treat. Then I licked the cut, and it closed.

I watched it heal. Eddie's heart thundered in the silence, his breaths coming faster. The amount of venom I could get into him like this was negligible. It couldn't affect him, but our touch was most intimate. Why hadn't I let go of his hand yet?

I could taste his blood on my tongue. The most delicious flavor in the universe, just a tiny drop. A vicious tease and self-inflicted torture.

My own fault.

My stomach hurt with hunger, and I was hard in my pants. Eddie only had to glance lower, and he'd see it.

I could bite his wrist. It would only take a tenth of a second, and I could be eating my dinner with my hand on his cock. My fingers in his ass.

Horried at myself, I let go of his hand and moved behind the desk.

“That was over the line. Please, forgive me.”

He stood there, gaping at me, then he looked at his finger and at me again.

“It’s gone,” he breathed. He inspected his hand, looking dazed. “Thank you. That’s kind of amazing.”

“It only works on small, superficial wounds.”

He nodded jerkily. “Sure. Okay. I... should go.”

“Yes. Thank you for today, Eddie. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Nodding again, he put the folder under his arm. “See you on Monday.”

“Yes. On Monday.”

He walked out of the room on unsteady feet and fumbled with the doorknob before closing the door.

I stumbled forward and sank into a chair. My erection throbbed.

God, I was so fucking hungry . I had to feed.

Rolling my tongue around in my mouth, I closed my eyes. Eddie’s unique flavor faded too quickly.

I should go to a club and eat properly. Hell, I should spend the weekend biting and fucking whoever was willing so I could face the temptation on Monday.

But I didn’t do anything even remotely sensible like that.

On my way home, I bought an overpriced bottle of Bordeaux. I drank the entire thing in the bathtub, alternatively refilling my glass and masturbating to the fantasies of Eddie naked on my desk, legs spread and throat exposed.

7

CONFESSIONS

EDDIE

When I came home, Sheri had a bottle of prosecco open and was curling her eyelashes. I was about to ask her where Aaron had disappeared to, but then I remembered he'd planned to visit his grandma this weekend.

"Let's go out," she said when I hung my coat on a hook by the door.

I groaned. Here we go again . "Not today."

"C'mon, Eddie. You know I'll convince you in the end. Say yes now, and we'll spare ourselves the time and energy."

She put aside the eyelash thingy and poured me a glass of the fizzy drink. She clinked it with hers and handed it to me.

"You need to unwind. You've been pushing yourself too hard again."

"I'm fine."

"You're not. But that's okay because you have me, and I'm going to get you laid."

"Sheri..."

“We’ll go to the dinner club on Twenty-third Street. Maybe your mystery vamp will be there.”

I must have winced despite my effort to keep my cool because Sheri’s face fell.

“Eddie?”

I shook my head and gulped the bubbly. I swallowed too fast, and it nearly made me cough.

“You told me you liked it,” Sheri said, sounding uncertain. “That he was hot and made you come like no one ever. You said you were a little mad at me for dragging you away.”

“We can go somewhere else,” I piped up, desperate to change the subject.

She put her fingers in front of her mouth, and her eyebrows drew together, making her look like a sad puppy. “It was bad, wasn’t it? Eddie, why didn’t you tell me?”

My face was burning. I was such a lousy liar. “Tell you what?”

Sheri’s voice rose in pitch like it always did when she was upset. “Why did you pretend it was fine when it obviously wasn’t!? You can trust me. Please, Eddie. If he did something... There are rules, I told you that. He bit you without asking, didn’t he?”

Oh Lord, she was jumping to conclusions again. “He didn’t. Russel wouldn’t do that. It was consensual.”

She gaped at me. “Russel wouldn’t do that?”

I took another sip of the prosecco, slowly this time. I could feel her gaze boring holes into my head.

“Spill. Did you go to the club without me to meet the guy again?”

I shook my head and drank the rest of the bubbly. It went down easily this time.

“I haven’t been totally honest with you, Sheri. I’m sorry. Can we talk?”

To avoid her glare, I refilled our glasses and sat on the sofa. I patted the cushion next to me and looked up. Yep, still glaring.

“Please?”

“This had better be good,” she muttered.

“It’s not. It’s awful.”

She sighed as she plonked down by my side. “I’m listening.”

Maybe it would be good to get it off my chest. Or not. I braced myself for the myriad of Sheri’s possible reactions. “Russel Greenwood, my new boss at the agency, is the same vampire I met at the dinner club on Twenty-third when I was there with you.”

Sheri’s eyes got comically big. “You’re kidding me.”

“Neither of us had any idea until he walked into the conference room the Monday after.”

“Fuck me! Are they going to fire you?”

I chuckled, probably sounding bewildered. “No. He didn’t tell anyone. He’s been professional. For the most part.”

That made Sheri squint. “The most part?”

“He tried to flirt a little on the first day, but I quickly made it clear I needed this job and wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize it.”

“And he went with it?”

“Yeah. But...”

“But?”

“There’s this tension.”

Suddenly, Sheri looked like I had offered her a box of chocolates. “Uh-huh. Keep going.”

“This is bad, Sheri. Stop looking so excited.”

“Can’t help it.” She pointed at her head with both hands, her grin growing manic. “This is the most exciting shit these ears have ever heard. Keep talking, for fuck’s sake!”

I laughed even though my stomach turned, the fizzy liquid inside suddenly like a bomb about to explode.

“I’m screwed.” A small burp escaped me as I said that, and I covered my mouth. Sheri just giggled.

I told her everything.

“I like him. He’s handsome and intelligent and a damned adult, you know? Not a boy, not a dude, he’s a man . He’s around fifty, I think, but doesn’t look it because, hey, vampire. I know you prefer older guys, so I don’t have to explain that to you, but experience is so hot , right? He’s already lived a life and seen stuff I can’t even imagine. He challenges me, and I really have to think when I talk to him because he doesn’t miss a thing. I really really fucking like him, and the fact that I can’t ever have him is making it worse. I think... I have reason to believe he likes me too. Or he’s attracted to me. Or at least he wants to...drink from me again. Which... Sheri, it was the hottest thing ever.”

Sheri bit her lip, her eyes glowing with glee. “Let him.”

“Did you miss the part where I could lose my job?”

“Clandestine, dangerous, hot office affair...”

“You’re not helping.”

“What are the chances, though? I thought this only happened in rom-coms.”

“Because in real life, crazy coincidences like this never lead to anything good.”

“Let’s focus on the important part.”

I nodded, becoming serious. “How to make it through this without jeopardizing my career.”

“No, silly! The important part is he wants you too!” God, she was giddy, and I found it hard to push back against her enthusiasm. It was infectious.

“I don’t know for sure, but...”

“Do tell.”

“I cut my finger today. Just a paper cut, but there was a little blood. Just a drop.”

She groaned. “Oh my God, he must have smelled it. They smell blood immediately. I bet he wanted to bite you.”

“He probably did, yeah. He took my hand, sucked on the wound to clean it, and then he sealed it.”

Sheri put her hand on her chest. “Wow.”

“He moved away from me, but he looked shaken. And I tried not to stare, but there was a distinct tent in his pants.”

“Holy shit, that’s so hot! Did you offer him a helping hand?” She winked.

I jerked back, horrified by the suggestion. “No! I ran out of there like my ass was on fire.”

“What? I still don’t get it, Eddie. You’re like this genius PR wizard, right?”

“Not really. I...”

“You are. That’s why you have this high-profile job and those super-secret clients you can’t tell me about. You’re a freaking genius. But put a fuckable man in front of you, and it’s like your brain regresses into the seventeen-year-old pimply, clueless preppy boy I first met.”

“This is not about my bumbling nervousness in front of men. This is about ethics!”

“Well, screw ethics. You’re not hurting anyone.” She downed the rest of the bubbly and poured us more. “Fuck, Eddie. I want to be you. Having a hot vampire boss thirst after me at work, the sexual tension in the air, the danger. And I saw him, remember? He is fucking hot . A bit on the melancholy side, but you like that, don’t you? Damn, boy, this is awesome!” She sang the last word as she shook out the last drops from the empty bottle.

“You’re nuts. This is a disaster.” But as the bubbles from the prosecco tingled in my belly, it suddenly felt exhilarating.

“C’mon, it won’t be so bad.” She clinked my glass with hers. “If you cave and have passionate, bleeding sex on his desk, you just have to keep it quiet.”

On his desk? In his dark office with the blinds down. He would prowl forward like a predator, and I’d back away until my ass would hit the edge of the desk... “I can’t. It’s not so simple.”

Sheri was like a dog with a bone. “It is, Eddie. It’s very simple. People break the rules all the time. Only the ones who get caught face consequences.”

“I can’t risk it.”

“You’re already in too deep.” Was I? My eyes widened with fear, but she just patted my cheek. “I’m not dragging you out today under one condition.”

“What condition?”

“We’ll finish the bottle together while you tell me all about Russel.”

“I shouldn’t have told you anything,” I grumbled.

“But you did, and I’m so happy! And there’s another bottle in the fridge.”

* * *

Damn Sheri for putting a bug into my fragile system of denial. Talking to her had made everything more real somehow.

The days passed in a rush, my life a blur as if I sat on a speeding train, and the only sharp image was Russel’s face.

Every time I saw him, I thought of his lips on my skin. At work . It was a nightmare, so why did my heart flutter excitedly whenever he spoke to me? It would have been best to avoid him, but Anthony involved us in three different projects, and I spent half of each day with Russel in the room.

Then it was finally Friday again. Cat and I usually didn’t have time for more than a quick snack in the breakroom or eating from a lunchbox in the terrarium, but once a week, we allowed ourselves a proper forty-five-minute break at one of the restaurants near the office.

Today, I regretted going with her.

“You don’t like Greenwood, do you?” she asked me point-blank as soon as the food arrived.

I froze with my fork in the air. How transparent had I been? “I do. He’s great.”

“Why are you dodging him whenever you can? You ducked out of the breakroom when he came in this morning. He doesn’t bite, you know.” She laughed at her own

joke.

“I’m not dodging Russel. I’m with him all the time.”

“When you must, sure. But you’re acting weird around him. He can tell, you know.”

Of course, Russel could tell. I hoped he appreciated my keeping a distance. It was better for both of us.

“I’m not prejudiced against vampires, I promise.”

“I wondered about that too, but now I have a different theory.” She dipped a piece of bread in olive oil and popped it into her mouth.

“Enlighten me.”

She leaned forward conspiratorially. “You’re into him, aren’t you?”

Fuck. Had I been so transparent? “No,” I squeaked.

“It’s okay, Eddie. I won’t tell anyone. But for the record, he is gay. Frank told me, Viv confirmed it, and Greenwood makes no secret of it.”

My stomach clenched. As I studied my half-full plate of Caesar salad, I didn’t feel all that hungry anymore. “I’m not into him. And even if I were, and I’m not, you know the company’s policy.”

She just shrugged. “I don’t think Anthony would make a big deal out of it if he found out.”

“Not a big deal?! I’m not hitting on my boss,” I hissed. “Jesus!”

Giggling, Cat patted my arm. “He’s hot, Eddie. You’re only human.” She smiled wider. “Only human, get it?”

I shook my head. “Can we drop this subject, please?”

But she was on a roll. She was almost as bad as Sheri. “Have you ever been bitten?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“Oh, c’mon. Everybody does it these days.”

“Have you?” Please start talking about yourself. Please!

Cat lowered her voice, and her eyes gained an excited gleam. “My cousin took me to the big dinner club that belongs to Levi Castillo. Do you know it? It’s called Aglio, which is Italian for garlic. Apparently, Levi is a funny guy. Anyway, we went on a Saturday, a busy night, and oh my God! Not that there were people outright fucking in there, but not far from it. I swear I saw a girl come humping another woman’s thigh in the line to the toilets. The vampire lady bit her right there, and the girl’s eyes just rolled into her head, her mouth made an O , and she moaned like Meg Ryan over lunch. It was wild. If someone approached me, I don’t know what I would have done, but I was tempted to try. But there were many more humans than vampires in there. It’s super popular, like a freaking buffet for the blood drinkers.”

“And did your cousin hook up with someone?”

Chewing a mouthful, Cat pointed at me with her fork. “Getting there. So. Aglio is on top of a hotel, which is, like, a super clever setup because a bunch of vampires always book a room for the night. So this silver fox approaches my cousin Becca at the bar, and he’s all witty and charming, so after a couple of drinks, she goes with him to his suite.”

“Just like that? And what did she say after? Did she like it?”

“Oh yeah. Best sex of her life.” Crunching on a piece of cucumber, Cat got into the story. “The dude was a lawyer or a stockbroker or something like that. Loads of money. Older, maybe seventy, but you know, they don’t really look old until they’re basically on their deathbed. Anyway. She said he kept biting her in places, just taking these small sips, and I think it kinda, like, made the venom last longer or, like, he kept upping the dose or something. So when he fucked her, she said she was coming for, like, all the time.”

Cat was a great copywriter, but you really couldn’t tell by the way she spoke.

“Anyway, he gave her some kind of drink afterward to, like, restore her strength after blood loss, and dude drew her bath. Can you imagine a hookup doing that? He filled the tub with bubbles and massaged her feet; I kid you not. She let him do her again.” Cat rested her elbows on the table and whispered, “Freaking anal! Straight into the back door over the bathroom counter. He bit her when he was in there, and she said she didn’t know she could come with her butthole, but that’s what happened.”

I coughed to get a piece of salad out of the wrong pipe while Cat continued casually.

“She’s really into anal now. She said there’s nothing like having a guy’s hard dick up your butt while he’s drinking from your neck. And because she’s a slut and a half, she gave him her number. Dude’s not from the city, but he calls every time he’s in town for business, and they have themselves a fuckathon at a hotel somewhere. She doesn’t want a relationship with a vampire. She says she wants a family one day, kids and everything, and even if vampires could have kids with people, most of them aren’t into monogamy. Not the older generation, anyway. But she says that as a fuck buddy, he’s the best. He probably has women all over the country since he travels a lot, but hey, not like vampires can carry STDs, so she doesn’t care. When he’s in town, he treats her like a goddess.”

I didn't know where to start unwrapping all of that, but my stupid brain replaced Cat's faceless cousin and her vampire fuck buddy with me and Russel. He'll draw me a bath and then bend me over the bathroom counter...

"But you haven't been bitten yourself, then?" I asked, chasing the fantasy out of my head.

Cat deflated with a mighty sigh. "No. There was this one guy giving me the look, but I chickened out when Becca left, and I haven't been since. I don't want to go alone."

"My roommate, Sheri, goes to dinner clubs."

Cat's eyes got big. "Really? Like regularly?"

"More or less. I could ask if she'd take you with her someday."

"Wow. That would be fantastic."

"I'll talk to her and let you know."

"Yes, please! I sound like a total hussy, don't I? But I keep hearing how amazing it is, and I really want to try it, but, like, in a safe way, you know?"

I shrugged. "I'm not into slut-shaming. Go for it and enjoy."

"Right? You're a star, Eddie. Thanks."

A bullet dodged. Cat got distracted by her upcoming dinner club adventure and didn't mention Russel again. Except all the talk about venom and anal sex had me squirming.

When Russel intercepted us on our way from lunch, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Eddie, do you have five minutes?”

Why did his voice affect me so much?

Cat looked at me meaningfully, which I ignored. My heartbeat quickened as I followed Russel into his office. It took my eyes a while to adjust to the darkness.

He closed the door and gestured for me to sit. The intimate setting did things to my underbelly, and my stupid dick tingled. I dug my nails into my palms under the desk.

Lucky for me, Russel’s request was one hundred percent work-related. He turned his laptop screen toward me. It was an initial brief, the kind we sent to the client for approval, together with a budget proposal, before we started working on a project. The language seemed pretty standard, but I frowned at the client’s name.

“So?” Russel asked after I’d read the page.

“Sorry, but I’m not sure what you’re asking. Will I be involved in the campaign?”

He shook his head. “It’s not final yet. The client approached us last night, and Anthony left it to me to decide whether we take him on. I haven’t sent the brief and the quote yet because I want your opinion.”

“It’s a good brief. I don’t have anything to add.” Why was he asking for my five cents? Russel had at least twenty more years of experience than me. He could write a brief in his sleep.

“I’m asking you if we should take the job or not.”

I gaped at him. That wasn't the kind of decision I was supposed to be involved in.

"Eddie?"

"Honestly, that's above my pay grade."

"Yes. I intend to talk to Anthony about your salary when I have a more stable footing in the company. But you do have an opinion, don't you?" He grinned at me like he could see into my head, like he knew me, and it gave me courage.

"Yeah. I do."

"So?"

"I don't think we should work with him," I said. "I've seen him in interviews and at a couple of functions, and he's bad news."

Russel leaned back and folded his arms over his chest. For some reason, he looked smug. "Why do you think that?"

"It's a feeling. A vibe. Sorry."

"Don't apologize. Explain, please."

He asked, so I was going to answer. "He's rude to female reporters and dismissive of women in general, and that's never a good sign. If he's accused of sexual misconduct or worse one day, I won't be surprised. He jumps in and interrupts people who have way better things to say than he does, says vaguely sexist and racist stuff, and when you call him out on it, he tells you that you should learn to take a joke or starts preaching about living in a free country. His social media feed is just macho posturing and reposting of random conspiracy theories. He's a bully and a jerk, and I

don't think we should do a campaign convincing people he's not."

Russel smiled. "Thank you, Eddie. I'll tell his rep no, then."

I couldn't help but feel suspicious about all of this. "Just like that? Because your most junior hire said so?"

"I had a bad feeling about this one, and you confirmed it. You're right. We shouldn't do an image-improving campaign for someone whose behavior will be impossible to justify. Besides..." He put his arms on the desk, staring at me with a crooked smile on his face. "I'm the newest hire."

Chuckling, I pointed a finger at him. "Not junior. How old are you, anyway?"

Russel's smile turned sad. "Fifty-seven."

"Oh." Had he been human, I would never have guessed him to be more than forty—vampire genes. But he looked tired. There were dark circles under his eyes, and the brackets in the corners of his mouth looked sharper. Those pale golden eyes... "That's not old for your species, though."

"No." He stared back, unmoving.

My throat got dry.

I broke eye contact and braced myself to stand. I had to get out of there. "Do you need anything else from me?" I sounded breathless, but Russel didn't call me out on it.

"Thank you, Eddie. That's all."

“Okay. Thanks for trusting me.”

“I’m just being smart, asking the most competent people for input.”

I blushed at the compliment. How could I not? Nodding like a bobblehead, I backed out of his office before I could make a complete fool of myself.

I came home late and exhausted, but that didn’t stop me from paging through the vampire book again. The paleness of Russel’s eyes and his obvious tiredness bothered me, but the only chapter that mentioned eyes in the title was about hypnosis.

Vampire eye and thrall as a means of seduction

How powerful sexual arousal vampire venom can cause depends on many factors. Individuals react differently to the venom from the same vampire. Some researchers speak about different levels of compatibility and mention even hormonal cycles and testosterone levels. How much and where on the body the vampire injects the venom affects the speed, intensity, and longevity of the effect. However, there exists zero scientific proof that vampire eyes have hypnotic potential.

The myth about thrall—a vampire’s power to induce a hypnotic state and make a human follow their orders—exists in multiple cultures under different names. The likely root of this ideation is the noticeable change in the hues of vampiric irises. The eye can go from pale silver (for myths about starving vampires, see the chapter Bloodlust) to warm copper during the feeding. Let’s imagine a human holding eye contact with a vampire while being bitten. The arousing effect of the venom arrives while the hues in the eye of the vampire are changing. The conclusion that the physical effect the prey is experiencing is connected to the vampire’s eyes doesn’t seem far-fetched.

I flipped to the table of contents and found the chapter on bloodlust. The first

paragraph was enough for me to understand what was going on. Russel was hungry.

Uncontrollable aggression caused by bloodlust in a starving vampire is a figment of human imagination. Starvation is accompanied by apathy and general weakness that make it increasingly difficult for a vampire to find prey and feed. Depending on age, a vampire begins to feel uncomfortable hunger ten to fifteen days after feeding. Starvation symptoms arise after three weeks: lethargy, muscle pain, headaches, disrupted sleep, and even depression. The most obvious sign is the loss of color in their eyes; the golden hues recede, replaced by silver and gray tones. Vampires have been known to starve for months without enduring permanent physical harm but suffering significantly during. A starving vampire eventually enters a catatonic state, which is terminal without medical intervention.

Vampires cease experiencing hunger toward the end of their lives. On average, they are aged one hundred fifteen to one hundred twenty when they feed less often until they eventually stop searching for prey. Such passing is peaceful compared to involuntary starvation at a younger age.

8

AN ASSHOLE

RUSSEL

“No, it doesn’t surprise me one bit.”

My mother sniffed at the glass delicately and took a slow sip. Her wide-brimmed hat cast a dark shade over her face, but her eyes gleamed copper. She never went more than a few days between meals. Was she still having the last boy toy stay at her condo? What was his name? Giulio or Giorgio or something like that.

The first interview with Helen and Pierce was out, and the reactions were as expected—everything from outrage to an outpouring of support, but the majority were neutral to positive. Since it was the most recent big news in society, my mother had to dissect it during our semi-regular Sunday outing to a wine bar.

“I keep telling you,” she said, “monogamy is a human invention, and not a very smart one at that.”

“I know several monogamous couples where one of the partners is a vampire,” I countered. “They are rare, but they do exist.”

“Yes, and I bet if you knew them well , you’d realize they all have some kind of deal going on, just like Helen Snyder and Pierce Black.”

“I met them in person. They seem to love each other.”

My mother made a scoffing sound. “Oh please, darling. They capitalize on their relationship. And good for them! Why humanity still insists on archaic nonsense like marriage is beyond me.”

“And how is Giorgio?”

“Who?” She blinked at me and gulped more wine.

“Your latest juice box.”

She curled her lip. “You sound bitter, Russel. It’s unattractive. Gino has moved out.”

“You kicked him out already?”

“He was with me for merely three months, but I paid for two semesters of graduate school for him. And it wasn’t like I dropped him on the street. He’s sharing an apartment with a friend of his. I’m convinced he doesn’t regret his choices.”

Yes, most of my mother’s lovers were less than half my age. By now, I was used to it.

“I met a lovely, delectable man at your sister’s fundraiser last week. He’s spending the weekend.”

“How old is he?”

“Old enough to make his own decisions.” Her smirk told me everything I didn’t need to know.

“You’re incorrigible.”

She looked satisfied with herself as she drank her wine. “Your grandmother lived to be one hundred and twenty-seven, remember? I have plenty of time to date old men when I’m closer to the grave. And what about you? Still feeding at clubs?”

“At least I don’t have to break up with someone ten times a year.”

“I didn’t mean to judge you, Russel. You did that yourself. There is nothing wrong with finding meals and sexual partners at dinner clubs.”

I sighed. “I’m sorry, Mother. You’re right. I haven’t been myself lately.”

“It’s the season. You’ve always been sensitive to prolonged daylight.”

I suppressed a groan. Did she talk to Levi? They barely knew each other. “I’m fine.”

“You should eat more often, Russel. You look ghastly. I swear, you look older than me! Why a handsome man like yourself would voluntarily starve himself, I’ll never understand. You need reliable partners who’ll be at your disposal, who’ll come to you and take care of your needs with enthusiasm. Trolling clubs for strangers is exhausting, and some of those people taste vile.”

“Do you remember how my last attempt at a relationship with a human ended?”

My mother threw her hands in the air theatrically. “Because he expected monogamy.”

Actually, I expected him to be loyal. But mistakes were made on both sides.

“If you’re clear about your wishes, nobody gets hurt,” my mother said. “And I’m telling you, some of those young men out there are very accommodating. Gino wanted me to feed from him daily. I took only a few mouthfuls, of course, but he had amazing stamina and was so responsive! And Marc tastes even better. Do you think

this is all skincare and makeup? Pfft. Young blood will rejuvenate you.” She grinned as she finished her glass. My mother was proud of her lifestyle and flaunted it whenever she could.

Before I could change the subject, she dropped another bomb. “I also saw your employer, Anthony Fowles, at the fundraiser. He seems very reserved. Does he treat you well?”

“He’s good. I like working for him.”

“Hm. When I said who I was, he told me about this thing you’re having on Friday in two weeks.”

Shit . “It’s just a small mingle.”

“I’d love to see where you work, and I’m already invited. I don’t need your approval.” She winked playfully, but I knew she’d be hurt if I told her not to come.

“I’d love for you to be there,” I lied.

Her face lit up. She was like a fish in the sea at any social gathering. Or more like a shark in a tank.

Then it hit me. She might meet Eddie. I hadn’t thought that through.

* * *

I didn’t mind working late. I didn’t need to sleep for more than a few hours a day, and once the night fell, I usually got more alert—when I was well-fed.

It had been twenty-eight days. Five more hungry nights since last Sunday when my

own mother told me I looked like shit.

Why did I do this to myself, indeed? I didn't think I'd ever gone without blood that long. Rationally, I knew I was far from real danger. Vampires had made it months without feeding and survived. I wondered, though, if they made it with their sanity intact.

I should be staying away from Eddie. Instead, I kept finding excuses to be close to him.

After another podcast interview our clients had done earlier today, we set up a workstation in one of the meeting rooms to monitor the media. The bot examined the feed for us and reacted to predefined terms, but the results still had to be categorized and evaluated manually. If we left it until Monday, we could have a shitstorm on our hands.

Eddie sat a mere three feet away from me. In the dim light coming from the screens, his face looked surrounded by a halo in all the colors of the rainbow. I could clearly see his pulse fluttering on the side of his throat.

“The keywords aren't giving us anything weird. None of the usual suspects have picked it up yet, aside from Dan Gennaro, but today's episode had low stats compared to his podcast's average reach, so my guess is he won't return to the topic. I think we're good until tomorrow.”

I could hear what he was saying, but my brain didn't engage with the subject. It was otherwise occupied. Eddie's lips moved, his eyes scanned the screen, and I got fascinated by the tiny hairs on his cheeks and nose, visible in the white glow from the computer. His skin looked like the softest velvet.

Leaning closer, I breathed him in.

His humid exhale, the faint perfume from his antiperspirant, a hint of his sweat and musk, the smell of his shampoo... I had all of that catalogued and memorized and should be used to it, but my reaction to the essence of him was only getting stronger.

To my frustration, I realized I couldn't recall his exact flavor, not even while smelling him next to me. Was the taste of his blood too complex, too sophisticated to be taken in fully and remembered? Was it so elusive that I couldn't reimagine drinking from him? I couldn't even dream of tasting him again, which frustrated me to no end.

What had his moans sounded like? I remembered his weight in my lap and his kisses, but I wished I could replay the sound of his orgasm.

“Russel?”

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

He frowned, scrutinizing my face. “I’m sorry if I’m overstepping. It’s just that you don’t look good. Are you sick? But you can’t...get sick, can you?”

I blinked. I stared at his concerned expression, panic churning in the pit of my stomach.

Eddie dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry. It’s none of my business.”

“I’m fine. I’m just...”

“Tired?”

I pushed away from the table and from him, trying to get some distance. The wheels on the chair squeaked against the floor. One of them seemed stuck, and the chair stopped still too close to him. After shaking my head in a futile attempt to clear it, I glanced at the city lights outside. The nightfall was always such a relief.

“It’s okay. I just haven’t eaten in a while.”

Silence fell, heavy and meaningful. Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.

“Oh.”

Closing his laptop, Eddie stood. It seemed he couldn’t get away from me fast enough. I wouldn’t blame him. He was alone at the office late in the evening with a vampire who had just admitted he was hungry.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, my voice weak. “I’ll be fine.”

Closing my eyes, I leaned back in the chair. With Eddie further away from my body, the air in the room seemed colder. I shivered. My arms and legs weighed a ton. I’d get up soon. I just needed a moment.

But Eddie hadn’t left the room. I heard him shuffle by the door.

“You’re really pale, and there are these dark circles under your eyes. You look almost gray in the face.” He sounded concerned and kind, not judgmental in the least. Then came the quiet but explosive question. “How long has it been?”

I exhaled, not opening my eyes. “Four weeks.”

“But that was...”

I gave him a single nod. Yes, he'd been my last meal.

"Why?" He breathed the word.

"It's okay, Eddie. It's not your fault or your responsibility. You can go."

I needed to pull myself together. I had to go out and feed. Tonight. All the screeching demons in hell! Just the thought of touching anyone else but the boy in front of me made me nauseous.

Why was he still here, staring at me?

I pushed myself up. "Go home, Eddie." I didn't mean for it to sound so harsh.

With a grunt, I braced my hand on the desk...and I fell back into the chair. My legs just wouldn't hold me up. My head was spinning.

It was Eddie's scent. It made me drunk. I knew I had the strength to move; I just needed fresh air.

"How can I help you?" Eddie's whisper sounded terrified.

"Go." It was supposed to be an order, but the word just fell from my lips, barely audible.

I didn't want him to leave.

Eddie stepped closer instead and put his hand on my forehead. Fuck . His wrist was right there. The warmth of his blood pulsed through the thin sliver of air between us, right against my lips.

“You’re ice cold, and you can’t even get up,” he said indignantly.

I forced my eyelids up to look at him.

He was so lovely. All of him. So earnest and sweet. Just beautiful.

Eddie pursed his lips, his expression hardening with determination.

“This won’t be sexual. I’m just helping you out, okay?”

Before I could comprehend what he meant, his arm was extended toward my face, his exposed veins in front of my mouth. He parked his butt on the table and gripped the edge with his other hand.

“C’mon. Do your worst.”

Heavens.

If you were crawling through the desert in the baking midday heat but weren’t allowed to drink from the sacred lake in the oasis in front of you, would you obey the rule? Or would you dive in headfirst?

I cradled Eddie’s wrist in my hands, opened my mouth, and sank my fangs into his buttery skin. I made an involuntary noise, just a sinister hiss. Feeling Eddie shudder, I tried to suck gently at first. But then the molten heat trickled into my mouth.

Colors clashed on the insides of my eyelids, like butterflies and autumn leaves spiraling in the wind.

I cut the wound open wider, no doubt making it painful, but I couldn’t help it. Eddie’s blood flowed faster, and I gulped it down. My moans and growls must have scared

him. I felt him shake, but I could only hold his arm tighter.

There was nothing like it. Nobody had ever compared, and nobody would ever come close.

Eddie's blood was the most potent drug.

When it filled the hollow pit in my stomach, the familiar satisfaction easing my pain, I glanced up at him.

He stared back, wide eyes pinned on my lips, his pupils huge. He breathed with his mouth open, the tip of his tongue visible. I swallowed and sucked harder, not taking my eyes off his face. He panted, his expression full of fear and wild, reckless desire.

He was breathtaking.

I drank too much. Surely more than a pint.

Eddie's chest was rising rapidly. With my stomach full, I regained control of my body and maybe even a little bit of sense. I licked the wound several times, lingering, making sure it closed properly.

Then I pressed a kiss to the spot.

"Thank you, Eddie."

He didn't move. He gazed at me with raw hunger, no hint of self-awareness in his features. His panting breaths came faster and louder. It didn't matter that I'd bitten him only to feed; some of my venom still made it into his system.

His erection was right there, tenting his slacks.

He whimpered, and his hips jerked before he stiffened, his hand holding the desk so hard the wood creaked.

I was an asshole.

I slid off the chair and onto my knees. In seconds, I had his slacks open and his underwear tucked under his balls. His cock was heavy with blood, the veins throbbing. My need to give him relief was instinctual.

I sucked him down into the back of my throat.

“Aah!”

Both Eddie’s hands went into my hair. He clutched my head to him as he bucked with abandon. I placed my hands on his hips, not guiding him or restraining him but letting him know it was okay and that he could use me.

He thrust hard, fucking my mouth like a hole, jabbing his cockhead as deep as he could. I didn’t mind one bit. Not like I had a gag reflex.

“Augh. Oh fuck. Fuck!”

I tightened my lips around the base of his cock and swallowed his cum. The knowledge that it was now in me, together with his blood, was intoxicating.

I merely had to squeeze my erection through my pants, and it was game over. Groaning around Eddie’s hard cock lodged in my throat, I came into my underwear.

Eddie wavered.

I shot up and hugged him before he could keel over. I brought him gently to the floor,

where I sat on my butt, and he curled to my chest.

I weaved my fingers through his hair.

Minutes went by, and he didn't move an inch. His heartbeat calmed down ever so slowly, but then it picked up again. I could almost hear his thoughts. Any moment now, my stolen time with him would be over.

A few more seconds. God, I loved just holding him.

Eddie broke the silence, his voice empty. "I can't believe I did that." He fumbled for his groin, tucked himself in, and zipped up.

"You didn't do anything. The responsibility is mine."

He pushed at my chest feebly, and I loosened my embrace. With an unfamiliar, dull pain in my chest, I watched him move away from me and lean his back against the opposite wall. He put his hand on his forearm in what seemed an unconscious move, covering the place where I'd bitten him. The scar was long gone.

"We can't do this again," he murmured. He was pale and solemn, his earlier passion gone.

I was such an asshole.

"I'm sorry, Eddie. This is my fault. You're safe from me, okay? I won't ever jeopardize your career, I promise."

"I started it. I thought I could hold back...and just let you drink. But I..."

"I shouldn't have done it. I knew how strongly you get affected by the venom. I

shouldn't have bitten you."

He shook his head, a self-deprecating smile marring his lips. "We're both at fault, then. Can we forget about it?"

Impossible. "Of course."

"Thanks for being discreet."

"No problem."

"Maybe don't...don't let yourself get hungry like that again?"

How could I feed from someone else ever again? I pushed down my panic and pasted on a fake smile. "Sure. Stay put, I'll get you a drink."

My cum was getting sticky in my underwear as I walked down the empty hallway. I thought of it as too mild a punishment for my stupidity.

The pickings at the office break room were slim late on a Friday evening. I brought Eddie a glass of orange juice, and he gulped it down in one go.

I ached to hold him. I told myself it was just to make sure he was okay, but as his gaze sharpened and his eyes lost the glassy, hazy quality of the post-orgasmic lethargy, I had no excuse.

He braced himself against the wall with one arm and slowly stood.

"I'm good." He nodded to himself. "I'll go home now."

"Let me get you a cab."

“No, I should go. We shouldn’t leave the building together.”

The night receptionist. But surely, he wouldn’t suspect something just because we left at the same time? There were multiple companies in the building, and he probably didn’t even know which one we worked for. Besides, colleagues went in and out in groups all the time.

Eddie seemed eager to put distance between us, though.

“Okay. I’ll wait a few minutes.”

“Thanks.”

He didn’t look at me anymore as he packed his things. He murmured a soft good-night and stalked out, his head down and shoulders slumped with what could only be shame and regret.

I couldn’t make myself regret anything. In fact, I was already trying to come up with a way to taste him again.

And there was no way I could wait four weeks.

TEMPTATION

EDDIE

Historians agree that the myths about the incubus and succubus are the product of human-vampire interaction. During clandestine times, vampires have used their superior strength and reflexes to enter human homes to feed. Whether this intrusion was welcome or not was highly individual.

A unique perspective is offered in the diary of the Castilian Prince Philip, the second son of King Charles VI. The diary details Philip's relationship with a being he described as the incubus who visited him at night over the span of at least a decade. The unusually well-preserved eighteenth-century writings were considered fake until a modern analysis provided significant proof that they were likely genuine, and that the prince was of a sound mind when he wrote them.

Prince Philip was betrothed to Isabella Theresa from the royal Habsburg family, but it is possible that the marriage was never consummated. Instead, Isabella's seven children have been fathered by her many lovers, with Philip's knowledge and support. Philip even arranged suitable men for his wife, recruiting them from less influential aristocracy and clergy, and binding them to secrecy under threat. About his own love life, Philip wrote the following:

“Had I ever thought him a demon? He's an angel. The nights I'm alone, I lay awake, begging God to send him to me. When he finally climbs into my window, I fall to my

knees and kiss his feet and loins. That is my prayer. I worship his divine shaft and swallow his seed for it is the elixir of life. The pleasure he gives me is greater than anything else my earthly presence can offer. I don't want the kingdom, not now and not in afterlife. I give my body to my angel to consume, to drink from it and to possess it, and only when he enters me, I am whole."

The book was not helping at all. I considered throwing it out, but instead, I kept returning to it and even rereading some passages. When I finally put it away and closed my eyes, Russel's lips wrapped around my cock, sliding to the base, replayed like a video on a loop in my head. And so, I'd barely slept for the past three nights.

I dreaded seeing Russel at work on Monday, and a part of me—the self-sabotaging, stupid part—couldn't wait to see him. Would he pretend it never happened? Could I? It was what we'd agreed to do.

But then, in the 10:30 meeting, our gazes met, and his look was all too knowing. We had a secret—it felt like he and I were co-conspirators now.

The best solution would be to see each other as little as possible, but we'd be working closely together for the upcoming months and not just on the Black-Snyder account. Two other projects Anthony had entrusted us with were on a need-to-know basis, with only Russel and me involved.

I couldn't avoid him, not even for a single day.

"Eddie, a word?" Like a shot in the back.

Nobody would find it weird that he asked me to stay behind. I cringed, nonetheless. It felt as if everyone in the room must know he had his mouth on my cock just from the way he said my name.

Cat closed the door after everyone filed out of the conference room, and I reluctantly turned to face Russel. My hands were shaking.

“Are you okay?” he asked, so quietly it was almost a whisper.

“Yes, of course.” My reply came on autopilot, but I sounded breathless. No way would he buy it.

“I was worried about you on Friday. I should have made sure you got home okay.”

“We agreed never to mention it again.” Even as I said it, I made an involuntary step forward, my body gravitating toward him.

“I’m sorry.” Head bent, he looked sheepish, but then he glanced at me through his eyelashes. “I find it difficult.”

Why did I grin? I was supposed to insist on distance, dammit! But God, if he’d been thinking of me like I’d been thinking of him, I might throw all caution to the wind.

“Russel, I...”

The sound of the door opening made me jump. Frank walked in, followed by Vivian.

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t know you were still here. Are we interrupting?”

“No, of course not,” Russel said. “We’re just leaving. Thank you, Eddie. I’ll look at the materials you’ve sent and get back to you.”

He walked out, and I stood there, stunned.

I must have looked out of it because Vivian touched my arm, motherly concern on

her face. “Eddie? Do you need something?”

“No. No.” I scrambled for something normal to say. “I just have this nagging feeling I must have forgotten something.”

Frank groaned. “Tell me about it. It’s been haunting me all weekend. With my luck, it’s an anniversary or someone’s birthday, and Shelly will kill me.”

“That’s why I share my calendar with Juan,” Vivian said. “Sometimes I think he doesn’t remember how many children he has, let alone the days they were born.”

I laughed appropriately and hurried out of there.

* * *

We were swamped with work for the rest of the week, and I was grateful for it. I had enough tasks to distract me from Russel’s constant presence. Except he kept giving me these looks—discreet and rare, so nobody else noticed, but I soaked them up even as they terrified me.

He looked at me like I was a piece of chocolate cake. It was disturbing and hot, and it drove me bonkers. My nightly jerk-off sessions were full of fantasies about him. I didn’t even try to go back to my usual spank bank material. On Wednesday, I fucked myself with a dildo fantasizing about Russel doing me raw on the conference room table.

Sadly, it wasn’t just attraction. I could have dealt with mere lust, but he kept noticing me in ways that messed with my head. He remembered everything I’d ever said and brought it up casually as if paying this much attention to me was natural. The way we worked together was seamless, and I’d never had anyone treat me with such easy, natural respect. It blew my mind and inflated my ego.

By Friday, the one last functioning brain cell in the back of my head was waving a red flag. Don't stay after hours .

But then I thought I could just prepare some stuff for Monday, draft that last press release, and schedule a few emails so I wouldn't have to log in on Sunday evening. Lies, lies, lies! Stop stalling and go home!

I knew Russel was still in his office. I always knew where he was—I was borderline obsessive about that. Then it was past seven, and I heard steps in the hallway.

“You're still here?”

He stood in the doorway.

“I'm almost done.”

“Something that can't wait till next week?”

“Monday will be busy. I thought I'd get a head start.”

“Have you always been so responsible, Eddie?”

Was there a double meaning? Was he asking if I would consider being less responsible with him? Was he going to hit on me? Why the fuck did I feel giddy at the idea of him trying to seduce me?

I put my tablet into my bag and shrugged into my jacket. “Not always, no.”

He grinned. “What's the most reckless thing you've done?”

Asking you to bite me.

I couldn't say that. I must have been blushing because he averted his gaze, smiling benevolently like he was giving me privacy to work through my embarrassment.

"Are you ready to go home?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to take a walk with me?"

"Um."

He lifted a hand, showing me his palm. "Just a walk. I won't do anything inappropriate, I promise."

"Okay."

He gestured for me to go first, and my shoulder nearly brushed his chest as I passed him.

We stood next to each other in the elevator, and I struggled to keep my breathing under control. I kept staring at the metal door in front of my face, but I could smell him, pine and a hint of wood smoke, and my heartbeat went wild. He must have heard.

"Eddie, you don't have to fear me," he murmured.

"I'm not afraid of you." I wasn't, was I? I was afraid of myself, of this pull between us that eroded everything I'd thought I knew about myself.

"No?"

He was dangerous for me, but not because he was a vampire and I was his prey.
“I’m...” ...scared of wanting you .

“Nervous?”

I let out a helpless chuckle. “Always.”

“Why am I making you nervous?”

It was such an unfair question. “I don’t want to answer that.”

He sighed, but it was soft, without frustration, like he understood. “Okay.”

The elevator buzzed, and seconds passed.

“I’m nervous around you too,” he said.

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true. I’m afraid to do something wrong. I don’t want to cause you any harm.”

I glanced at him, surprised by his admission. “Can’t you just...not cause any then?”

God, his face! Yearning, sadness, and tenderness. When I saw him look at me like that, the crushing wave of want nearly flattened me.

“I’m selfish, and I’m not being fair to you.” His gaze dropped to my lips. “Eddie, do you want me to stay away from you?”

Yes. Tell him to stay away. Tell him to be cold and impersonal and never look at you like this again.

I couldn't say it. Caught in his warm, golden eyes, I couldn't make myself form a single word, let alone a sentence. He wasn't hungry now, not like last time, but he still wanted me and that was intoxicating.

The elevator dinged, and the door slid open.

Russel broke eye contact and walked out. I followed. After we said goodbye to the receptionist, he paused on the sidewalk outside.

I needed to get away from him as soon as possible because, in my current state, he could crook a finger, and I'd go with him anywhere, even to his bed.

"I'm that way." I jabbed a finger toward the subway station.

He scanned my face, and I tried not to squirm. I half expected him to ask me something more, but he didn't.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he looked resigned. "Have a lovely weekend, Eddie, and I'll see you on Monday."

"Monday, yes," I mumbled. "Goodnight."

I spun around and ran.

I should have told him in no uncertain terms that nothing would ever happen between us, that he was never to allude to our sexual history ever again, and that we would, from now on, remain strictly professional.

Instead, I spent the subway ride home daydreaming about how he had looked at me and what we could have done if I'd dared.

* * *

The familiar sense of gloom fell on me as I walked the gray corridor to the visiting area. When they had first arrested Mom, I thought I would only ever see her through the plexiglass I knew from movies, but the room looked more like my high school classroom. We weren't allowed to hug, but we could sit at a table and talk and maybe pretend we were at a café or something—where wardens stood at every corner.

“You're pale, Benedict.”

“I'm fine. Work's hectic, but I enjoy it.”

“Good.”

Her smile was weak. She didn't look sick or anything like that, but I was used to her wearing makeup at all times. The Julia Perkins I knew never left her bedroom without impeccable contouring on her surgically enhanced face. Now she sat here wearing an orange jumpsuit, and the color looked garish on her. She must hate that her roots were growing out and her platinum hair looked faded and frizzy.

“Anthony Fowles is good to you?” she asked.

“Yes. He's great. But I don't work close to him. The few clients he still takes care of are all corporate.”

“Right. And you're in personal brand.” She looked around distractedly.

“Yes.”

“That'll come in handy once I'm out of here.” She laughed, but I couldn't. “What clients do you have now?”

“You know I can’t tell you that.”

“C’mon. I’m bored out of my mind. Can’t you share a little bit of gossip with your mama?”

“No, Mom. I can’t.”

“I forget. You always follow the rules, don’t you?” Her smirk was bitter.

Yes, I’d told the truth on the witness stand. Not once during my biweekly visits had she missed an opportunity to rub that in my face. My testimony wasn’t important in the grand scheme of things—the prosecutors had found enough proof—but Mom had never forgiven me. I used to feel guilty about it, but not anymore.

“Would you have preferred it if I’d been locked up like you?”

Her eyes flashed. “Benedict! That was uncalled for. I’m still your mother.”

“And I’m your son. You asked me to lie in court.”

She rolled her eyes. “You really want to rehash this now?”

“Maybe we should. We’ve been avoiding it long enough.”

“I did it for you. All of it. I wanted you to have a safe future.” She said it with such conviction that I could almost believe it. Almost.

“Yes, you keep saying that, but I don’t buy it anymore. You did it because you could. It thrilled you and made you feel powerful. Above the law, huh?” The anger rose in me. I leaned forward, hissing the next sentence. “You defrauded children’s charities, Mom. You took money from little kids with cancer, and you have the gall to tell me

you did it for me.”

“You’re just as sentimental as your father.” Her face was stony, but her voice sounded strained. It used to be her go-to tactic. She played the dad card whenever I pushed her into a corner. I was over that, too.

“I’m glad he didn’t live long enough to see me sleeping on people’s couches.”

“Jesus! What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing. I’m just done with your bullshit. We have a few more years to work on our relationship, and I think honesty is a good basis.”

The wrinkles around her mouth deepened. “Do you have any idea what it is like in here?”

“You can’t demand compassion and empathy when you’ve never shown any, Mom.”

“I think I’ve had enough for today. I’ll see you in two weeks.”

“Good. I hate to keep Sheri waiting in the parking lot.” I nodded at the warden closest to us and stood.

“What do you have a driver’s license for?”

“I can’t afford to keep a car in the city. I have loans and rent to pay.”

The reminder only made her sneer. No doubt, she was disappointed in me. She probably thought I should have sucked up to some sugar Daddy a long time ago and my financial troubles would have been solved.

“Bye, Mom. See you in two weeks.”

She didn't reply.

Why did I ever contradict her? Hadn't I learned anything over the years? She wouldn't change, not even in the slightest, no matter what I said or did.

As usual, Sheri got out of the car and hugged me before we got in.

“It was rough, huh?”

“Yeah. I don't know why I do this to myself.”

“What did she say this time?”

“The usual. Except silly me, I didn't let it pass. I told her she took money from kids with cancer and has no empathy. Then I reminded her she ruined my life.”

Sheri whooped as she started the car. “Go, Eddie! I'm proud of you. I know it feels like shit right now, but you did the right thing.”

I really did feel like shit. “It makes no difference.”

“It does for you. What she says or does is irrelevant, but you treated yourself with respect. And that matters.”

Unconvinced, I blew out a breath, watching the green fields behind the window.

“Where's this ruthlessness coming from?” Sheri asked. “Don't misunderstand me—she deserves it and worse. But why now?”

I shrugged. I had an inkling, but it was too raw to talk about.

My mind kept going back to Russel. I'd been playing everything by the rules, to the ridicule of my own mother. I'd never found it difficult to resist temptation when a higher principle was at stake.

But this time, the temptation was bigger than ever before, and the moral principle... I wanted something special for myself, just for me, and for the first time ever, I felt like I deserved a fucking break from all those rules I imposed on myself.

Nobody would get hurt, right?

10

SIREN BLOOD

RUSSEL

“Can’t you just...not cause any then?”

I had prepared a plan. I was going to admit that what we were doing looked wrong from the outside, but since we could both be discreet, it wouldn’t hurt anyone. I was going to assure him that saying no to me in bed would never affect our dynamic at the office. We would have talked about boundaries and rules. I would have invented an entire fucking campaign around why our sexual relationship would even become a good thing for him and his career.

Then I was going to bring him to my place and spend the night exploring how much of my venom he could take before he passed out orgasming.

But Eddie asked me not to hurt him.

I went home alone and spent the weekend working and feeling sorry for myself.

On Sunday evening, I sat at the downstairs bar of Levi’s hotel, drinking his best wine. It was late, and the lobby was nearly empty. Aglio was closed today. Levi looked relaxed in a dark-blue shirt, his jacket hanging over a chair.

“Your irises are nearly red,” I observed. “What did you do?”

“Friday was a private party at Aglio, and a couple of lovely girls I met there accepted my invitation to stay at my beach house for the weekend. I might have overfed. You know how much I love bisexual women.” His wink said he didn’t regret a thing.

“I know how much you love to objectify bisexual women,” I grumbled.

Levi just grinned, unrepentant.

Sometimes, I envied him for the ease with which he consumed pleasure. He was very much like my mother in that respect, free of guilt and the existential angst I seemed to carry with me everywhere for no good reason.

“What about you?” he asked. “You look better. When did you feed?”

“Nine days ago.” And I wouldn’t give him details, but something else occurred to me that a vampire of Levi’s age and experience might know about. “I have a question. Has any human ever tasted significantly better to you than anybody else?”

“Sure. It’s pheromones, nutrition, and sometimes just personal taste.”

“This isn’t just some blood that is better than other blood. Imagine a sort of blood so far removed from everything you’ve ever tasted that you won’t want to drink anything else again. It makes you want to grab the person and keep them locked up in your home so you can have them for yourself for the rest of your life.”

Levi gaped at me, his eyebrows arching almost comically. “What happened to you?”

“Have you heard of something like that?” I pressed.

“Folks say all kinds of crazy shit, but you usually don’t. What’s up?”

“Can you keep your mouth shut?”

My friend gestured to himself, looking slightly offended. “Who do you think you’re talking to, Greenwood?”

“Okay.”

I threw back the glass of wine, and Levi immediately refilled it.

“I’ve met a man,” I began. “It was at a club on Twenty-third Street.”

“What? You sneer at the clientele at my club, and then you go and feed at a dive bar?” I rolled my eyes, and Levi waved his hand. “Sorry. Continue.”

“He was a newbie. He had never been bitten before, so it took some convincing, but in the end, he let me feed from him. And he blew my mind. I’d never tasted anything like it. It was like a drug, like he’d hypnotized me.”

My friend was looking at me with concern.

“I’m not exaggerating, and I’m perfectly sane. So far,” I added.

“I believe you.”

“And now I get nauseous trying to convince myself to go feed elsewhere.”

“You said you fed nine days ago.”

I swallowed. “From the same man.”

Levi’s expression looked grave for some reason. “Ah.”

“So? Have you heard of something like that?”

“There was this book someone told me about. Blood of a Siren .”

“A book?” I had no idea Levi read books. Where did he find the time among all the partying? Of course, he called it representation.

“Yeah. It’s a story about a female vampire who can only feed from one human. When he dies, she starves to death.”

I grimaced. “That’s a little extreme.”

Levi shrugged. “It’s fiction.”

I pulled out my phone and typed it in. The book popped up, with mediocre reviews, supposedly based on an old Greek legend, but then there were articles.

What Is Siren Blood?

Scientific Evidence Behind Siren Blood

Siren Blood: Myth versus Reality

I clicked on the last one.

Some would say that the effect of siren blood is simply a vampire creating an emotional bond with a specific prey. However, multiple accounts, even scientific studies with a modicum of credibility, suggest that the unusually potent taste of blood precedes the emotional attachment and might, in some cases, cause it.

“Russel?”

I looked up. “Huh?”

“Who’s the man?”

“Who?”

He smirked. “Your siren.”

My siren . I was reeling from the onslaught of ideas. Emotional attachment. Yes, I was attached—more than I’d ever been to anyone. Was it a bad thing?

“His name is Eddie. He’s the son of Julia Perkins and my direct subordinate at work.”

Levi’s eyebrows hiked up again. “Holy shit, Russel. When you mess up, you mess up . Damn. His mom is in jail for fraud and tax evasion after the most humiliating public trial of the decade, and now you’ll cost him his job.”

I glared at Levi. “I won’t cost Eddie his job.”

“It’s rule number one. We don’t feed from colleagues and employees.”

“I thought rule number one was not feeding from people who don’t want it.”

Levi just cocked his head to the side, waiting me out.

“I didn’t do it on purpose, okay?” I cried. “I didn’t know he worked for Fowles & Tito when I met him. I drank from him at the club, and we both had a great time, but he left before I could get his number. Then I spent the weekend looking for him because I couldn’t stop thinking about him. And on Monday, he stood in the conference room at my new workplace.”

“But you fed from him again.”

I hunched over my drink. “I didn’t mean to. I went four weeks without blood. But then...”

“Four weeks? Jesus! I don’t do more than one week, man. Are you nuts?”

I glared at my friend. “I was trying to do the right thing. I was going to feed from someone else, but I kept postponing it. Then we worked late, and after breathing him in for hours, I almost fell on my ass from dizziness. The hunger was killing me. He saw I was unwell and offered me his arm. It wasn’t supposed to get out of hand.”

Levi snorted. “Yeah, right. Have you ever fed without fucking the prey? I’ve heard it’s possible but don’t know anyone who actually managed that level of self-restraint.”

I shook my head. “I sucked him off and came into my pants.”

“There you go.”

“That was nine days ago.”

“You must be getting hungry again, especially seeing him at work every day. What are you going to do?”

“No idea. Research siren blood and see if I can do something about it.”

“And you can’t bring yourself to drink from anyone?”

“No.”

He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. He looked as if he'd been given a challenge. "You should try it. Maybe it will, like, break the spell."

Would it? I gazed at the glass in front of me. I could imagine the blood was wine and just drink. But would I want to touch that person?

I want Eddie.

Levi tapped a finger on the table in my line of sight. "You don't want to push for a relationship and cost this guy his career, you can't harass him at work, and you can't starve yourself. Let's go feed. We'll rip off the Band-Aid."

"I can't."

"You must. C'mon. I know just the place."

It felt like cheating. I was about to cheat on a lover I didn't have. "It won't work."

"How do you know that if you haven't even tried?"

I rubbed a hand down my face. Everything in me revolted.

My friend's heavy hand landed on my shoulder. "This guy, Eddie, he doesn't know about your little problem, does he?"

"No."

"Does he want to have a relationship with you?"

Eddie was clearly attracted to me, but the mere attraction wasn't enough of a reason to risk his fragile livelihood and hard-earned reputation. He had already been through

hell and back by no fault of his own. How selfish was I that I still hoped to seduce him?

“He told me to forget that anything had ever happened between us and asked me not to cause him any harm.” As I said those words out loud, my chest hurt. I knew what I had to do, and I hated it.

My friend sighed, squeezing my shoulder. “Leave the man alone.”

He was right. The pain in my chest grew, throbbing along my ribs, but I nodded.

“Come,” Levi said. “We’ll get you fed.”

Levi took his car from the hotel’s underground garage and drove us out of the business district. After fifteen minutes, he turned onto a winding driveway lined with actual fire torches. The place looked like an entrance to a luxury spa. He left the key with a valet and led me through a lobby full of exotic greenery. The receptionist recognized him immediately.

“Welcome, Mr. Castillo.”

Levi waved in response.

We entered a garden of sorts with a myriad of alcoves and small bars. Cabanas with curtains were cleverly spaced out among trees and bushes, giving a sense of privacy to each group of guests. I could see movement inside some of the cabanas, but before I could figure out what was going on, Levi found a low sofa in a corner, partially hidden behind creeping vines.

“What is this place?” I asked as we sat, not sure I wanted to hear the answer.

“Just another dinner club.” Levi’s expression looked too innocent.

Before I could push for an explanation, a beautiful young woman came to us, clad in a barely there skirt and a bikini top. She smiled brightly at Levi.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Castillo?”

“I’d like a full dinner for my friend. A male, twenty to thirty, preferably a bottom.”

She appraised me with a smile and returned her gaze to Levi. “And for you, Mr. Castillo?”

“Maybe later. Thank you.”

She nodded. “I’ll be right back.”

“You took me to a brothel?” I hissed as soon as she was out of earshot.

“Oh, get off your high horse, Russel. It’s a club. Just a different concept—one with a menu. And yes, the people get paid. Very well, I might add.”

“I shouldn’t have come with you.” I was about to stand, but Levi caught my arm.

“You need to eat, and you clearly don’t have the emotional capacity to seduce someone. Here, you can just bite and suck. No chitchat, no wooing, just food. You can even think of your Eddie while you do it.”

Silly me, I hesitated.

Suddenly, a young man appeared in front of us. He was wearing nothing but a white harness and a matching jockstrap. He looked like a god, with a chiseled, gym-toned

body, dark-brown velvety skin, smooth jaw, the fullest, sensual lips, and midnight eyes.

The Adonis met my gaze and smiled. “Good evening, sir. May I offer you a taste?”

He lowered himself onto a pouf by the sofa and extended his arm toward me.

This was so easy. I had no idea how much Levi paid for a membership here, but it was certainly over my budget.

I could drag the man to the cabana a few feet from where we sat and just drink.

Fucking hell, was I seriously considering it?

“What’s on the menu?” Levi asked.

The guy’s pleasant smile didn’t waver. “Biting and drinking from any place on my body. Oral and anal sex during feeding. I’m versatile.”

“And if my friend here doesn’t want to have sex at all?”

The escort eyed me curiously. “We don’t have to touch aside from the bite if that’s what you prefer. I’m sensitive to the venom, though. You’ll have to excuse me if I come from that.”

“That’s actually great, right?” Levi elbowed me. “Go on. Have a sip.”

I stared at the prominent veins on the young man’s arm. I took his wrist in my hand and lifted it to my nose. I sniffed. He smelled nice, but it did nothing for me. My cock remained soft, and my stomach felt curiously full.

My fangs refused to drop.

Instead of the flood of saliva that always came with feeding, my mouth felt as if I'd been eating hot sand. Then, a violent cramp seized my middle.

I dropped the man's arm as if it burned me. This was insane. This couldn't be true.

"Excuse me."

I shot up, sidestepped the escort, and marched out of there.

After my dramatic exit, I felt like a fool. I stood in front of the hotel, looking from left to right. I didn't even know where the parking lot was. Not that I had the keys to Levi's car. I'd need to go back and have the receptionist call me a cab.

"Hey!" Levi caught up with me outside.

"I'm sorry," I said before he could rip into me. "I know you meant well, but I can't."

"Why?"

"I can't do it. It has to be Eddie."

Levi put his hands on his hips, staring me down. "You're acting like a nutcase, my friend. Just bite and suck. Don't think about it!"

"I couldn't even make my fangs drop."

His annoyed expression turned into concern. "Fuck. Really?"

Pacing, I breathed deeply and tried to disperse the nausea. "What if it's not just the

blood?” I asked.

“What?”

“What if it’s all of him?”

“What do you mean?”

“I kept talking about the blood, but it’s all of Eddie. He’s the siren. He’s...”

Levi stepped closer and grabbed me by my shoulders. “Slow down. I’m not following.”

“Of course, you aren’t.”

He found my gaze and looked at me imploringly. “Explain it to me like I’m a moron,” he said in a low voice.

I snorted out a helpless laugh. “Just touching the guy back there felt like a betrayal. My stomach turned as if I had eaten human food. If I’d bitten the man, I would have vomited all over him. Well, if I’d managed to make my fangs drop, which...” I shook my head. “I can’t. I can’t, Levi.”

“Back up for a second. What betrayal? Eddie and you are not in a relationship. You bit him twice, and he asked you to leave him alone.”

I took a step back and glanced at the sky. We were far enough from the city center that a few of the brightest stars were visible. Dropping his arms, Levi waited. I could feel his worried gaze on me.

“I’m falling for Eddie. I think I’m... Yeah. Maybe I’m in love with him.” Strangely, I

felt relieved saying it out loud.

“You’re in love.” My friend sounded suspicious.

I love Eddie . Because he deserved nothing less. The guilt seemed to lift from my shoulders, and I realized I was suddenly smiling. I can love Eddie.

“Would that be so bad?” I asked Levi. But he was the least likely man to offer me good advice on love, of all things.

Instantly, he proved me right. “I don’t know. Some folks say it sucks.”

It made me chuckle. “We’ll just have to see, then.”

“Can he feel the same?”

A new, unexplored realm of yearning and heartbreak hid in the answer to that question. “I have no idea. I think he’s scared.”

Levi winced. “That’s not good.”

“No. It’s not.”

11

OOPS, I DID IT AGAIN

EDDIE

Chinese fairytales as old as 300 BC tell stories of young women who fell in love with blood-drinking demons and gained immortal beauty as long as they remained their mistresses. Similar stories appear in Hindu mythology, Central European folklore, and even Maori traditions.

The legends about immortality and humans changing into vampires are often interconnected. During times when human life was more fragile than today, vampire longevity and slower aging, immunity to human diseases, and the capacity to heal superficial wounds were deemed supernatural. While mankind was decimated by plagues and wars, the vampires survived, appearing nearly immortal. Understandably, if it were possible to turn into a vampire, some people would willingly do so.

Another possible source of the immortality and transformation myths is the long-term effect of the venom. While there is still little research in that area, high and repeated exposure to vampire venom over a prolonged period of time might have positive effects on human health, such as lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels, and even decreased risk of some cancers. However, these benefits are also, without exaggeration, attributed to frequent and satisfying sexual intercourse. Whether the venom can slow down some symptoms of aging is disputable.

Psychoanalysts in the early twentieth century famously recommended vampire bite as

a cure for hysteria and a variety of other neurotic symptoms in women. It went unsaid that the bite was accompanied by masturbation or, more often, intercourse with a vampire. Medical circles were in agreement that a human woman couldn't be impregnated by a vampire and that vampires didn't carry sexually transmitted diseases. Together with meager knowledge about female pleasure—some physicians and sexologists of the era even denied the existence of female orgasm—these facts led to the rise of one of the most fascinating moral paradoxes in human history. If a married lady visited a vampire establishment, it was not considered adultery as long as it was for therapeutic purposes.

In the twenties, some dinner clubs began promoting themselves as spas, and the human guests would pay a significant fee to become dinner. The vampires who worked in these clubs were considered healers, received a hefty salary on top of the supply of willing prey, and some even gained notoriety for their perceived quality of venom and healing skills, in other words, their sexual prowess. The myth about the rejuvenating effect of vampire venom was once again in circulation, much to the benefit of the vampiric community.

Rising religious conservatism during the Great Depression slowly pushed vampire clubs into illegality until the sexual revolution of the sixties.

* * *

Helen and Pierce were apparently determined to become my most difficult clients ever. They were invariably good to me, but when they revealed the name of the baby's father, I wished I could have turned back time and studied to become a vet.

Charles Carlsson Jr. rose to fame playing hothead action heroes, and word had it that his real-life personality wasn't far away from the characters he portrayed. He must have been a funny antidote to Pierce's dark pragmatism. As soon as his promo tour ended, he would land in our lap, and we would have to explain to him that punching a

paparazzo was not good PR. He needed media training, even though trying to teach him the strategy would be like teaching a cat to fetch.

“I owe you an apology,” Pierce told me.

We were in the same suite at the hotel where we’d first met the clients, but we’d spread out a workstation in the living room this time. The sofas were more comfortable. Helen sat by Pierce’s left, her hand casually resting on his thigh. Russel took a seat by my side, just close enough not to appear inappropriate but still make me hyper-aware of him.

Surprised, I blinked at Pierce. “I’m not aware of anything that would require an apology.”

“Charlie will live with us,” Helen said. “As soon as his promotional tour is over, he’s moving in. Had we decided to lie about the nature of our relationship and my pregnancy, that wouldn’t have been possible.”

“I was rude to you and underestimated you,” Pierce insisted.

“You were just protecting your family.”

Pierce Black was walking, talking charisma. All that intensity aimed at me made me fidget like a schoolboy in the principal’s office, no matter if he praised or criticized me. I moved a prepared folder toward the couple, almost toppling Pierce’s water glass in the process. He steadied it, offering me a rather wolfish grin.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I stammered out. “We have the social media posts announcing the pregnancy ready for you to review. Feel free to comment or ask questions. Take the folder with you and look at it in peace. We still have ten days, so no need to stress about it. It’s most important that you’re comfortable with the content.”

“We’ll need your help to navigate the press after Charlie joins us.” Helen looked a little sheepish.

“He’s already let it slip in an interview that he has had sexual experiences with both women and men,” Russel said. “Did he tell you beforehand he was planning to come out?”

Pierce heaved a mighty sigh, but he was smiling fondly. “He did not.”

“I think he was trying to help,” Helen said.

Russel smiled back. “I hope he’s willing to do the media training with us.”

“If he caught you suggesting what he said was stupid, he’d storm out of here like this.” Pierce snapped his fingers to drive his point home.

“We’ll leave it up to you how you want to bring it up with him,” I said. “Once the public makes the connection between Charles Carlsson staying at your house, admitting his bisexuality, and Helen’s pregnancy, he’ll face much higher pressure.”

“I think he can be persuaded to listen,” Helen said.

“We won’t force him to behave in a way that would contradict his character and values. But we can help him recognize warning signals when facing the media and prepare safe reactions beforehand.” Or at least I hoped we could.

Russel then continued to close the meeting, reminding the couple about the content they needed to review and confirming a date for our next consultation when Charles Carlsson would be present.

We shook hands at the door under the stern scrutiny of their security detail.

“It’s been a pleasure working with you, Eddie,” Pierce said as he squeezed my hand, and I swallowed against a sudden dryness in my throat. Did I imagine the glint in his eyes? Helen smiled knowingly.

Was Pierce Black attracted to me? They were in a committed threesome now, so it was a moot point anyway. But wow! I was allowed to be flattered, right?

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to our continued cooperation,” I stammered out, which made Pierce grin. Then he winked.

The door closed, and I stared at it for a second longer before I shook myself and turned to my boss.

Russel squinted at me, his mouth pinched. Why did he look mad?

“I think we’re done, right? I’ll review Charles’s public appearances over the past few months and draft a basic approach, but I guess we have a little more time now. They’re nice, aren’t they? It’s great that they want to keep us on.” I was babbling.

Glowering at nothing in particular, Russel closed his laptop and shoved it into his bag. “They’re eating out of your hand.” The resentment in his voice was thinly veiled. He was pissed, and my body reacted immediately. Cold sweat covered my neck, and my stomach tightened.

“Is there something more you think we should talk about?” I asked, sounding weak. I hated how his sudden foul mood affected me.

“Nope. You handled everything great. A-plus. As usual.” I’d never seen him so angry. His face was a mask of barely contained rage. He briskly zipped up his bag and moved toward the door.

“Is something wrong?” I knew I didn’t deserve his anger. Whatever had crept up his butt wasn’t my fault. Why was I panicking?

Russel paused with his back to me and hung his head. “Nothing’s wrong, Eddie. Go home and relax.”

And now he was patronizing me. That wouldn’t do. “Why are you angry?”

He spun around and spread his arms, his laptop bag dangling from his hand. “I’m being an asshole because Pierce was flirting with you, okay? It’s unprofessional and unfair of me, and I apologize.”

His nostrils flared, and his jaw tightened.

He was jealous.

Another vampire looked at me funny once, and Russel was jealous.

His eyes were getting pale again. I’d done my research; copper to reddish hues in irises meant the vampire had recently fed. Pale gold suggested it had been a while.

If the last time he fed was with me, it would soon be two weeks. And because he’d turned me into a fool led by my dick, my first urge was to offer myself to him. I had no interest in Pierce or anybody else. I’d been fantasizing only about Russel since the evening I met him.

I realized my hand went to my throat on autopilot. I rubbed the spot where he’d bitten me at the club. Russel’s golden eyes zeroed in on my hand, and his mouth parted.

My heart beating double time, I slowly dropped my hand, exposing my throat. Russel took a step, then paused.

The universe must have shifted around us because suddenly, the gravitational forces pulled my whole being toward him. I should be mad at him for acting possessive of me when he had no right. Instead, his jealousy brought me a rush of exhilaration and arousal.

I am certifiable.

He stared at me with fury and want, and my cock was getting hard.

As if hypnotized, I lifted my chin a fraction and popped open the top button of my shirt. He licked his lips. Another button.

Russel carelessly dropped the laptop bag onto the sofa, and in three strides, he was in my space.

He wrapped one arm around my lower back and dove into my hair with his other hand. He tilted my head back and to the side.

“Say it,” he rasped, his lips hovering over the fragile skin on my throat.

“Bite me.”

He let out a short laugh at my double meaning and tightened his hold on me. “Cheeky thing.”

The first touch was a kiss. An open-mouthed, slow kiss to my throat, a soft lick over the vein. He made a deep, purring sound, and my eyes fell shut. How easily I forgot about the rules and consequences...

He moved forward, guiding me until my ass hit a desk. I clung to his shoulders as he kissed up and down the vein. God, I couldn't wait. Now that I knew what was

coming, the yearning stole my breath. I arched toward Russel, every cell in my body begging him.

Then came the sting. Finally.

Fire and ice spread from the spot. I couldn't tell when the venom hit me because the anticipation alone made me painfully aroused. He shoved a knee between my thighs and unzipped my pants. Then his warm hand wrapped around my cock.

My desperate moan resounded in the empty suite like an explosion. Russel hummed into my flesh. He stroked me firmly but slowly, and he sucked .

Heat spread through my bloodstream, and my every nerve ending came alive. My cum bubbled over his fingers, but the orgasm didn't stop. Tingling pleasure kept coming in waves, and I moaned louder and louder.

He licked over the wound and let go of my cock. Was it over already? No!

But Russel was undoing his pants while he kept my head bent back with a firm grip on the hair on my nape.

Then his erection touched mine, and I cried out.

He took us both in his fist.

I lost myself when he bit me the second time, maybe an inch below the first bite. I could hear myself gasping, "Yes!"

His cock moved against mine, hard like a rock and warm, and the wound on my throat hurt in the most decadent way. Helpless, pinned down by his fangs in my throat, I flew on the inside.

Suddenly, I couldn't feel his lips anymore. Was I still bleeding?

“Open your eyes, Eddie.”

I obeyed.

His face was inches away from mine, and he was staring at me. His eyes were on fire, like hot coals in his irises, and his lips were stained with deep red.

My blood.

His tongue flicked against his needle-sharp fangs.

He's been drinking my blood. The warm hardness against my aching erection... that's his cock.

His hand stroked up and down, and I whimpered.

Oh God. So close.

“Your pupils are blown. I love it when you look at me like this.”

He brushed his bloodstained lips against mine, then moved lower along my jaw and throat until he closed his mouth over the wound. He began drinking again, and his hand tightened around us.

A few strokes, and I was falling again.

My head was spinning, my vision went black, and I bucked into his grip. The second orgasm was longer than the first. All of me was throbbing and shaking, and then I felt his cock jerk against mine. He smeared my erection with his cum. He rubbed it all

over my oversensitive cockhead as he licked the bite on my throat.

One day, I wanted to see the open wound. I wanted to watch myself bleed before he'd lick it off.

Fuck . I was already counting on doing this again.

When he straightened before me, his fangs were gone, and there were no traces of blood anywhere near his mouth. His eyes were the color of sunset.

He loosened his grip on my hair and massaged my scalp. I could smell a faint salty tang when he exhaled. He let go of my flagging cock and lifted his hand to his lips. With his gaze on me, he licked the cum drops from his index finger.

I opened my mouth like a baby bird.

Russel dragged his cum-stained fingers over my parted lips, and my tongue darted out. I caught the taste of the two of us, so different from how I'd tasted to myself the couple of times I'd tried.

He held his hand for me, and I licked around his fingers like a cat.

“Eddie...”

His voice sounded pained.

The next second, he pressed his lips against mine. Sharing the taste of our release, we kissed. He caught my upper lip between his, then licked into my mouth, and our tongues tangled together. He tilted his head to the side, and the kiss got deeper and dirtier.

I slid my hands up his arms and closed them around his neck. Our bare, sticky groins pressed together. With a firm hand on the back of my head, he held me to him and devoured me.

I'd come twice. I should be done. I should be thinking again, regretting, berating myself; any moment now, the spell would be broken...

But we just kept kissing.

He kissed me until the venom must have been long gone from my system, and the cum on my skin began to dry.

He brushed his parted lips over mine with tenderness, then dove into my mouth, only to soften the kiss again. He pressed butterfly kisses to the corners of my mouth and the center of my top lip, traced it with the tip of his tongue, nuzzled my cheek, and sucked on my tongue anew.

We could have been kissing for half an hour.

"Eddie, baby, I can't stop." One more kiss followed by one more. A flick of his tongue. "You need to tell me this isn't over."

As if I could tell him no. "It's not over."

He groaned and buried his face at the base of my throat.

"We'll set up rules," he murmured. "Limits. I won't hurt your career, I swear, but you must let me..."

Another groan.

“Fuck, I sound like a bastard.”

I couldn't help it; I laughed. “I have to let you feed from me?”

He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed. “Please, Eddie. Having you in front of my nose every day and not knowing if I'd ever be allowed to taste you again has been torture.”

I could start repeating all the perfectly legitimate reasons why this was a spectacularly dumb idea. But my body and soul were chanting yes. Nothing could ever compare to the feeling of his hands and lips on me, his fangs piercing my skin, and his venom coursing through my blood. It was the most thrilling sensation, the pinnacle of joy, and I was already addicted.

How would it even work? Would I stay after hours every Friday to be his dinner? Would we do it during lunch breaks in his executive bathroom? Would he ever invite me to his home?

I wanted him to fuck me. I wanted to know how a bite would feel with his dick in me.

He said he wanted to feed from me. Just that? All those kisses... Was that my payment?

But I couldn't ask more questions and negotiate the arrangement now because I would agree to everything he wanted.

“Okay,” I murmured weakly. “We should probably clean up now.”

He sighed into my skin and pressed a firm kiss to the vein he'd pierced earlier. “Thank you, Eddie.”

Did I just promise to become my boss's vending machine?

12

UNPROFESSIONAL

RUSSEL

We had to vacate the suite in thirty minutes. After downing a small bottle of juice he'd found in the minibar, Eddie took a shower, and I washed a cumstain from the hem of his shirt. He looked surprised when he walked out of the stall and saw me blow-drying his shirt.

"It's not perfect," I said, "but it'll have to do."

He shrugged into the shirt and buttoned up. "Thank you. That's great."

He looked solemn as he dressed, and I tried not to overanalyze, but when we were about to leave through the double door, I didn't like the resigned slump to his shoulders. It looked very much like regret. I caught his wrist, and he turned to me, a silent question in his eyes.

I'd promised not to hurt him, and I would do everything in my power to keep my promise. Except repeating it wouldn't do shit.

So I kissed him one last time, just a soft press of lips that made him smile and blush. There. That was how I wanted him to look at me.

"Russel, at work, um..." He sighed, his breath fanning my lips.

“We’ll be careful.”

With a nod, he turned to open the door.

* * *

It was incredible what being well-fed with the prospect of another dinner did to my mood. Where was my existentialist angst? My bitterness? Eddie’s blood cleansed my soul.

I walked the streets with my chin held high even when the sun beat my neck.

Eddie seemed nervous and jumpy at work, but as I observed our coworkers, I could tell nobody suspected anything—except maybe Cat. When I entered the breakroom on Tuesday, she nudged Eddie, and he turned scarlet in the face. I had to ask him about that soon.

With how many need-to-know projects we were working on together, Eddie spent hours in my office behind closed doors. I kept my hands to myself for the entire Tuesday and Wednesday, but it took great effort. It would have been the most natural thing in the world to kiss his cheek hello when he entered or to tuck a strand of hair behind his ear.

Eddie, like the responsible adult he was, didn’t display any signs of distraction.

“Anthony watched the Charles Carlsson interview last night,” he said when we were finishing up on Thursday evening.

“Yes, he told me. I don’t think he realizes what an achievement it was that you could make Charlie behave with a single training session.”

Helen and Pierce had called us in a panic that Charlie was about to say yes to an impromptu appearance on an evening show. Eddie had coached him, and the result was nothing short of a miracle.

Whenever I complimented him, Eddie's first instinct was to shrug it off. "Charlie's fun. I thought macho heroes like him died out in the nineties, but he's the real deal."

I scoffed. "He's a disaster. A loose cannon. It's incredible you made him stick to the script."

"I think it was the baby argument that did it. He's a very proud papa-to-be. Also, I suspect Pierce can be very persuasive."

"Ha! I bet." It was late, and I could feel the sunset behind the blinds. Eddie's delicious scent teased my nostrils. Maybe I could be playful now? I raised one eyebrow at him. "Did you or did you not imagine them fucking when you talked to them?"

Eddie's guileless eyes went wide. "Pierce and Charles?"

I grinned. "Yes, Eddie. Pierce and Charles. And we have it from the most reliable source that Charles bottoms."

"That's grossly unprofessional of you, Mr. Greenwood. I'm appalled." His tone was serious, but his lips twitched.

"You did imagine it, didn't you?"

"It was really hard not to. At one point, it looked like they were going to argue, but Pierce put his hands on Charles's shoulders and squeezed, and Charles's eyes fell shut, and he honest-to-God groaned. Then Helen licked her lips, looking at them, and

I wondered if I should have given them ten minutes to sort out the sexual tension in the room.”

I snickered. “Just ten minutes? Can you imagine what you would have walked in on?”

“Again, so unprofessional!”

“Luckily, you won’t snitch on me.” I winked.

The sound of our laughter died, and Eddie looked away. He muffled a yawn with his palm. I wanted to ask him to come home with me, but with how tired he looked...

“It’s half past six. You should go home and get some rest.”

He blinked up at me, then frowned. He seemed to be waging some internal battle, but then he rose and closed his laptop. He looked almost disappointed. Why did I send him away? If I asked him, would he come with me?

“Eddie.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve noticed Cat is giving you a hard time. Does she suspect something?”

Again, that blush. I adored that blush.

“She...seems to think I have a crush on you. It’s just friendly ribbing. She has no idea about...” He gestured between us.

A crush. Such an innocent word.

Did Eddie have a crush on me? I was grinning before I knew it.

Eddie flushed a deeper shade of pink. “Stop it.”

“What?”

“Looking so smug.”

I walked around my desk and took the laptop from his hands. I set it on the desk. Eddie was staring at his feet, ears red and lips smiling. Suddenly, he didn't seem so tired anymore. I placed my hand on his jaw, and the warmth from his blood seeped into my palm.

“I love it when you blush.”

He lifted his gaze. “We shouldn't,” he murmured. “Not here.”

It was a good rule. A smart one. Don't do anything at the office .

We moved in sync. Our lips met, and Eddie moaned. I licked into his mouth, starved for his taste. The kiss was filthy, and desire rolled off Eddie in waves. He was glorious when he was horny. He bucked against me, his hard cock pressing into my thigh. When I moved my mouth to kiss down his jaw, he turned his head and unashamedly offered me his throat, asking for what he wanted.

The first bite was only to tease. I swallowed a couple of times, and he gasped, struggling to stay quiet. I licked the wound and flipped him around. I tore his jacket off his arms and threw it somewhere behind me, then I undid his belt and shoved his pants down his thighs. Panting, he braced himself with his hands on my desk and looked over his shoulder. His eyes were wild, nearly black. The venom was coursing through his bloodstream.

“Please,” he whimpered.

My cock out, I pressed against his naked ass. I nestled my erection in his crease and licked his neck.

“You need to stay quiet.”

“I know. Make me come!” He was shaking.

I put my hand over his mouth and wrapped the other around his erection. Then I found the vein along the side of his throat and bit down.

Eddie’s cry of pleasure was muted by my palm. His cock pulsated in my hand, and his cum splattered onto my desk.

I drank, rutting against his bare ass. I needed to get him into my bed so we could do this properly.

Sucking slowly, I jerked him off toward a second orgasm. He thrust into my hand and rubbed his ass against my erection. When he came again, I was so close I was vibrating. I closed the wound on his throat and looked at his ass.

Oh damn .

He was perfect. Pale and youthful, fuzzy like a peach, with a couple of beauty marks on the left cheek. I wanted to kiss those.

“Eddie, please, show me your hole.”

It was a lewd request. Made at the office after hours, even more shameless.

But Eddie grabbed his ass cheeks with both hands and spread them. His hair was soft and pale, just a sprinkle, and his crease was smooth around his dark-pink pucker.

I shoved my fist into my mouth as I came all over Eddie's hole.

I fell to my knees behind him and licked him clean. My own cum tasted like nothing to me, but eating it from Eddie's fragile skin as he shivered and sighed was everything. When I was done, I pressed my face to his ass cheek and closed my eyes.

In the silence, Eddie panted, his heart sprinting.

"I need to fuck you, Eddie. I keep dreaming about it. Come to my place tomorrow night, I'm begging you."

He was quiet. I ran my hands up and down his thighs. Did I push too much? I recapped what I said and winced. It wasn't exactly a romantic proposal.

"Tomorrow is the office party."

I groaned. "Ugh."

I peppered kisses all over his ass, lingering on the birthmarks, but I could feel the tension rise in him. With Eddie, time always passed too quickly. He began to fidget, so I took his pants and dragged them up his hips as I stood. Eddie tucked his shirt in and adjusted his belt. He pointed at my desk, grimacing.

"Do you have tissues?"

I glanced at the streaks of his cum on the polished wood. "Leave it. I'll sort it out."

"Okay."

I retrieved his jacket from the carpet and shook it out. "Sorry about that." I held it for him as he shrugged his arms into the sleeves.

Since I didn't draw much blood from him, he recovered quickly. Too quickly. He was about to step away, but I put an arm around him and pressed my nose into his hair. I wished for an excuse to take care of him.

"I'm sorry for what I said before. I...crave you, but my delivery was thoughtless and crude."

Eddie leaned back into my embrace. "It's not like you can take me out and wine and dine me."

"I wish I could take you on a date." Just empty words. I felt like a heel.

"Sex will do," Eddie whispered. "I like sex."

Oh, please, yes. "Can you come on Saturday night? I'll send you the address."

"Okay."

Two days, and I'd have him in my bed.

Reluctantly, I let him disentangle himself. He gathered his things, and I handed him a glass of water, which he drank in one go. A rare spark of mischief lurked in his eyes as he paused by the door.

"I need you to fuck me too."

Then he was gone.

After staring at the closed door for who knows how long, I turned to my desk. Drops of pale liquid glistened near the edge.

I swiped a finger through Eddie's cum and licked it. It was cold, not as potent as when I sucked it from his pulsating cock. Still, I scooped up two more dollops and ate them with my eyes closed before wiping my desk clean.

13

MOTHER

EDDIE

The Fowles & Tito headquarters wasn't an ideal place for a party because of its narrow hallways and tiny glass cubicles. Our largest conference room barely fit thirty. For occasions like today, Anthony had hired a conference space three floors above. The vast open room was crawling with people—all employees and their plus ones, PR teams from our corporate clients, and a few additional guests I didn't recognize.

I felt a little guilty as I ducked behind a pillar, avoiding Cat. Her idea of fun was elbowing my side whenever Russel looked vaguely my way. And since her jokes hit too close, I didn't trust myself not to give anything away.

Russel kept a distance, which was smart. I had no reason to feel disappointed about it. None whatsoever.

After finishing my second glass of wine, I put it on the nearest bar table. I wondered how long I would have to stay when a lady in a strawberry-red suit appeared before me, seemingly out of nowhere. I'd seen her talking to Anthony earlier.

"Who are we hiding from?" she asked, smiling conspiratorially.

I blinked. "I'm not... Uh. Good evening."

“Are you one of the PR people?”

Everyone in the room was a PR person. Except for her, it seemed.

“I guess.”

I’d never been attracted to women, but I had eyes and could tell that this lady was objectively beautiful. She had the body and skin of a fit thirty-year-old, but her gaze was ageless, the pupils the deepest black that didn’t reflect a thing, and the irises copper. Those were the eyes of an old vampire. They got half-lidded when she stared at me, and she put a hand on my upper arm as she leaned closer.

“My name is Isabelle. And yours?”

“Eddie.”

“Eddie? How cute. Darling, you look like you know all the juicy gossip. What’s the hottest news in Hollywood now?”

I laughed awkwardly. If I had a dollar for every time people asked me that, I could have paid off my student loans. Where did Anthony know her from? “We’re bound by NDAs.”

“Are you? What a shame. I was hoping you could whisper dirty secrets into my ear.”

Oh Lord. Her lips nearly brushed my earlobe. Panic. Panic! She was hitting on me! “Erm. I...can’t. Sorry. It would get me into trouble. I’m sorry.”

“Goodness, you’re adorable. Are you single, darling?”

Technically, I was, which didn’t feel right at all. But Russel and I hadn’t made any

promises... How was it even relevant? I should just lie. While all those thoughts tumbled through my mind, I bobbed my head in a way that could have been a nod or a headshake. Her lips twitched knowingly. I needed to get rid of her, fast. But what if she was a good friend of Anthony's?

She licked her lips, her copper eyes growing brighter. "How about we have a drink, you and I."

"I shouldn't. I already had two and...I don't tolerate alcohol well."

She laughed at that. "Unless it's not obvious, I'm trying to get into your pants, dear. You can have a soda, for all I care."

Bewildered, I didn't know what else to do. "I'm gay," I blurted, and my face burst into flames.

Arching her eyebrows, she appraised me. Her expression turned speculative. "Well, I'm out of luck. You're very handsome, Eddie." She took a deep gulp from her glass of red wine. "And you smell delectable."

When she winked, I must have blushed even harder. "Thank you?"

She hooked her arm through mine and began walking. "You must forgive me for my forward approach. I love young men. I enjoy their blood and their sexual prowess, and I very much like how easily I can seduce them. But I see I won't succeed with you. I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't." She'd terrified me, in fact.

"I did, and I apologize. But now that I have you in my claws, let's chat. In this PR business, do you meet many celebrities?"

“I can’t really talk about them. Most of our clients want to remain anonymous.”

“I don’t doubt that. If I hired someone to twist and manipulate my public image, I wouldn’t want people to know they’re being manipulated.”

“I try not to see it that way.”

“No? How do you see it?”

“Fame is a trap. It looks seductive and glamorous from the outside, but it’s fickle, demanding, lonely, and terribly expensive on the inside. We help people navigate that with their dignity intact.”

She paused in the middle of the room. “You’re not just a pretty face, are you?”

I chuckled. “I feel like I’m being evaluated.”

“Maybe.” She winked again. “Since you’re single, delectable, clever, and like men, I have someone you need to meet.”

“Oh no. Please, no.”

But she wouldn’t be deterred. “He’s here somewhere. He’s a grump and a little prim but very attractive, even for a vampire. Something tells me you might like him. He tends to get philosophical too.”

“I’m...ah... I don’t want to cause any offense. But I don’t want to be...dinner.”

“Nonsense. Have you tried it?”

“Yes.”

“What’s not to like?”

“Forgive me, madam, I really can’t. Technically, I’m at work and…” I was about to tell her I had a boyfriend—I wished!—but I never got the chance.

She ignored me as she paused behind a group of men in suits. “There he is.”

Could I rip my arm out of her grip and run?

And then she called, “Russel?”

My stomach lurched.

Russel turned to face her. The play of his features would have been hilarious if I weren’t drowning in embarrassment. He went from annoyance to surprise to sheer horror at the sight of me hooked to Isabelle by the elbow.

“Russel, dear, this is my new friend, Eddie. Isn’t he delightful?”

“Mother, stop harassing my coworkers! Eddie, I apologize. She doesn’t mean any harm, I promise.”

This was Russel’s mother?! Oh. My. God .

“Of course, I don’t. So, you two already know each other? Huh. And you do know Eddie here is gay too? He told me.” She turned to me, frowning. “I’m sorry. What are the rules? Can I say that you’re gay to another gay man if you’ve told me, or am I, what’s the word, outing you?”

Russel dragged a hand down his face. “The rule is to never say anything to anyone about anyone’s sexuality, and it applies to you specifically.”

Russel's mother cackled, unconcerned. "See? Like I said, he's all prim and proper."

Seeing the frustrated expression on Russel's face, I hurried to diffuse the situation. "Russel and I know each other well, madam. We work on the same team. In fact, I'm his direct subordinate."

She looked from me to Russel and back. "Goodness. This is a hilarious joke, isn't it? And here I was, hoping I was getting my boy a meal like a good mama."

Closing his eyes, Russel took a deep breath.

"But this is the twentieth century. One shouldn't feed from one's colleagues. Oh. Who's that?" She pointed at a tall, dark-haired man who looked only slightly older than me. I recognized his face but couldn't place him.

"He's in HR at one of our corporate clients," Russel said in a vaguely menacing tone. "I believe he's working now, Mother."

"Is he? He looks bored. Excuse me."

She offered us a brilliant smile and floated away, heading straight for the unsuspecting brunet.

"Eddie, I am so terribly sorry."

Biting my lip, I tried to hold back my laugh. "The guy won't know what hit him." My laughter burst out as the anxiety bomb in my belly exploded. Tears welled in my eyes, but I couldn't stop.

Luckily, Russel laughed with me. He had a nice laugh, deep and honest. It made me look up at him. Damn. He was so handsome. Eyes glinting, he met my gaze. We just

looked at each other, grinning like fools.

I wanted him so badly I could beg him. Since when had I become so reckless? I could blame the wine I'd drunk. Two small glasses?

Or was it the kaleidoscope of butterflies in my stomach whenever he looked at me like that? He stepped closer to me.

"Eddie."

His voice felt like a caress.

My gaze dropped to his lips. We were in a room full of coworkers, dammit! We couldn't make fuck-me eyes at each other.

"Eddie, come home with me."

If I did that, we'd have sex. He would push his cock inside me and bite me. He'd drink my blood while fucking me .

I never stood a chance.

How could I have believed for one second that knowing what his venom did to me, how his lips felt on my skin, I would be able to resist him?

I jerked my chin in a single nod and turned away. I walked straight to the exit. In the hallway, I pushed the elevator button and stepped into the first car that arrived. The door was just about to close when Russel slipped inside and pressed another button. Then we were alone.

14

PASSION

EDDIE

We moved in sync. He cupped my jaw, his grip on my face somehow tender and firm at the same time, and my hand slid into his hair of its own volition. We kissed like we'd been starving, even though Russel couldn't be hungry. It'd only been a day since he drank from me. His irises were still warm copper.

It occurred to me that there might be a camera in the elevator. Would a security guard somewhere get an eyeful? Were they even looking when there wasn't an emergency? Russel's chest brushed against mine, and my thoughts dispersed in a pink cloud of lust.

"Irresistible," he murmured against my wet lips. "Driving me crazy."

I kissed him deeper. His saliva had a sweet, flowery taste, like nectar, and I knew it was the venom I was tasting. It wouldn't affect me as fast and as intensely as if he'd bitten me, but still... Just knowing I was licking it from his mouth made my cock throb.

The elevator dinged, and Russel grabbed my wrist. The garage was deserted, all cars dark and quietly waiting. He led me toward a discreet exit on the other side of the building. Nobody ever used it since it led to a dodgy alley lined with dumpsters. We jogged onto the street, and Russel waved down the first cab he saw. Miraculously, it

stopped.

In the back seat, he grabbed my hand again, rubbing his thumb across my wrist. He squeezed from time to time, and I looked at his worried expression, city lights flying across his face. Was he afraid I'd back out at the last minute?

I didn't want to. What I was doing was monumentally foolish, but I couldn't stop. I'd never wanted anything more than to fall naked into this man's arms and lose myself.

The ride took less than five minutes. It was late, and the traffic had already died down. We stopped in front of a modern high-rise, and Russel paid the driver.

We passed a doorman who greeted Russel politely and didn't blink an eye at my accompanying him. Then we were kissing in an elevator again.

I had no idea which floor we got out on, and if I came here again tomorrow, I wouldn't be able to find which door was Russel's. My senses were full of him as I followed him like a puppy until a door clicked shut behind me, and he pressed me against it.

I half expected him to go straight for my throat, but he didn't. He palmed my ass over my slacks and thrust his tongue into my mouth. His hard cock pressed into my lower belly.

"How do you want to do this, Eddie?" he asked against my wet lips. "You call the shots."

The easiest question in the world, the easiest answer. "I want you to bite me and fuck me."

He groaned, squeezing my ass. "I'll fucking eat you alive."

A glorious shiver ran down my spine. I hated that I needed to take care of the practicalities first. “But I need a shower,” I said.

Leaning his forehead against mine, he exhaled. “Okay. Okay. I can wait for ten more minutes. Maybe.”

He nodded but didn’t let go of me. I was trapped between the door and his large frame.

“Show me the bathroom?”

“You won’t change your mind?”

“I won’t.”

“Okay.”

Grabbing my hand, he pulled me after him. The apartment was dark, and I barely knew where I was going, but he didn’t need any lights. He paused by another door, presumably the bathroom, and caressed my jaw.

“I should at least offer you a drink.”

“Later. Sex first.”

That made him chuckle. “Yes. Sex first. Don’t be long.”

“Do you have a kit?” He’d know what I meant.

“The cupboard under the sink.”

I closed myself in the bathroom and patted the wall by the door in search of a light switch. Bright light flared to life, illuminating black metallic tiles. I peered around as my eyes adjusted.

The bathroom was the size of my bedroom: a double sink, a toilet separated by a low wall with built-in shelves, a shower stall big enough for four people, and a large corner bathtub. Russel had a remarkable lack of things . A single toothbrush, toothpaste—I hadn't known vampires brushed their teeth—an unscented shower gel, soap, toilet paper, and a beard trimmer were all I could see. Compared to this, the cramped little bathroom I shared with Sheri and Aaron looked like a fully stocked drugstore after a mild earthquake.

The cupboard held a few clean toothbrushes in plastic packaging, a water-based lube dispenser, and a wooden box. I peeked inside the box. Bingo . The black silicon bulb for douching would do great. I grabbed the lube and the bulb and set them on the counter.

Time dragged horrendously as I went through the routine that couldn't be rushed. Then I finally stood in the shower, clean on the inside, and tilted my face up. I gave myself a few seconds under the warm spray before I slapped the water shut.

I pressed out a dollop of lube and smeared it over my rim, then I pushed my fingertip inside. Closing my eyes, I let the sensation run its course.

Damn, I'd come out of here lubed and hard. Was I overdoing it?

My cock bobbed as I washed my hands. I could at least wrap a towel around my hips, but with my erection, it would look ridiculous.

Instead, I gave myself a few strokes, imagining Russel doing a double take when he saw me walking out of his bathroom, ready like a fluffed-up porn star.

Who was this new me?

A vampire venom junkie.

Instead of guilt and apprehension, I only felt excitement as I turned off the light and stepped out of the bathroom.

A soft yellow glow guided me down the hall toward another room. Russel must have heard me coming because when I entered, he was sitting on a bed, gazing at me.

I paused, leaning on the door frame. I was naked, but he still had his shirt and slacks on. My cock pointed straight at him. He looked me up and down, and his nostrils flared.

Not taking his eyes off me, he unbuttoned his shirt and dragged it off his arms. He dropped it carelessly on the floor. Then he undid his belt and opened his fly. I watched as he took his cock out and stroked it.

“Come here,” he rasped.

As soon as I stepped close enough, he grabbed my hips and yanked me forward. He rubbed his lips along my erection and kissed my slit. I remembered fucking his mouth to the root in frenzy and how he looked up at me with near devotion, even as I must have cut off his breathing. He gave me the same look now, with his lips touching my cockhead.

A skittish voice inside me whispered that this wasn't how one looked at food. This was something else. Amid all the arousal and anticipation, I felt a tug in my chest.

Holding my gaze, Russel slowly licked the underside of my cock. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and kissed me below my belly button, then he breathed deeply from

my skin. A wave of warmth seemed to roll off him, enveloping me. It seemed natural that I would hug his head to my middle. His shoulders lifted with another deep breath, humid air wafted over my groin... What are we doing?

One more kiss, and he glanced up. This time, there was mischief in his changeable eyes. A dangerous predator was about to bite me, drink my blood, devour me, and I'd never felt as protected and cherished as I did right then.

Abruptly, he swung me around, and I landed with my ass on the soft bed, bouncing off it. I laughed, but the expression on Russel's face made me stop.

He bared his teeth, and I saw in real time how his fangs dropped. Now that was definitely hunger, predatory and fierce. My body responded to the sight, my cock aching and my balls tightening.

He swiftly took off his pants, and gloriously naked, he bent over me.

"Ready?" he rasped.

For the emotional chaos brewing in my head? No .

But I nodded with eagerness, and his sinister smile widened.

The first bite was above my hip. Just a shallow mark that he licked right away, closing it in a second. Another sting by my belly button. The hollow between my hip and underbelly. The inside of my thigh. They were like open-mouthed kisses with a tiny prickle of his teeth.

Those little bites were designed to make me explode.

"More?"

I moaned. I wanted his marks everywhere.

“Fuck, yes. Keep going.”

He bit a vein on my thigh, and a heartbeat later, the rush from his venom hit my brain. I arched my spine and threw my head back. My cock was throbbing.

Using his inhuman strength, he flipped me around. Face down, I inhaled his scent from the bedding.

“Please...”

The next sting came on my ass cheek and another on the inside of my crease.

I couldn't help it—I shoved my knees under myself and rocked back, blatantly offering him my ass. All the spots where he'd bitten me were burning, like blazing fire licking my skin, except the burn was pure passion.

He licked from my balls to my hole. I clawed at the sheets.

“Fuck me, Russel, please.”

With yet another stinging bite on my ass cheek, he slid a finger inside me. He brushed my gland, and I whined.

“I'll come!”

“Shh. Yes, you will. You'll come so many times tonight.”

He kissed up my spine, his finger moving along my rim, stretching me out.

“I want...” The next brush over my gland made me gasp. One more, and it would be game over. “Russel! In me!”

I had no idea where the lube came from, but I heard a click and the distinct slippery noise of a hand on a slick cock. The mattress moved under me, and Russel’s hand grasped my hip.

Eager to feel him, I bore down against the blunt pressure on my opening.

Fuck!

I forgot how overwhelming it could be. The pressure took my breath away. He was in me.

“Eddie, baby...”

He sank deeper, and I groaned. He curled his body over me, his front to my back, as he inched into my hole. A tiny back and forth, and deeper still.

“Eddie.”

“Keep going,” I managed, before a guttural groan tore out of my throat.

The fullness felt amazing. My groin tingled, the pressure inside me forcing tendrils of pleasure to run down my legs and swirl in my balls.

Russel pressed a kiss to my neck and stilled.

In the quiet, I heard only my panting breaths and blood thrumming in my ears. All the blood.

And I imagined in how many ways he owned me already, and how much more I was willing to give him.

How far was I willing to go to feel like this?

We weren't even moving, and I hovered on the edge of complete ecstasy.

When he brushed over my sweet spot, I lost it. My untouched cock jerked and spurted onto the sheet under me, and my hole clenched around Russel.

I didn't know what I yelled, but I heard Russel's deep voice in my ear.

"Oh sweetheart, you're perfect. You feel perfect."

The pleasure grew and withdrew and grew again like tidal waves.

He straightened behind me and wrapped his large hands around my waist. He gave me slow, pumping thrusts, dragging his cock out and pushing it back in, and after the shattering orgasm, my hole should have gotten tight and achy. But instead, my body opened for him like a damned flower.

He went in to the root, his balls touching my taint, and I wondered if he looked at my ass, spread out for him like this, open and filled and taken.

Miraculously, I was still hard. How long would the venom last? Was it the venom? Maybe, with Russel, one orgasm would never be enough.

I leaned on one elbow and managed to wrap my right hand around my cock. I hissed at the touch. My cock was swollen and heavy like never before. But I wouldn't complain. This was heaven. This was as close to nirvana as a human could get.

“Good?” he purred.

He must have heard how good it was. I was all but mewling.

“Yes. Aah. Yes!”

And he sped up.

Wailing, I got steamrolled by another climax. Small lights danced on the insides of my eyelids.

Russel rolled us to the side, and my jellified muscles didn’t put up any resistance. He spooned me and rocked me on his dick as he kissed my neck. I was buzzing, the aftershocks of pleasure shooting all the way to my fingers and toes. Some time passed; maybe the Earth was still turning. He was still hard, lodged in my body. Had he come? I’d been too out of it to notice.

A small press of his hips. His dick nudged my oversensitive gland, and I whimpered. I was completely, utterly taken.

“I can do this all night.” The darkness in his voice. Was it a threat?

But he owned me, so I breathed, “Yes.”

He bit me one more time.

I was hoarse from yelling. My cry was more like a croak when the rush came a heartbeat later. Euphoria was the word. Every cell in my body sang, and instead of all those annoying thoughts, my head was full of exhilarated joy.

Holding my right leg, he pushed himself up, straddled my left thigh, and drove into

me with force. The strength with which he controlled his every move was such a turn-on. I was helpless, drowning in sensations, and he fucked me . On and on. Hard and deep and to the hilt. His warm hand enveloped my cock.

Wet smacking sounds, my mewls, his groans. I peered up at him, surprised I could still see. He moved like a machine, his broad, lean torso rippling with muscles. In the glow from the weak lamp, his fangs glistened like pearls. He snarled, and the image got blurry.

This pleasure was different. It came from somewhere in the middle of my body...pressure rising with each pump of Russel's hips until it flared out like a fucking supernova.

Three times.

He fucked three orgasms in a row out of me.

Now my hole was loose and slippery, his cum oozing out. I couldn't move a muscle. Sweet kisses dotted my thigh and waist, warm hands gently rolled me to my back, and more kisses rained on my chest.

There might have been a wet towel, but I couldn't remember. A straw nudged my lips. Cool water in my parched throat. Velvety skin against mine. With the last of my strength, I threw an arm over him.

“My sweetheart.”

Maybe he said something more, but I didn't hear him. I fell asleep in seconds.

15

HOW TO FEED YOUR PREY

RUSSEL

The night was merciful. It forgave everything. At night, my head was clearer and my mind calmer.

Eddie was asleep, his lips parted, eyelids pale, and cheeks tinted soft pink. He looked content...and breathtaking. The quiet was a contrast to his passionate cries and pleas only an hour ago. The taste of his blood in my mouth and his flesh clutching my dick as he came were now burned into my memory as the greatest pleasure I could ever experience.

I'd been ruminating about the meaning of life forever, and I'd never gotten anywhere close to figuring it out. But tonight, for the first time, the pointlessness of it all didn't bother me. Even if I was put on Earth merely to fuck Eddie and make him come as much as possible, it would be enough for me. Was I allowed to love him? Then I'd never complain about a thing ever again.

Propped up on one elbow by his side, I watched his serene face. The man who held my life in his hands. What would he say if he knew?

The legend about the vampire who starved to death after their beloved prey passed away—it was possible. I could see how that could happen.

With a fingertip, I touched a strand of chestnut hair above Eddie's forehead and traced the shape of his eyebrow. The tip of his nose twitched, making me smile.

He must have been exhausted to pass out cold like that. I wouldn't disturb him. I lay by his side and stared at his profile in the dark until my eyes closed.

I slept for three hours, then took my laptop to bed and worked until the sunlight crept in through the narrow gaps around the blinds. I didn't have any food to offer Eddie, but a grocery store two blocks down opened at six. I walked past it on my way to work every day.

I left a note on the nightstand, weighed down by Eddie's phone I'd put on charge. I was about to tie my shoelaces when I remembered something else. I tiptoed back to my bedroom and laid out a T-shirt and clean underwear for Eddie when he woke up. Then I slipped outside.

The high-rise neighborhood protected me from the morning glare as I jogged to the store. What did Eddie like? Should I buy eggs and bacon? I'd seen Eddie eat at work and knew he wasn't a vegetarian. But I'd never cooked a thing in my life. I searched online, then bought fresh croissants and a couple of ciabattas, yogurt, granola, fresh orange juice, mozzarella, dried ham, cream cheese, tomatoes, and an avocado.

On my way home, I was watching a video on how to make a tomato and avocado sandwich when it struck me that I didn't have a single sharp knife at home. And I needed olive oil and salt! I spun around and hurried back to the store.

The sound of the shower running welcomed me as I entered my apartment later. I could smell Eddie in my home, just a faint, warm human scent that made me giddy. I stuffed the groceries into my otherwise perpetually empty fridge, and Eddie appeared in the kitchen, blinking blearily. His wet hair curled toward the tips, and he had a faint hint of stubble on his jaw.

“Hi,” he rasped. He looked vulnerable and a little afraid.

I set the paper bag with croissants on the table and walked over to him. Kissing his cheek, I wrapped my arms around him. He smelled soft and sleepy and fucking delectable.

“Good morning. Did you sleep okay?”

He leaned into my embrace and exhaled. “Yeah.”

“Are you hungry? I went to the grocery store, but I didn’t know what you liked, so I just got a few random things.”

“I saw the note. You didn’t have to do that.”

His quiet voice in my home sounded so strange. Since I’d moved in a year ago, I’d never had anyone visit me here.

“You need breakfast.”

He snuffled a soft laugh against my neck, so I leaned back to look at his face.

His lips curved, and he squinted. “Don’t you need breakfast?”

“I’m good for a few days.” I rubbed my thumb over his plush bottom lip. “But I do like snacking between meals.”

Throwing his head back, Eddie laughed out loud, all joyful and carefree. It was a beautiful sound.

“So, what did you buy?”

I grabbed his hand and opened the fridge for his inspection.

“What the internet advised me, except for eggs and bacon. I didn’t trust myself to cook. I haven’t used the stove once.”

Eddie chuckled. “Dear me, you don’t even know how to cook eggs.”

“I only eat rare steak on occasion.”

“Huh. I forgot about that. Red wine and red meat.”

“The only things aside from blood that vampires can consume.”

“And the steak... Can it replace the blood? I mean nutrition-wise.” He pulled out the cheese and inspected the contents of the paper bags with baked goods.

“Not really. Most vampires eat it because it’s the only thing they can order in a restaurant or because they like the taste. But I can’t eat it more often than once every few months.”

I offered him a plate, and he sat at the table.

“Why?” he asked.

I lowered myself onto a chair, facing him. “It gives me digestive problems.”

Eddie blushed. “Oh. Sorry.”

“Yeah, let’s not go there. Would you like orange juice?”

“Just water. I’ll have the juice later. You don’t happen to have coffee, hm?”

Shit . Coffee! How could I have forgotten about coffee?

I must have looked horrified because Eddie's expression softened, and he patted my hand. "Hey. That's fine. This is a great breakfast, thank you so much."

"I forgot you drink coffee."

"There are many things to keep track of when caring for your prey. I'm impressed as it is."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. Was that what he thought? Eddie spread cream cheese on a ciabatta and took a bite.

"You're not just any prey."

He raised his eyebrows, chewing. When he swallowed, he waved his hand. "Forget I said that. You don't have to explain. I promised I would let you feed from me, and I will. Besides, this is a mutually advantageous deal." He sounded all casual, but I could see the uneasiness in his eyes and the tension in his shoulders. His gaze wandered around my kitchen restlessly.

"No, Eddie." I sounded harsher than I'd intended.

He froze, his eyes meeting mine.

"I want you to understand," I said.

"Understand what?"

I gestured between us. "This."

Eddie set the piece of bread aside. “Then explain.”

Where to even start? “You taste better than anyone I’ve ever been with.”

He frowned.

“That’s not accurate.” I took a deep breath, and fool that I was, I told him the truth. “Your blood tastes like a miracle to me. It’s like a drug. I can barely describe it. It’s not just how it feels in my mouth and stomach, but what it does to my brain. It’s like drinking distilled joy and passion.”

Eddie looked at me with his lips parted, his breakfast seemingly forgotten.

“After the very first bite, I knew you were unique. I tried to catch up with you at the club, but the bartender stopped me and you got away before I could ask for your number.”

“We waved down a cab,” he murmured, looking stunned.

“During that weekend, I searched for you. I left a message at the club on Twenty-third and scrolled through every single queer man in the metropolitan area on three different dating apps, hoping to spot your face somewhere. I couldn’t find you. And then you were there, at the office, within arm’s reach, and I couldn’t touch you. I told myself I needed to feed so I could face you at work, but I kept putting it off because I just couldn’t imagine drinking from anyone else. I still can’t.”

“So all of this is because...I taste different than others?”

Leaning across the table, I cupped his cheek and held his eyes. He looked scared, and that wouldn’t do.

“No, Eddie. It’s everything about you. You’re brilliant; you blow my mind whenever you open your mouth. And beautiful. God, you’re so beautiful that I sometimes feel I should protect my eyes. When you laugh, it’s like looking into the sun. I’m not hungry now, not at all, but I still want to be near you for as long as you will let me.”

The mix of fear, excitement, and hope on his face was irresistible, and I blurted out the next question.

“Can you stay one more day?”

Glassy and a little dazed, Eddie’s eyes roamed my face.

“Okay,” he murmured.

Clearly, I had more luck than sense. I gestured to the plates on the table. “I should let you eat in peace.”

Smiling, Eddie picked up the ciabatta and took another bite. His cheeks gained an adorable shade of pink again, but I knew better than to stare at him during his breakfast.

Straightening up, I eyed the dishwasher.

“I should finally learn how to work this thing,” I muttered more to myself.

“Do you even have dishwasher tablets?” Eddie asked from behind me.

I frowned as I pressed the start button. The machine blinked to life. “What tablets?”

Eddie burst out laughing.

I did the dishes by hand, which Eddie commented was impressive. Now, he was openly making fun of me, but I was happy to be his clown as long as he was laughing.

“I wash my wineglasses,” I clarified as I ran the dish towel around a plate.

“True, I forgot about the wine. By the way, since I’m staying the weekend, I should buy stuff for lunch and dinner. You can just point me in the direction of the store.”

“Absolutely not. You’re my guest. You choose, and I’ll order in.”

I wanted to take him out for dinner, dammit. The weather was nice, cloudy but no rain, but we couldn’t even risk going out for a walk in the evening. A clandestine affair wasn’t at all the adventure it was rumored to be.

After I put the last plate into the cupboard, I turned to find Eddie leaning with his butt on the kitchen table, dressed in the cotton T-shirt and boxer briefs, looking at me somewhat coyly. I dropped the dish towel on the counter behind me and moved to cage him in. He tilted his face up and grazed his lower lip with his teeth.

Irresistible.

I had to kiss him. Eddie opened for me, pliant and eager, and I licked his tongue. He palmed my back, then ran one hand down my spine and over my ass cheek. Just that simple caress made my fangs itch. I grabbed him by his thighs and lifted him up. Eddie grunted with surprise but didn’t break the kiss as I carried him to the living room.

The sofa was the nearest comfortable surface. As soon as I sat down with him in my lap, we ground against each other, my erection pressing against his. Straddling me, Eddie humped my lap, and I snuck my hands into his underwear. The happy groan he

made when I grabbed his ass cheeks with both hands...

“You love this, don’t you?” I ran my fingers through his crease.

Eddie bit my lip. “Uh-huh. Love it when you touch my ass. But I’m sore after last night.”

He grinned cheekily, letting me know he didn’t mind that kind of soreness at all. I trailed kisses down his neck and licked the spot where I’d bitten him before. He moaned.

“Sweetheart?” I whispered against his skin. “You know the effect my saliva has on small superficial wounds...” I licked again, waiting for him to catch up.

“Oh.”

I grazed his neck with my teeth. “Will you get on your knees for me?”

He leaned back to look me in the face, and his eyes grew darker. I gently stroked his straining cock through the cotton with just my fingertips, and he hissed. Then I patted his hips.

“Kneel on the sofa, Eddie.”

“Oh God,” he muttered as he lifted his leg and knelt on the cushion beside me. I tugged his briefs all the way down to expose his ass.

“Spread your legs and push your ass out.”

He hesitated.

“I’ve never done this.”

Damn . “Are you telling me that with how gorgeous your ass is, nobody has ever rimmed you?”

“No.”

I kissed one of the birthmarks on his ass cheeks. “Will you let me do it?”

“Yes.” His reply was quick, making me smile.

I used my thumbs to part his cheeks and expose his hole. There were tiny reddish marks on the little star, traces of our fucking last night. And because I was a bastard, I liked seeing those. I’d fucked Eddie good. Hard and deep, stretching his hole, making him come.

Eddie shifted nervously. “Okay. I’ve showered just before breakfast, so... I think we’re good to... Oh my God!”

I ran my tongue through his crease and over his hole. I lingered on the star, coating it with my saliva, then pressing open-mouthed kisses around it and down Eddie’s taint. I licked from his balls back to his hole, letting his quiet moans guide me. He let out a soft cry when I pressed the tip of my tongue to his hole. Soon, he loosened up and pushed back. I licked inside him, and Eddie’s cries became wild and uninhibited. Pride filled my chest. I was the first to show him this kind of pleasure. With how sensitive he was, of course, he loved rimming. I swirled my tongue around his open hole.

“Touch yourself, sweetheart.”

“I’ll come,” he warned.

“Do it. I want to feel your hole squeeze my tongue when you come for me.” I dove back in, shoving my tongue deep.

“Oh fuck! Fuck...”

I tongue-fucked his hole, and Eddie’s voice broke. He orgasmed on a high-pitched cry, and the ring of muscle spasmed around my tongue. Panting, Eddie collapsed with his chest onto the cushions, but his ass remained high in the air. I palmed his ass cheeks and licked over his hole soothingly as it twitched a couple more times. The skin was pink and healthy now, the chafing and tiny fissures gone. It glistened with my spit. I pressed a chaste kiss to the sweet pucker.

“How does it feel now?” I asked, nuzzling his ass cheek.

“Hmpf.”

Eddie rolled to his side, so I braced myself on my arms above him and found his gaze.

“Good?”

“Epic.” He lifted his hand to show me the cum dripping down his fingers. “Tissues?”

I shook my head and caught his wrist. I licked his hand clean while he watched me with half-lidded eyes.

“What about you?” he asked, grazing my erection with the back of his hand. “Do you want to bite me?”

That fucking blush! And could I really have this? My Eddie, with his brilliant mind and his precious blood, offering himself to me guilelessly...

What if I could have him with me here every night? I could feed whenever while bathing him in ecstasy. I could take a small sip here and there just to feel him shiver with pleasure. His warmth, his laughter, his taste...mine all day, every day.

“Do you want me to?” I rasped, surprised my voice worked under the crushing wave of yearning. “I’ll make you come again.”

He smirked. “That would take a while.”

“Not at all.”

I let my fangs drop, and Eddie’s lips parted as he sucked in a breath. Staring at my fangs, his pupils widened.

“You look so hot like this. Scary, but so hot.”

I flicked my tongue against my teeth, and Eddie tilted his head to the side. I grazed a vein on his throat while I curled my hand around his cock.

“Please!” His rushed plea made me grin.

When I bit him, he cried out and bucked into my hand. I stroked him with a firm grip and sucked only a few mouthfuls, then I bit him again, only skin deep into his shoulder. I came against his hip, my fangs in his hot flesh.

Eddie’s moans crested, and his cock jerked in my hand. A few drops of cum spilled over my fingers. I licked the double wounds, then my fingers, and then I kissed him deeply, holding him to my chest as his heartbeat calmed down.

“I love making you come,” I whispered against his lips.

Eddie grinned, looking drunk. “You’re awfully good at it.”

THE LIGHTHOUSE

EDDIE

Early studies in vampire relationship psychology and sociology suggested that vampires were generally more promiscuous than humans and formed short-term romantic attachments, while their platonic relationships, such as friendships and familial bonds, were deeper and more stable than in humans. Recent sources find fewer significant differences between the species. It seems that in the past fifty years, humans have become more promiscuous, while vampires form increasingly durable monogamous relationships with both humans and individuals of their own species.

The plentitude of legends about blood-drinkers coveting one person suggests that mankind experienced monogamous relationships with vampires even during clandestine times. These bonds were obviously powerful enough to inspire folklore.

The German tale “Der Herr der Nacht” is likely more than six hundred years old and tells a story of a blood-drinking creature who haunts a young man every Sunday night. At first, the young man is terrified of what he perceives as a supernatural presence, but ever so slowly, he falls in love. The “guest” seduces him and feeds from him. Curiously, the gender of the creature is not specified in the oldest written version, and it varies in retellings. It is also unclear whether the tale was meant to be cautionary.

“The guest embraced him and bestowed great pleasure on him, drawing blood from

his neck and replacing it with molten desire. When their bodies were joined, lust consumed the young man's mind, and he begged the guest never to leave him. Thus, the guest spoke. 'I love you ardently, my sweetest, but alas, tonight is the last time I enter your chamber. Take my hand and leave with me. Your blood and your body will belong to me for the rest of your life, and I'll fill your soul with passion no human could ever give you.' The young man saw nothing but the gold in the guest's eyes. He promised his body and soul, and no one ever saw him again."

* * *

Sheri: You slept with your boss, didn't you?

Me: I'm at Russel's. I'll come home tomorrow.

Sheri: I knew it. Enjoy! But please, be careful.

Be careful. How? What was the danger, and how could I avoid it?

After we'd spent a solid two hours making out, I was sitting bare-assed on Russel's sofa, a blanket over my shoulders. My hole still felt loose and sensitive after he'd rimmed me—that had been amazing—but the soreness was gone. He was getting me lunch, and I was supposed to stay for another day of what I hoped would be marathon sex.

The damage was done.

Yes, I was infatuated with my direct supervisor, and I was letting him fuck me and suck my blood because it was the best feeling on earth. I was addicted to his venom—which I knew was medically impossible, but what about psychologically? When he had his cock in me to the root and bit down on my neck, I'd been as close to heaven as a living being could get. Of course, I wanted more.

This could never end well, but what I felt when I imagined never touching Russel again could only be described as grief. I avoided thinking about it. The second worst-case scenario would be Anthony finding out. He'd be disappointed in me, and he'd fire me. What would I do then? Wash dishes at some restaurant downtown and take courses to become a barber or something? Plenty of folks did that, even people with college degrees. Times were rough.

Was I insane? I'd worked my ass off to gain a modicum of stability in my life, and now I was throwing it away.

Russel walked into the room with a large paper cup in his hand and a shy smile that scrambled my brain and sent butterflies aflutter in my belly.

"I hope this is the right stuff," he said as he handed me the mug.

The smoky scent tickled my nose. "Coffee!" He saved me, bless him. I took a sip and groaned. "Thank you so much."

Russel's face lit up as he watched me drink the coffee he must have ordered with the lunch delivery. He was so incredibly thoughtful; it blew my mind. I still hadn't recovered from the breakfast experience. He showed me more care and respect than either of my exes, and I soaked it up like a sponge.

Something in my brain blinked, a little red light in the back of my head. Maybe this was the real danger. Russel treated me like I was something precious, almost as if we were in love. It would be easy to forget what he wanted from me and let myself be swept up in this fantasy.

As if to confirm my worry, he took my hand in a gentle grip. He squeezed my fingers and played with them, then he lifted my hand to his face and nuzzled my wrist. Humming, he brushed his lips over the frail skin covering the veins.

You can't fall in love with this guy, silly. You're his food.

"Thank you for the coffee," I said.

"Anytime. Are you hungry? Your sushi is on the kitchen table."

I lifted my coveted paper mug. "I'll finish this first."

"Okay. What would you like to do after lunch?"

"I don't know. We can't go anywhere." As soon as I said that, I wanted to take it back. It was stupid of me to remind him of our situation. I was fine with staying in and having copious amounts of irresponsible sex. More than fine.

But Russel pressed another kiss to my wrist, unperturbed. "I have a car. I rarely use it because I walk to the office. Most days, it just sits in the garage. How about we drive out of the city? Somewhere remote and quiet."

The look he gave me was hopeful. Don't fall in love with him.

"I'd like that."

We talked about work during the drive north before Russel put a stop to it as he parked the car.

"This is supposed to be quality free time, and we're discussing strategies."

"Sorry."

"Not your fault. But from now on, work is a prohibited topic."

“Okay, boss.”

He smirked at me as he put on dark shades. “Cheeky thing.”

Though the sun hid behind fluffy clouds, Russel wore a ball cap and sunglasses. He said daylight could give him headaches when he wasn’t careful.

I followed him out of the vehicle and looked around. I hadn’t visited the coast in years. The scent of saltwater in the air brought a wave of nostalgia; my parents’ beach house, where I’d spent summers as a kid, was long gone. Confiscated and sold.

Closing my eyes, I tilted my face toward the breeze. Seagulls yelled above, and waves hummed in the distance. It was the same scent, the same sounds, and I could almost feel the warm sand under my feet.

Russel’s arm around my shoulders brought me back to the present, and I blinked, pushing the bittersweet memories away. He led me to an outlook at the edge of the tourist parking lot and gestured downward.

“There’s this cute restaurant on the boardwalk. We can have dinner there later.”

The coastal village looked old and picturesque. It must have been a fishing community that was later gentrified; most of the boats in the marina were yachts. Opulent residences dotted the hills above, indicating that the prices in the stores and pubs down by the beach would be steep. Wooden stairs led to the boardwalk from the parking lot where we stood. I glanced to the left and spotted a winding path on the range of a rocky cape. At the end, a white lighthouse perched on a low cliff. The view looked like an ad for a private luxury getaway.

“How do you know this place?” I asked.

“My friend Levi owns property here. I’ve visited a few times. Come on, let’s walk to the lighthouse.”

Halfway down the trail, Russel caught my hand as I hopped over a crack in the stony ground. He only let go when the path got too narrow for us to walk side by side.

The breeze was gentle and warm as we sat by the lighthouse and watched the ocean. Being quiet felt natural with Russel. I liked that he didn’t need to fill every second of our time with words. Sometimes I feared the things we said; maybe the next sentence could break our fragile bubble, and we’d have to face the consequences of our recklessness. But as long as we didn’t say anything about it, the foolish things I imagined felt almost real. His care and attention, the warmth coming from his shoulder and arm, the way he leaned closer and inhaled from my hair... In the silence, those things could mean even more than the years I’d worked to get back on my feet, more than my coveted independence, reputation, and work ethic.

He sounded soft and careful when he broke the quiet, as if he knew what I was thinking.

“I have an idea. How about I check if the hotel down in the village has a room for us? We could stay until tomorrow. Have dinner, take a walk on the beach at night, sleep in.” His eyebrows rose above the edge of his glasses in a playful waggle. “You’ll get your morning coffee.”

The list of things I wanted to do with Russel but shouldn’t was growing by the minute. I hesitated.

“An overnight bag would have been handy.”

“We don’t need clothes. In fact, I demand you sleep naked. And we can stop by a pharmacy for toothbrushes and other stuff.”

Toothbrushes, toothpaste, and lube—we didn't need anything else. What made me most apprehensive was how much I wanted to say yes. Fuck, this was a bad idea.

"I need to be back early tomorrow."

"I hope you're not working on Sundays, Eddie."

"Sometimes I have to, as you know. But Sheri is driving me to visit my mom." Way to ruin the mood—remind him of my felon of a mother. It unnerved me that I couldn't see his eyes behind his sunglasses.

"At what time do you have to be there?" he asked.

"Twelve thirty sharp."

"Where is it?"

"The Graystone Facility. It's a forty-minute drive north of the city. Close to Ashland."

A seagull cried, and I looked up to see it circle above us.

"That's almost on our way back if we take the inland freeway," Russel said. "I'll drive you there tomorrow."

My reaction was knee-jerk. "No."

For some mysterious reason, he looked hurt, even with the stupid sunglasses on. I backpedaled.

"Russel, thank you. It's very kind of you to offer, but you won't drive me to see my

mother in prison.”

“Why not?”

I let out an exasperated laugh. “Does it sound like a fun date to you?”

“You need a ride, and I have a car. It’s just a small detour.”

“You’d have to wait in the car at a prison parking lot for at least half an hour.”

He didn’t wince. In fact, he wore the same infuriatingly kind and understanding smile. “Your roommate Sheri does it.”

“When she doesn’t have to work. She’s a nurse.”

“And when she works?”

“There’s a bus stop. I’ve taken the bus a couple of times.” Not that I particularly enjoyed the experience. “But I won’t have to take the bus tomorrow because Sheri will drive me,” I added emphatically.

Pinching his mouth shut, Russel watched the waves come and go. He finally seemed to accept my no.

“I’ve been wanting to ask you something,” he said after a while.

“What?”

“Your name is Benedict. Why Eddie? It’s not a common short version of Benedict.”

“It was what my dad called me. He passed away when I was ten.”

Russel let out a deep breath. "I'm so sorry."

Usually, when I was forced to say that, I hurried to change the subject. Curiously, I didn't feel the need to do it with him.

"My grandfather's name was Benedict, but people knew him as Ben Perkins. My dad was Benedict Perkins Jr., but my grandparents called him Ned, and it stuck. Then I was born, the third Benedict Perkins, and Dad insisted on calling me little Eddie. The only person who calls me Benedict is my mother."

"How was he as a father?" Russel spoke quietly, as if the question could scare me. But I was glad I could, for once, talk about the parent who made me proud to be a Perkins.

"He was great. Caring, loving, interested. He was there for me. Maybe it's just my child brain idolizing him. Maybe I'd have discovered plenty of his flaws had he lived long enough for me to grow up. But to the ten-year-old Eddie, he was a hero. The only dumb thing he'd ever done was to marry my mom."

"But you visit your mom every other week?"

"Yes." Seawater splashed high into the air, and the drops landed only a few feet away. My shoes had gotten dusty on the walk here, and I was still wearing the same slacks and the white shirt I'd had on last night. I wondered if the waves were getting stronger and we'd get drenched. The next couple of showers seemed weaker, though.

"How long has it been?" Russel asked.

"She's been at Graystone for two years now."

"Do you miss her?"

How to explain? I picked a broken shell, possibly a trace after a seagull's snack, and threw it into the waves. "She's my mother, and a part of me, the little boy in me, will always love her. But she's got some difficult personality traits." I could feel Russel's gaze on me. I was torn between wanting to escape and craving leaning into him so he'd hug me. "I think she's disappointed in me. What I find important and valuable, she sees as weakness or even stupidity."

"You're one of the smartest and strongest people I've ever met, Eddie." Russel's voice sounded steady, dead serious. It was a powerful compliment, and I struggled to believe it.

"What about your mom?" I asked.

Russel chuckled. "She's...a lot to take. As you've witnessed firsthand."

"She seems fun."

"Oh, she is that. She drives me mad, but I adore her."

"And your father?"

"I've never met him." He said it lightly, unbothered. "My mom didn't always ask the names of her many lovers, and her relationships with other vampires have been even more fleeting than the arrangements she's had with human men. There's a chance she doesn't know who he was, either. She simply doesn't care."

"Wow. Good for her?"

He laughed. "Like you said. She's fun."

"I mean, monogamy is rare among your species." I managed to sound casual. I wasn't

angling for a relationship with Russel—it wasn't possible anyway. Was it? No. How naive could I be?

“Not as uncommon as my mother likes to claim to justify her lifestyle.”

What did he think of monogamy? Had he ever had a relationship? With a vampire or a human? A spike of irrational jealousy made me shut the train of thought down. I must have been quiet for too long because Russel took my hand again.

“Eddie?”

“Huh?”

“Let me take you tomorrow. It doesn't make sense for you to hurry back to the city early in the morning only to drive back north.”

It made perfect sense in my head. My humiliating past, those visits, the shame and guilt... That wasn't the part of my life where Russel belonged.

Except he cupped my cheek. “Eddie, look at me.” He'd put his sunglasses into his hair above his forehead. He squinted in the daylight, his eyes roaming my features.

“I want to take you because I want to get to know you.”

Danger! Danger! The red light in the back of my head glared. I ignored it.

When he leaned in for a kiss, I parted my lips for him. His warm hand stroked down my cheek and settled on the side of my throat. Our tongues tangled, and my cock stirred. Just a fleeting touch from this man aroused me. A full-on deep kiss had me shivering. God, I hoped the hotel in the village had a room for us! We could be fucking within an hour.

Russel made a soft, hungry sound from the back of his throat, and I grabbed his shoulder to pull myself closer.

That was when a spray of saltwater hit our lower legs. We tore apart and jumped up, laughing.

As we walked back, Russel scrolled on his phone, looking for accommodation.

“They don’t have an online booking service,” he said. “I’ll call.”

“What if they’re full?”

“The summer season hasn’t started yet. But I can ask Levi, and we’ll stay at his place.”

“No. Don’t bother your friend. Let’s try the hotel first.”

They did have a room for us, and Russel arranged for us to check in immediately. We drove to the village, made a short detour to a pharmacy, and left the car in the hotel’s fenced-in parking lot. The building boasted a wooden shingle roof with dormers and an intricately carved alcove over the main entrance. A turret completed the princess castle impression. A middle-aged lady at the reception bleeped Russel’s credit card over the machine, and before I could wake up from this dream, we were entering the top-floor honeymoon suite.

“You’re joking.” I gestured to the balcony overlooking the beach. The lighthouse shone yellow in the late afternoon sun.

Russel shrugged. “It was the last available room.” He put his sunglasses and baseball cap onto the coffee table and circled his arms around me. “Now, kiss me again.”

“I will. But shower first.”

His nostrils flared. “Hurry.”

He let go of me, and I closed myself in the bathroom. I still wore my slacks and now dusty dress shoes from yesterday. But I didn't allow myself to freak out as I showered and prepped for more sex with my vampire boss .

I walked out of the bathroom with just a towel around my hips. Russel was waiting for me only in his underwear, sitting in an armchair, his legs casually crossed.

“You wanted a kiss?” I asked, and he smirked before he was suddenly right there, his palms on my cheeks. Fuck . I forgot how fast he could be.

At the touch of his lips, I pushed it all away. The fear, the guilt, the what-ifs. I sank into the kiss and the blissful oblivion of arousal and the slow, sensual dance of tongues. When Russel dragged his wet lips along my jaw, I tilted my head to the side, blatantly asking for what I wanted.

He bit me, sucked out a mouthful, and licked up the side of my throat. Then he let go of me and sat on the edge of the large king bed.

Panting, my cock throbbing, I didn't know what to do with myself. I squeezed my erection, staring as Russel drizzled lube over his thick cock and stroked it up and down.

“Come here.”

Shaking with desire, I went to straddle him, but he turned me around. With one hand on my hip, he guided me to sit on his cock with my back to his chest. My hole gave way at the gentlest push, and I sank down on a moan.

“Gorgeous view, huh?” he rasped into my ear.

Behind the large window, the sun was sinking lower over the ocean, and orange beams shone through the clouds like stage lights. Russel cupped my balls and massaged behind them as he fucked up into me. With his venom coursing through my bloodstream, I was already close to coming. When he stroked my cock and ran his thumb over my slit, I fell apart. The spectacular view became blurry as tendrils of pleasure swirled up my chest and down my legs.

“When you come, your hole squeezes my cock just right. I love that.”

The orgasm faded away, and I felt all loose inside. I pushed myself up and sank down again, letting Russel’s cock drag along the front wall of my hole.

The beauty of venom-induced orgasms was that they sensitized me but didn’t make me oversensitive. Sparks of pleasure ignited in my gland on each thrust, and soon, I was riding him shamelessly. The mattress shifted as Russel leaned back. He palmed my ass cheeks.

“You’re beautiful, Eddie. In the sunset, your body looks like you’re on fire.”

He saw colors differently than me; I knew that much. Light looked much brighter to him than to me.

I braced my hands by his sides and put my feet on the bed. The new angle had his cockhead pushing against my gland, and I could fuck myself harder. My cock waved in the air in the most obscene way, but I liked it. I felt free as I rode him with abandon, the colors of the sunset streaming into the room, bathing me in gold.

“Fuck, Eddie, sweetheart. You’re killing me.”

He sounded like he was about to lose it. I pushed down hard, my ass smacking against his hips, and Russel cried out. So I did it again. This time, it was me making him come.

I sped up, my muscles burning, but I wouldn't stop. Russel bucked.

Groaning, he grabbed my hips to still me. His cock jolted inside me, and I grinned with victory. Abruptly, he rolled me to the side and pressed into me deeper. He sank his fangs into the crook of my neck and shoulder. The cool sensation lasted only a second, then came the fiery lust that made my mind explode with colorful fireworks.

Russel milked my cock with his hand and fucked into me hard. I sobbed through the orgasm.

“Stay in me!” I gasped. My ass twitched uncontrollably, and his cock felt like the only thing keeping me tethered to reality—that and the stinging where he'd bitten me.

But he wasn't drinking from me now. I felt his breath in my hair, then he rubbed his face against my nape. He sighed and hummed, pressed a kiss into my hair, sighed again... His grip on my erection gentled, and he rocked me slower and slower. The last wave of pleasure came and went, weak and merciful.

“You're still bleeding,” Russel murmured. “Let me.”

He pushed on my shoulder to expose my throat, but I shifted away. His softening cock slipped out of me.

I blinked around the unfamiliar room. “Is there a mirror?”

“There.” Russel pointed at a round mirror on the wall by the nightstand.

I had to see it. I swayed as I stood, but I didn't feel dizzy. My muscles were just mellow. Russel reached out to steady me.

"I'm fine. I just want to have a look."

I ambled toward the mirror and lifted my chin. There. Two red dots sat at the base of my throat. A drop of blood oozed from one of them, slowly inching toward my collarbone. My heart pounded at the sight.

I wanted the wounds to stay there. Russel's mark on me forever, like a brand.

He came up behind me and put his arms around me. He rubbed one hand over my breastbone and the other just below the twin red spots, smearing the drop. Our eyes met in the mirror, and Russel licked his finger.

The way he gazed at me made my stomach swoop. Yes, he was a predator. A dangerous creature with ten times the strength and much faster reflexes than any human. He could camouflage himself in business attire and hide behind sunglasses, have a day job, and pay taxes. But he would always be a blood drinker, and I would always be his prey. I looked so small and fragile compared to him, and my lizard brain loved that. It was right .

God help me, but I wanted to belong to him in ways that were bordering on delusional. I wanted him to feed from me and nobody else until the end of time, and I wanted the scars to show for it.

Russel gently turned me in his embrace, tearing me away from the image in the mirror. He leaned in and tenderly licked the stinging spot. The pain vanished. A few butterfly kisses up my jaw and a tender one on my nose.

There would be no visible scar anywhere on my body.

“Let me take you out for dinner, hm?”

I didn’t trust myself to speak. I nodded.

THE COLORS OF THE OCEAN

RUSSEL

The wine was overpriced and mediocre, which was just as well because I barely tasted it. My senses were full of Eddie.

I could so easily get used to having him all to myself. I knew I was operating on stolen time, but as long as he was smiling at me, his voice bright and eyes shining, I was happy.

The happiest I'd ever been in my life.

They'd given us a corner table on the glazed-in patio. The sun had set, and the sky had turned purple. After a full day in the daylight, I could put away my sunglasses and let my eyes rest. And I could look at Eddie without feeling like my brain was on fire—but that hadn't been just the sunlight. I needed to keep him close, and knowing I had one more day with him, I could let some of the tension go.

Eddie drank his wine, the plate in front of him empty. He'd all but inhaled the food. His cheeks were pink, and his eyelids heavy. After the blood loss and orgasms, even one glass could affect him, but I would keep an eye on him.

He glanced at me from beneath his eyelashes. "Can I ask something personal?"

“Sure.”

He hesitated, took a sip, and shifted in his chair. “Ideally, you must feed twice a month during adulthood, right?”

“It’s a minimum for most vampires, but many feed more often.”

“That means two people a month.”

“Yes.”

He nodded to himself, looking outside at the boardwalk and the darkening beach. I understood where his questions were headed and wouldn’t torture him by forcing him to spell them all out. He deserved to know.

“You’re asking about my sexual history?”

“Um, you don’t have to...”

“I’ve had sex with several hundred humans, and most of them were men or nonbinary people. I had a few relationships with people over the years, meaning I had a stable partner for sex and feeding during some periods of time. Only twice did the relationship last longer than a year. The latest was with Rory, a man I met at a dinner club downtown. He was witty and quick, and we laughed together a lot. I enjoyed spending time with him. I don’t think we were in love, but I wanted to be. It turned out he was in love with the venom, not me.” I added a smile, doing my best not to seem bitter.

Eddie studied me with a frown. “How long were you together?”

“Four years, give or take.”

“And this was...?”

“I haven’t seen him in three.”

“Oh.”

I could now recognize all of Eddie’s nervous signs: the fidgeting, the smoothing and crinkling of the space between his eyebrows, the tightening of his mouth, and his fingers dancing along the stem of his glass. Was there more he wanted to know but was afraid to bring up? He’d gone quiet, seemingly deep in thought.

“What about you?” I asked. “Any exes I should worry about?”

Eddie snorted out a short laugh. “No. My relationship history is unimpressive. One guy in the last year of high school. I’d just turned eighteen. He was older, and I think he had a bit of a virgin kink. It didn’t last long, but he treated me fine and helped my self-esteem. He... taught me stuff.”

I’d better not imagine things related to an eighteen-year-old, virginal Eddie and an older man.

Eddie finished his wine and set the glass aside. “My college boyfriend broke up with me when Mom got arrested. He told me he couldn’t afford to be associated with my family.”

I winced. “I’m sorry, Eddie.”

“At least he was honest about being a selfish jerk. I didn’t date after that. I had too much going on.”

“I can only imagine. Your entire world changed.”

But Eddie shook his head. “In hindsight, I’m kind of grateful for the experience. I have thought many times about who I would have been, had I remained in that bubble. I can get angry about what happened, and sometimes I still do, especially when Mom pulls one of her guilt trips. But I’m doing well now, and I’m proud of myself for finishing school and finding my way on my own merit.”

“You have every right to be proud of what you’ve accomplished. You’re brilliant.”

Eddie’s eyes twinkled in a way that might have little to do with the wine. “You’re biased because you like snacking on me.”

I guffawed. “Snacking?” Pointing a finger at him, I leaned over the table. “Anthony isn’t biased at all, and he talks about you in superlatives.”

His mouth turned down at the corners. “Because he doesn’t know about this.” He gestured between us.

I grabbed his hand. “Eddie. You know just as well as I do that neither of us has done anything that would negatively affect any of our clients or coworkers.”

“Still.”

I exhaled, about to protest, but Eddie waved a hand in the air as if chasing away a nonexistent insect.

“Forget I said that. I don’t want to talk about that at all. In fact, tonight, I want to forget that there’s anything outside this little village.”

He pasted on a smile again.

“We can do that. But we can also talk about how to make this work.” I squeezed his

hand. “And I really want to make this work.”

He suddenly appeared perfectly sober. His gaze dropped to my lips, then back up to my eyes. “After,” he said. “Let’s not go there tonight.”

Why? We only had to agree on a few rules. The chances that we would bump into someone from work here, for example, were nil. Nobody would ever find out about us unless we told them. But he didn’t want to discuss it tonight, and I’d respect his wish.

He didn’t move his hand away, so I stroked his fingers as he glanced around.

“Do you want a dessert?”

I smiled. “Always.”

Eddie smacked his forehead. “Why do I keep forgetting that?”

Chuckling, I brought his hand to my lips for a light kiss. “Do you want a dessert?”

“Not really.” He blushed beautifully. I could just imagine how the change of temperature on his skin would have felt against my palm or my lips.

“We can take a walk along the beach.”

“I’d love that.”

We left our shoes on the boardwalk and trekked through the sand. After the sunny day, it was still warm under our feet. I kept an eye out for anything Eddie could step on, like sharp shells or random trash that could have been washed up, but the beach was pristine.

“I always thought that the ocean was terrifying at night,” Eddie said. “It feels even bigger somehow, this infinite dark depth.”

I gazed at the gentle waves. “For me, it’s the opposite. I can only go swimming at night. With the sun in my eyes and all the reflected light, I’d be nearly blind during the day.”

“How does it look for you now?”

“Really, really blue. All shades of blue, from almost turquoise to indigo.”

“Wow. I wish I could see that.”

I pulled out my phone. “Give me a second. I’ll find you something.” I searched for an artist’s name and pressed on images, then I showed the screen to Eddie. “This painter was a vampire.”

Eddie grabbed the phone and leaned closer. “Those are incredible! How come I’ve never seen these?”

“He’s not well known. Just a local guy who mimicked French impressionists but with vampire color vision, painting landscapes and the ocean. The art isn’t anything that would get him recognition or a spot in a major gallery, but if you want to see how vampires perceive color, this is it.”

He scrolled and clicked to enlarge an image of a bright sunrise, the painting nearly all white with angry glares and burning edges. “Is this how you see the sun?”

“More or less.”

“I’d love to see these in full size. Damn.”

“There’s a permanent exhibition in his old home on the coast, south of the city.”

He grinned at me. “Can we go?”

“Sure. Next weekend?”

Eddie bit his lip. “Another weekend getaway?” He gave me my phone back, and I slipped it into my pocket before pulling him close.

“Yes. I’ll find us a hotel nearby.”

Maybe he tried to hide it, but I did notice the fleeting worry in his expression. “Thank you.”

When I kissed him, he melted against me.

“Let’s go back,” I murmured against his lips. I couldn’t wait to get him naked.

“Can we…”

“What, sweetheart?”

“Can we have sex without biting?” The question came in a rush.

I leaned back to gauge his expression. “Of course.”

“You can feed from me. I don’t mind. I just want to try…how it feels.”

“Eddie, you don’t have to explain. I’d love that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” I pressed my lips against his in a tender kiss. “I’ve never done that before.”

His eyes grew big. “No?”

“You’ll be my first.”

It made him smile, and this time, I didn’t feel like I had to shield my eyes from the glow. I let it singe my skin and heat my chest.

We walked back hand in hand and rushed up the stairs. Eddie took a shower while I undressed to my underwear and paced around.

I couldn’t be sure why he wanted to have sex without biting, but I could hope. Maybe he felt the same as me, that this could be more than...

The door to the bathroom opened, and Eddie stood there with a towel around his waist and droplets still glistening on his shoulders. He turned off the lights and stepped forward, dropping the towel on the threshold.

From the first day we met, I’d initiated and taken control of our encounters, but this felt different. This was Eddie’s moment, and I just stood there, waiting and hoping.

He put his hand on the side of my neck and pressed his lips against mine. I opened for him and closed my eyes. His familiar taste and scent made my fangs itch and stomach tighten in anticipation, but the urge was weak now that I’d fed from him several times in the last twenty-four hours. I could easily ignore it.

Instead, I savored the gentle dance of his tongue against mine, the warmth of his chest, and the press of his hardening cock on my thigh. I wove my fingers into his hair but didn’t grab or push. He dragged his parted lips down my jaw and lower, over my nipple. The strange sensation made me shiver.

Slowly, he knelt before me and pulled my boxer briefs down my thighs. He kissed the side of my cock and under the head before he wrapped his lips around it. I swallowed the excess saliva in my mouth and just breathed, watching him suck my cock deeper. His cheeks hollowed, and the tingling feeling in my dick grew tenfold.

“Eddie...”

What did I want to say? No idea. His name just fell from my lips.

He looked up and locked his eyes on mine as he bobbed his head. Anchoring himself with both hands on my hips, he took me deeper, until his throat spasmed around my cockhead. He gagged and pulled off, swallowing.

“Lie on the bed.”

I did as I was told, and Eddie straddled me with his back to my face.

“Better angle,” he said and bent over.

My cockhead slid right into his throat, and he swallowed around me. The pleasure shot into my balls, and I groaned.

His gorgeous pale ass was right in front of my face. I spread my legs and stuffed a pillow beneath my back so I could reach better. When I grabbed Eddie’s ass cheeks and licked into his crease, he hummed around my cock.

I lathered his hole with my saliva and worked my tongue inside him, healing the irritated skin from our fuck this afternoon. His hole loosened for me, and he sucked me harder and deeper, moaning and making yummy noises.

It was wild, uninhibited, and so good.

“Eddie, sweetheart, I’ll come,” I warned.

He pulled off and turned around. His eyes were dark, lips swollen and glistening with spit and my precum. Panting through his open mouth, he guided my cock to his hole.

“Don’t you want lube?” I rasped.

Eddie swore. “Where is it?”

“My bag, on the floor by the dresser.”

I was grateful for the interruption because it gave me time to pull myself together. He was back in seconds.

He drizzled the cold lube right on my cock, and I hissed.

“Sorry,” he muttered as he closed the cap and threw the tube on the bed.

The warmth of his body was like a slice of heaven. He closed his eyes, his eyebrows knitted together, and sank lower, paused, then lower still.

Fully seated, he wiped his hand on his thigh. Then he reopened his eyes and raked his gaze over me. He looked hungry.

And damn, I loved that look on him.

He rocked carefully, then rose and sank again, his rim sliding up and down my length in a tantalizing way. A soft moan fell from his lips, and he smiled.

I reached for his cock, but he pushed my hand away. “Don’t.”

Leaning back, he rode me faster, his erection bobbing. His hands dug into my thighs.

Eddie was slight and soft around the edges, with a flat belly and slim shoulders. He looked fragile to me, and I knew for a fact that I was about three times faster and stronger than him simply because we were different species. But as he moved sinuously over me, the lean muscles on his arms working, he was the powerful one, and I could just lie there, watching him drain my soul from the last of its independence.

He peered at me through his eyelashes. "I'm close."

"Let me see you come."

Licking his lips, he pushed down harder. My balls were already tight, my dick throbbed, and watching Eddie chase his pleasure without touching his cock drove me to the edge.

The urge to bite never went away, but I held back, finding anchor with my hands on Eddie's thighs and ass cheeks. I swallowed the excess saliva in my mouth. Eddie's wish was more important than my perpetual thirst. He wanted me, not just the high my venom could give him, and I was so fucking grateful for it. The thirst blended with lust, and I hurt with all of it, except the ache felt like joy.

He kept changing the speed and angle, and his moans grew louder. He used my cock to make himself feel good, used me, and I loved that he took what he wanted. Fucking hell, I'd give him anything, sacrifice anything to have him want me like this. Instead of fear, the realization made me giddy. Eddie deserved the world, and if I could be the one making him feel good... I'd serve him until the end of time.

When he circled his hips on a moan, and searing heat engulfed my groin, it felt like we were joined with more than just flesh. Something flowed between us, and it

wasn't blood or venom or cum. I felt the tingling pleasure even through my palms on his skin and where his ass cheeks touched my thighs.

Precum leaked from his slit, and as his hard cock smacked against my belly, it left glistening smears on my skin. I pulled on his hips and bucked up. Did I grip him too hard? I didn't want to cause him bruises. But Eddie moaned, arching his back. His inner muscles tightened around my dick. Did he do it on purpose? The throbbing pleasure in my cock reached a new high.

My fangs dropped against my will, and he saw. His mouth formed an O , and his eyelids fluttered. He cried out.

The next second, the first streak of his cum landed on my belly. The flush in his cheeks, his puckered lips... His euphoric expression was simply stunning.

"Come in me!" he ordered breathlessly.

I sat up and hauled him with me, folding him in half under me. I swallowed his cries and shoved my tongue into his open mouth as I bucked into him. His rim clenched around my cock. Was he still coming?

Eddie wrapped his arms around me, and I felt like I was free-falling. But he caught me. I came with my lips against his and my cock as deep inside him as I could reach. His inner muscles softened around me, and the tantalizing heat of his body around my cock became a soothing warmth.

I kept kissing him so I wouldn't say something stupid like beg him to never leave me.

With my cock inside him and my body all around him, I nipped at his swollen lips. His hand on my cheek made me pause. I searched his features for something, some reassurance, but he looked just as desperate as I felt.

Was that a good thing? I couldn't tell.

The emotion inside me grew stronger and clearer. It picked me apart, messed me up on the inside, and now it was rebuilding me from scratch. This change was irreversible.

I'll forever love Eddie.

18

TEARS BEHIND BARS

EDDIE

In the morning, I ate the delightful hotel breakfast while Russel watched, which strangely enough didn't feel awkward. I got up to get some fruit from the buffet, and when I sat back down, Russel noticed me wincing.

“You're sore.”

I popped a blueberry into my mouth. “I have no regrets.”

He chuckled, but when we got back to the room, he insisted he had to “kiss it better.”

I lay draped over the edge of the mattress, moaning into the bedding while he made love to my hole with his lips and tongue. I didn't know if it was the effect of his saliva, but my ass felt all warm and tingly. When he cupped my cockhead in his palm, smearing the precum around, the orgasm overwhelmed me without warning.

Russel hummed as he licked me through it. He flipped me around and suckled the cum off my cock. He kissed and nuzzled my belly...and stupid me, I glanced at the clock.

“We have to go soon.”

With a sigh, he laid his head on my stomach. “Just a minute.”

I stroked his hair as we rested in silence, him on his knees by the bed, hugging my hips. He pressed one last kiss below my belly button and rose. Offering me his hand, he pulled me up.

We didn’t speak as we packed the few items we had. He loaned me a T-shirt so I wouldn’t have to wear the same shirt I’d had at the party. It smelled of his cologne. Fifteen minutes later, we were on the road away from the coast, and my fairytale was over.

When Russel stopped in the facility parking lot, I made myself look at him and smile.

He brushed a hand down the side of my face. “You don’t have to pretend for me, you know.”

My smile fell, but it was with relief. I leaned into his touch, and he gave me a simple kiss.

“I’ll wait here. Take however long you need.”

“Thank you.”

* * *

Spending time with my mother was always a gamble. I never knew what I was getting myself into. I remembered that, even as a kid, I always tried to gauge her mood when she entered the room so I would be prepared for what was coming. She would love on me one day, reprimand me for some random missteps the next, or be cold and detached for no reason that I could identify. The tight sensation in my stomach was familiar.

It took a while to make it through all the security points, and when I arrived at the visiting room, she was already there. Her face lit up when she saw me. Today would be about motherly love, then. The realization didn't help my nausea. God, when was the last time I'd been genuinely glad to see her?

"Hello, darling! You look good today. Is that a tan? How have you been?"

"Hi, Mom. I'm great. I was on the coast yesterday, so maybe I caught a little sun."

"Coast? Does that mean you finally got yourself a car? Don't tell me you took a bus to the beach."

Like that would have been a capital offense. The beaches my mother had frequented didn't have any bus stops nearby.

"No. A friend took me."

"A friend." She grinned. I hated how perceptive she was. Why was I sharing anything with her? Right. It was the point of these visits—to salvage my relationship with my mom while she was locked up. "And would that be a male friend?"

"Yes."

She clapped loudly, and a female warden threw an irritated look our way. Mom leaned closer to whisper conspiratorially, "Do you have a boyfriend, Benedict?"

"It's early days. How are you?"

She waved my question off. "We're not talking about me. I want to hear about your boyfriend. Tell me everything."

Oh Lord.

It hadn't even taken a minute, and I was already thrashing around in a trap. "I don't want to jinx anything. I'll tell you about him next time."

"Oh c'mon! Nothing ever happens in here. You have to give me something. Where did you meet? What does he do?"

I searched my brain for any benign facts about Russel. If I took too long to answer, she'd get suspicious. "We met at a restaurant downtown." That was close enough to the truth. "He works in communication too. And... he's a little older than me, and we've only been seeing each other for a few weeks, but I like him a lot."

She was frowning, though, scanning my face with unnerving intensity. I hated it when she did that.

"What?" I prompted.

"I know you, Benedict. What's going on?"

Dammit. I wouldn't tell her that I worked with Russel. No way. "He's a vampire."

Her eyes grew big. "Oh my God! I would never have guessed my straitlaced, anxious little boy would grow up to date a vampire."

I let out a nervous chuckle. "Well, I wouldn't have guessed either."

"You're being careful, aren't you?"

"Careful about what? He can't get me pregnant, you know."

Her lips tightened. “Smartass. You know what I mean.”

“I don’t. What should I be careful about?”

“For all you know, he could be using you just for blood.”

She could play my insecurities like an instrument. But after yesterday and this morning, did I still believe Russel only wanted me for my blood? Uniquely tasting blood, according to him. “Thank you for the boost of confidence,” I muttered.

“You should date someone like Uly. Someone of your own class.”

I laughed bitterly. What class did the penniless child of an incarcerated felon belong to? “He dumped me when you got arrested, remember?”

She ignored the jab. “What kind of relationship can you have with someone who literally feeds from you?”

“He drove me here,” I challenged. “He’s waiting outside.”

Her face hardened. “Then he must be serious about you if he stooped so low as to give you a ride to prison.”

I was so happy yesterday and this morning with Russel. He fucking doted on me, and I let myself hope for some kind of future where I could have a man like him care for me. Even love me.

Five minutes with her, and she ruined everything.

“Mom, I don’t want to argue again. I thought you’d want me to be happy.”

Lifting her chin haughtily, she looked around. “Happiness becomes a strange concept when you’re in here. Prison provides you with a unique perspective.”

“Does the unique perspective have to do anything with dating vampires?”

“You’re being rude again.”

Don’t contradict her. Don’t push her.

But I never learned because I let the anger take hold of me. I was so angry it gave me energy.

“Really, Mom? You keep saying these things about how your opinions have changed and how you’ve gained perspective and wisdom, but you never specify what opinions. Where’s the wisdom? About what?”

She glared at me. “You can’t understand.”

“Try me. Tell me the great truths about life that you’ve learned here. I’m listening.”

“You’re not. You want to humiliate me.”

“No, Mom. I’ve never wanted anything like that. And if you really knew me, you’d see that. I’m just hoping that one day, I will notice some sign that you actually care about me. And don’t give me the usual bullshit about wanting what’s best for me. I want you to care about who I am on the inside, about what I feel and what I think. You used to be interested in my grades, my reputation, my style, my classy boyfriend, and the people I hung out with in college, and silly me, I thought that meant you cared. But do you give a shit about me as an actual person?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? I’m your mother.”

“You care whether I take the bus when I go to the beach, but did you ask about my day there? I could tell you about how Russel makes me feel. He ran to the grocery store at seven in the morning so he could make me breakfast before I got up, even though he didn’t even know how to cook eggs. He listens to me, asks me questions, and remembers every word I say. And even though he’s more than thirty years older than me, he respects the hell out of me at work, and not once have I heard him say anything the least bit condescending.”

Squinting, she tilted her head to the side. Her previous irritation vanished, replaced by cold curiosity. “At work? You work with him?”

Fuck.

The couple of seconds I needed to regroup after my blunder was enough for her.

She cackled, but there was no humor in her laugh. “Benedict, sometimes I believe you’re a changeling because I couldn’t possibly have produced a child filled with such pure naivete. An older vampire you work with has been feeding from you for a couple of weeks, and you’re building a picket fence. When he dumps you and Anthony Fowles fires you, come visit me again. Maybe then you’ll appreciate some of your mother’s wisdom.”

No matter how hard I’d tried to prepare, I had always been helpless against her cruelty.

My eyes burned, but I didn’t let the tears fall, not until I was walking down the hall. The impassive faces of the prison guards created an appropriate audience for my humiliation. She was right about one thing—I was naive as fuck. I had hoped to feel a smidgen of my mother’s love, but my mother was Julia Perkins.

The bathroom for visitors smelled of chlorine. I washed my face, but I still looked

like shit. I tried to paste on a smile so Russel wouldn't notice anything, but of course, he saw through me.

As soon as I entered the car, he put his sunglasses aside and opened his arms to hug me over the console. Did he think I was unhappy because my mother was in prison?

"Eddie, sweetheart, I'm so sorry."

I didn't have the strength to fight it. My tears soaked his collar.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked after a few minutes.

I shook my head.

"Okay."

He kissed my forehead and petted my hair.

I wanted him to love me. I needed him to love me.

Was I naive? Weak and pathetic, starved for genuine affection because my mother didn't show me an ounce of it? And now I clung to a creature who saw me as food.

Did a chocolate chip muffin think it was love when I sniffed it before eating it? Since when did inanimate objects carry emotion?

What the hell was I thinking?

I huffed out a broken laugh. Russel cupped my cheek and lifted my face. His warm, copper eyes seemed to be looking into my skull, but I didn't want him to see the ugly stuff in there.

“God, Eddie. How can I help?”

“It’s okay. It’ll pass.”

He kissed below my left eye, then my right, and leaned his forehead against mine.

“Whatever happened in there, you don’t deserve to feel like this.”

I inhaled, my chest expanding.

I didn’t deserve this. No. Even if she were right, I didn’t deserve her scorn and cruelty.

“Thank you.”

Another kiss, this time on my nose. “I’m grateful you let me come with you.”

I kissed him back. I tasted the salt from my own tears, but I didn’t care. What Russel was giving me in the prison parking lot did feel like love, and I basked in it for as long as I could.

When he drove back to the city, he held my hand. He took me back to his place, and I didn’t say a word of protest.

As soon as the door to his apartment closed behind us, I offered him my throat. He bit me, gulped down mouthfuls of my blood, and I soaked up every little sign of affection I got in return.

19

LOVE AND CUPIDITY

RUSSEL

On Sunday afternoon, I had to let Eddie go to his place. He said he wanted to get some work done in preparation for the next week and, of course, change clothes. I hated letting him out of my sight after what happened earlier that day.

The grief and pain I witnessed in him would haunt me.

“Let me drive you.”

“No. I’ll take a cab.” His tone allowed no arguments.

“When can I see you again?”

One corner of his lips lifted. “Tomorrow at work.”

“You know what I mean.”

Eddie slipped on his shoes and straightened, meeting my gaze with seriousness. “I need you to give me space at the office. We shouldn’t see each other outside work during the week. I think it would confuse me, and I need to focus.”

This would be torture, dammit. “I’ll keep my hands and mouth to myself, I swear.

Monday to Friday, I'll be strictly professional."

He gave me a tiny smile. "Thanks."

"Come to my place Friday night? For Saturday, I'll book the hotel I told you about, and we could go see the exhibition."

"Okay."

I searched his features for any sign of excitement or anticipation. I wanted to hear him laugh again, but he looked resigned and drained.

"Eddie, I..."

"It's okay. I'm sorry you had to witness that. But I'm fine now."

He wasn't. I hugged him to me, breathing him in. All too soon, he disentangled himself and moved to the door.

"See you tomorrow."

Would it be unfair to tell him I'd miss him?

* * *

During the Monday team meeting, Eddie sat as far from me as possible. I didn't think he even looked at me once. I was tempted to call after him and make him talk to me, but that was exactly what he had asked me not to do—not to bring up anything at work that had to do with our relationship outside of these walls.

Every day, I worked late and walked home after dark. My apartment felt even emptier

after Eddie had stayed there. In the mornings, I was the first one at the office, leaving my door open so I'd know when he arrived.

I held my mouth shut and acted as detached as I could muster, day after day, even when we were alone in my office with the door closed and blinds down. I hoped Eddie appreciated my effort because I was screaming on the inside.

Despite my inner struggle, everything would have worked out just fine, had it not been for Pierce Black.

On Thursday, we had a late meeting with Helen, Pierce, and the proud father-to-be, Charles Carlsson, in preparation for their first joint public appearance after they'd disclosed their relationship.

"Eddie, how lovely to see you. But what's this? You look tired." Pierce shook Eddie's hand with way too much enthusiasm for a mere business meeting and even patted his shoulder with his other hand. He glanced at me as if Eddie's tiredness was my fault. Which was partially true, but Pierce couldn't know that. "You should take better care of our wonder boy. We need him now more than ever."

Eddie blushed and gestured to the sofas. "Please, take a seat."

Helen sat in the middle while Charlie and Pierce flanked her. Charlie put a hand on her knee, and Pierce cast an arm on the backrest behind her. The presence of his wife and his lover didn't stop Pierce from tracking Eddie's every move as he took a seat opposite. I planted my butt on a chair between Eddie and Pierce. I told myself it had nothing to do with my possessive urges toward Eddie, but that was of course a lie.

Pierce was clearly attracted to Eddie, if not romantically, then at least as a predator to a prey, and my hackles were up. It was unprofessional as hell, and I did my best not to let anything show. It was already dark outside, and we'd be stuck in here until

midnight as it was. I needed to behave and get it over with.

“How do you feel before tomorrow’s show?” Eddie asked.

Helen was the only one who admitted nervousness. Charlie looked his usual cocky self, and Pierce turned serious, oozing apprehension.

Eddie went through their main talking points, and I was supposed to observe their body language and their reactions toward each other. I would then give them feedback.

During the fake interview, Pierce’s simpering and flattery toward Eddie only got worse. Didn’t Helen and Charlie see it? Didn’t they care?

When it was my time to speak, I looked at my notes. I might as well have been doodling Eddie’s name on my notebook. The few broken sentences I jotted down were useless.

Fuck this. I would tell them what I thought. After all, it was highly relevant.

“The goal of your presence on the talk show is to reassure the public about the stability of your relationship. Pierce, you can’t flirt with the interviewer in front of your partners.”

I knew the word choice was poor as soon as I said it. Plus, the blatant annoyance in my tone must have been hard to miss.

Pierce lifted his eyebrow challengingly. “I’m paying attention to the person interviewing us. How’s that a problem?”

“You should want to see Charlie’s reaction to the questions aimed at him, and your

attention should be only on him when he answers. Yet through the sequence about Charlie's role as the biological father, you barely looked at him."

"I'm pretty sure that's not true," Charlie said, his eyebrows knitted together. "He was looking straight into my eyes when I spoke about my filming schedule after the baby is born."

Eddie stepped in. "Everybody has the tendency to gravitate toward the interviewer, but you should be there for each other, first and foremost. When Helen and I were speaking, you both angled your bodies toward her. Even if you glanced at me here and there, your body language showed you were focused on her. That was perfect. It's more difficult for you, Pierce, to show the same toward Charlie when Helen is in your line of sight."

Eddie directed them on how to sit and change positions during the show while I pretended to go through the questions again.

An hour later, Pierce shook my hand at the door. "Don't worry. I don't poach," he murmured under his breath and winked.

Luckily, his words were inaudible to human ears. The bodyguards closed the door to the hotel suite, and I turned to Eddie. Shame weighed on me. He'd been clear about what he needed from me, and I failed him after only a few days.

He had his hands on his hips and held his chin high. "What the hell was that?" he demanded.

"That was me being stupid. I apologize."

Eddie threw his arms in the air. "What is it about Pierce that makes you act like a caveman?"

“We aren’t supposed to talk about these things at work.”

“Oh, so now you bring the rule up?”

I walked up to him and reached out to hug him, but he sidestepped my attempt.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Eddie shook his head and sat on the sofa that the trio had vacated. He let out a heavy sigh.

“What are we even doing?”

I lowered myself to his side carefully, afraid he’d move away from me. But he didn’t. He leaned back and stared at the ceiling.

“Why, Russel?”

I pushed a strand of hair off his forehead and ran my fingers down the side of his face. “Because you mess with my head.”

He turned his face to me, and his eyebrows drew together. “I’m not doing any…”

Pressing a finger on his lips, I made him pause before he jumped to conclusions. “When you ignore me at work, a part of me wants to throw a tantrum. It’s silly, and I’m sorry.”

I traced the contour of his upper lip.

“It isn’t your fault. Nothing ever is. It’s just me being a possessive, insecure idiot. I want more than this, Eddie. It’s only been days, and I want so much more.”

He shook his head, his lips moving under my fingertip.

“Eddie, sweetheart, I’m falling...”

Swiftly, he put a hand over my mouth. “No.”

Panic squeezed my chest. Was he angry? He looked angry.

“No, Russel. Even if what we feel is real... And for all you know, maybe it’s just my blood tasting weird. You can’t say that to me. You can’t do that to me.”

Then he pushed himself up and stomped across the room.

“I’m sorry.” How many times had I said that? I didn’t understand what I’d done, what I should apologize for, but I couldn’t bear him being mad at me.

He pointed a quivering finger at me. “You promised not to hurt me.”

“Am I hurting you, Eddie? How?”

With his hands in fists, he squeezed his eyes shut. “You’re not. I’m not even mad at you.”

“Talk to me, please.”

“Don’t you see how impossible this is? Whenever I’m with you, it’s like I’m floating on clouds. Even you being jealous of Pierce, which should infuriate me, makes me dance on the inside. I can say screw work and screw my future. I can just let myself be swept up in this beautiful dream and forget about everything else. And then in a few months, maybe years if we’re lucky, we wake up from the dream. And I’ll be left with nothing.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but Eddie lifted his palm to stop me.

“This isn’t about my career, even though that’s a part of it.”

“What is it about?”

“I don’t want to depend on you. I don’t want to...” He gestured with his hands back and forth between us. “This...intensity. I crave it so much, but what if I come any closer, and it’ll eat me alive? It’s too much. It terrifies me how much I want you. It fucking terrifies me, Russel.”

With horror, I saw tears well up in his eyes. He was slipping away from me, and I had no idea how to stop it from happening.

“You said it yourself,” he continued, his voice softer. “When shit went down with my mother, my world crumbled around me. I was a clueless, nineteen-year-old kid, and everything I knew, every firm point in my existence, was taken away overnight. I had no parents, no home, nowhere to go, and no coping skills to deal with any of it. I went from the most sheltered, privileged position you could imagine to a complete wreck. People I’d known my whole life, family, friends, distant relatives, my friends from school, they all stopped answering my calls. Well, my grandfather offered for me to come live with him on Long Island if I took care of the gay thing.” He made quotation marks in the air, his mouth in a bitter sneer. “The more things came to the surface about my mother’s dealings, the more of a pariah I became. And I just thought...if I can work my way out of this, if only I can get a student loan, finish school, and get a respectable job, I’ll prove to everyone that I’m not... Ugh!”

Eddie rubbed his hands down his face, wiping the tears away. Watching him cry was like having a hot poker shoved up my ribcage.

“I’ve worked so hard not to be like her.”

“You’re not. You’re nothing like Julia Perkins.” But Eddie didn’t seem to hear me.

“I decided I wouldn’t make mistakes. Not a single one. Never. I would never do a single bad thing. And somehow, all those people who washed their hands of me, they would see that, see what I’d become, and they would regret that they didn’t support me.” He let out a broken laugh. “Like I said, I was clueless. But even after I made it, there’s still this fear in me, and it fucking cripples me. If I make a mistake, a single stupid mistake, I’ll be alone again. Left with nothing.”

“Oh, Eddie...” It was like he grabbed the hot poker and twisted it. I wished I could cry with him so the pain could go somewhere. “We’re all allowed to make mistakes. And you’ve never made any. Ever.”

“Except for this.” He gestured between us again. “This is a colossal mistake.”

That propelled me from the sofa. “No, it’s not. It can’t be.”

I hugged him, and thank heavens, he let me. He laid his head on my shoulder and exhaled, sagging against me.

“I don’t know what to do.” His whisper warmed the skin on my throat, and I held him tighter. Amid the pain I felt for him flickered a spark of happiness. Eddie said that being with me was a beautiful dream. Except we were wide awake, and what we had was real. Unique, rare, and incredible, but real.

“We’ll figure it out,” I told him with conviction, a decision already forming in my head.

He didn’t reply.

I pressed my lips to his forehead and inhaled the scent of his hair. What did I have to

lose? Nothing. Nothing in my life was worth more than the boy in my arms.

“It’s late, and you need to sleep. I know we said Friday, but please come to my place tonight. It’s only a few blocks away.”

“I’ll turn up at the office in the same clothes again.”

“Is that a no-go?”

“It should be,” he grumbled into my shoulder.

“Don’t leave like this, sweetheart. Stay with me.”

To my great relief, Eddie agreed.

I returned the key card at the reception, and we left the hotel together. The streets were quiet on a weekday in the middle of the night. We walked side by side, our shoulders nearly touching.

“Eddie, what happened with your mom on Sunday?”

He moved to the left abruptly, and I feared it was my question that pushed him away. But he only stepped around a beige puddle of something spilled on the concrete and returned to my side.

“She asked about who I was dating,” he said. “I told her a little about you. Nothing too specific, don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried. I’m glad you talk about me.”

“Well, she didn’t like that I was seeing a vampire, and stupidly, I let it slip you were

someone from work. That was when it got bad.”

“How bad?”

“She told me I was naive and would pay for it.”

“You’re not, and you won’t.”

Eddie’s smile was sad. “The worst thing about it is that she says these things with the intention to cause me pain. Whether she’s right or not is irrelevant. But I have only myself to blame. I know she’s like that, and yet I keep trying to be close with her. It’s like I’ve been slapped so many times, but keep coming for more.”

“It’s not your fault. You don’t deserve any of this.”

“You keep saying that.”

“It’s true. You’re amazing, Eddie, and with every day I know you, I’m more in awe of you.”

After that, he was quiet, not agreeing with me but not protesting either. I didn’t push him to tell me more or promise me anything. I wanted to tell him I loved him, but I didn’t have the right. Not yet.

We didn’t have sex, and I didn’t bite him. I was just grateful he let me hold him as he slept in my bed. It took him a long time to fall asleep, but he must have been exhausted because he didn’t stir until the alarm went off.

I closed my eyes for a couple of hours, but most of the night, I spent watching Eddie’s serene face and remembering.

Who had I even been before I caught his skittish gaze at the dinner club on Twenty-third Street?

* * *

In the morning, he acted calm and somber. We had to arrive at the office separately, so I let him go first. He gave me a small smile when we said goodbye at my door, but his eyes remained sad.

It was Friday, and he'd be back later tonight. If Eddie still wanted to come, we were supposed to drive south for our getaway tomorrow.

I knew what I had to do, and now that I'd decided, it felt so easy.

At the Fowles & Tito headquarters, I walked straight past the glass cubicles. I didn't check if Eddie sat in his—because the next time I spoke to him, he wouldn't have to hide anymore.

When I found Anthony Fowles in his office, he looked preoccupied and asked me to meet him after lunch instead. I didn't want to wait, though.

"If you have a few minutes, I'd rather do this now," I said.

He paused, scanning my face. "It's urgent, then?"

"Yes. I need to resign."

His face remained impassive. He sat in his chair and folded his arms over his chest, looking me up and down.

"Reason?"

“I behaved unprofessionally. I have developed powerful romantic feelings toward one of my subordinates, which will sooner or later affect my judgment and leadership performance.”

Anthony sighed. He looked disappointed but not in the least surprised. Had he suspected something? Or, after decades in this business, nothing could surprise him anymore. “I assume we’re talking about Eddie,” he deadpanned.

Not like there were many options. “That’s beside the point.”

“Do you want me to move him?”

“No, Anthony. This is on me. I won’t under any circumstances have Eddie’s career in the least disrupted.”

A few seconds passed, during which he sat still as a statue, watching me. “That’s not for you to decide, is it?”

“It’s not his fault.”

He grabbed a pen, tapped it onto his desk, and twirled it between his fingers. His bushy brows nearly touched each other, he was scowling so darkly. Some frustration finally made it through his stony facade.

“Dammit, Greenwood. Couldn’t you keep it in your pants?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. With my hands on my hips, I shook my head. If he only knew how much I tried to do just that. I’d starved myself for weeks, trying to keep my hands off Eddie, only to cave at the slightest temptation. “Had it been about sex, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, and I think you know that. You know Eddie. You sang his praises when I first started, remember? And you were right about

him. He's brilliant in every aspect."

Anthony grimaced. "I didn't think I was matchmaking."

"Eddie's my absolute priority. Everything else is negotiable, but he has to come out of this unscathed."

Anthony dissected me with his cold gray eyes. He dropped his pen onto the desk with a clatter and rubbed his forehead.

"See, my problem is, I don't want to lose either of you."

"Firing Eddie would be much worse for the team and for the company."

"Is your judgment affected when you say that?"

I smiled. "Possibly. But you yourself told me how talented he is, and you were right. I'm resigning, and he's staying because it's the best solution for everyone involved. You know just as well as I do how sharp Eddie is. In five years, he'll be the best crisis manager in the city. You need to hold on to him."

"And there's no way I could convince you to switch teams." It wasn't a question. He knew where this was headed.

"I've been toying with the idea of freelancing for a while. I'm tired, Anthony. I want weekends and vacations. I might even write a book."

He squinted at me. "Then I can call you in when we need you."

"I'd be happy to help on a project basis."

“Those weekends and vacations... You don’t plan to spend them all with Eddie, do you? Because you’ve just made him irreplaceable.”

“I hope to find a compromise.”

Anthony shook his head, and I was given the gift of one of his very rare smiles.

“I’m not happy about this,” he said, contrary to his expression.

“I’m sorry.” I smiled back.

“Submit the paperwork with HR and announce it to the team when you want. You will finish the ongoing projects, though.”

“Thank you, Anthony.”

He waved me off.

EVERYBODY KNOWS

EDDIE

It's no coincidence that we leave the myth about siren blood for the end of this book. It's unique in that it creates an overlap between human folklore about vampires and the mythology that the vampire community itself perpetuated.

Stories about siren blood existed in ancient Greece, but they can be even older, just never codified. In Greece and Rome before the rise of Christianity, vampires might have lived in near openness, enjoying society's liberal notions about pleasure and sexuality. Even monogamous relationships between the species occurred. According to the myth, some people had blood so rare and irresistible that the vampire who tasted it would forever covet that one human.

The most famous and historically most studied case of a vampire's obsession with one person's blood is the relationship between Alexander the Great and Hephaestion. Hephaestion was originally an officer in Alexander's personal guard. Alexander probably fed from his soldiers occasionally, but this was a well-kept secret since Alexander presented himself as human to his court.

Something must have changed the day he first fed from Hephaestion. He kept the man by his side for the rest of his life and likely drank his blood daily. Historians agree that the two were ardent lovers, and when Hephaestion suddenly died at the age of thirty-two, Alexander was overwhelmed by grief. He ordered a period of

mourning, petitioned for Hephaestion to gain a divine status, and built monuments in his memory.

Alexander survived his lover by a mere eight months. The philosopher and historian Plutarch depicts the symptoms preceding Alexander's early death in Babylon. "The king's skin was gray, his eyes white like snow, and he wouldn't rise from his chair on the palace's balcony. He sat in bright sunlight and refused to drink when his servants begged him. Burning with fever, the king breathed his last breath, blindly gazing into the sunset."

Did Plutarch mean the servants asked Alexander to drink water, or did they try to convince him to feed?

* * *

When Anthony himself entered our cubicle after lunch, I had an eerie feeling of déjà vu .

This is how it ends .

"Eddie, do you have twenty minutes? Come with me, please."

I exchanged a look with Cat. Her eyes were wide, telling me she had no idea what this was about. But I knew, and dread turned my stomach. Swallowing compulsively, I followed Anthony through the hallways until we reached his office.

"Please, close the door and take a seat."

I must have looked bewildered because Anthony folded his arms across his chest, measured me with his cold stare, and said, "I'm not firing you."

I opened my mouth and closed it. Shit . That was good news, right? Why was he looking at me like this, then?

“Russel talked to me this morning. He gave his notice.”

My mind went blank.

“Judging by your face right now, I assume he didn’t speak to you about this beforehand.”

I shook my head on automatic. Russel...gave his notice? This morning?

“He seems to care about you a lot.” Anthony’s expression was so sour that it took me several seconds to understand that what he’d said was a good thing.

Russel gave his notice because he cared about me.

He’d wanted to tell me he was falling in love with me, and I’d been too scared to hear it. But love wasn’t something one could pause at will and return to when the weather cleared.

We were in love, and it meant so much to Russel that he gave up his job for me.

I needed to process this, preferably without my boss dissecting my every move.

“I’m annoyed, Eddie. Exceedingly annoyed. You two were at the core of my new strategy, and now I must rethink everything.” He took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. “But he’s right. Given the choice between the two of you, I should hold on to you.”

“I’m so sorry, Anthony. I...apologize. I didn’t mean to...”

He didn't let me finish. "This means we don't have a team lead for personal brand. I'm facing another recruitment process, and I don't have time for that nonsense again. I would love to just make you the team lead and be done with that, but I can't, can I?"

My eyes almost fell out of my sockets. "Um, I'm not...ready."

"You need a few more years." He grimaced. "And management courses. You do have the brain, but you need to build your confidence. See, my second choice for Russel's position was someone named Hannah Kassem, who also happens to be a vampire. She's a little more experienced than you on paper but hasn't held a leadership position before either. She also has a more cautious approach, and I believe you two could balance each other out. So here's what we're going to do."

He paused and scrolled on his laptop while I waited with my heart in my throat.

"I'll give Miss Kassem a call," he finally said. "I'll ask her if she still wants to join Fowles & Tito, and you two will meet. If you like her, I'll offer her a job as a senior strategist, and you'll work side by side, answering directly to me. You'll share what's now Russel's office. He told me he would be available as a consultant."

Somewhere halfway through Anthony's explanation, my brain restarted and was now running at a hundred miles an hour.

"Thank you for trusting me. I won't let you down."

He flashed me another of his signature scowls. "I know. If you two break up in a few weeks, and this has all been for nothing... But no pressure, huh?"

Was he joking?

Then, Anthony laughed.

I'd barely ever witnessed him laughing, but now he let out a merry chuckle, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "You need to work on your poker face, Eddie. Now go. I've got work to do."

I shot up from the chair and backed toward the door. "Thank you, Anthony."

He grumbled something in reply, his gaze already on his screen.

When I closed the door to Anthony's office, Russel stood there, leaning against the wall.

His hair was messy. He must have run his fingers through it a lot. Upon seeing me, he gave me a shy smile. My stomach swooped, and my heart rate picked up.

"I've just spoken to HR," he said.

"You're crazy."

His grin widened. "About you."

He pushed off the wall, and I took a step toward him. He hugged me and kissed my temple, and I closed my eyes, breathing him in. Did anyone see us? It didn't matter anymore.

"You're completely crazy," I murmured.

"This was the best decision of my life, Eddie. I'm sure of it."

I couldn't speak, but I nodded.

I barely knew how I kept focus for the rest of the day, but somehow, I made it

through two meetings and multiple phone calls with my head on. Cat had been gone during the afternoon, working on something with Frank. When she came into our terrarium just before six, her eyes were big like saucers.

“Greenwood is leaving!” she whispered, miming an explosion.

“I know.”

She cocked her head to the side. “You do? How? What’s going on?”

“Russel gave his notice this morning. It’s all on friendly terms, and he’ll finish our current projects as a consultant. Anthony is bringing in a new person on Monday. Her name is Hannah, and she’ll work as a senior strategist. We’ll be without a team lead for a while.”

“I know that . But why is he leaving? What happened?”

“Personal reasons.”

“You do know why, don’t you?”

“Why would I know more than you?”

She pursed her lips and squinted at me.

As if on cue, Russel poked his head into our glass cubicle. “Eddie? Are you done for the day?”

Cat whirled around and stared at Russel, me, and Russel again. Stupidly, I blushed.

“You two...” She pointed at each of us, her mouth opening and closing.

“Have a great weekend, Cat. See you on Monday!” I rushed past Russel toward the elevators, not looking back. He was only a step behind me, and when the door closed, he put an arm around my shoulders.

I sighed. “By Monday, everyone will know.”

Russel pressed a kiss to my temple. I loved it when he did that. “Does it matter?” he asked.

I glanced up to meet his warm gaze. “Not really. But I feel like I should be mad at you.”

“Are you?”

“No. But I should be.”

“Because I should have talked to you first before I spoke to Anthony.”

“Obviously.”

“What would you have said?”

I huffed, staring at my shoes. The tip of the left one was a little scuffed. “That you shouldn’t do it.”

Russel put a hand on my cheek, lifting my face. He gave me a warm kiss on the corner of my lips. “How do you feel, sweetheart?”

Blinking, I fought against the pressure behind my eyes. “I’m selfish.”

He arched one eyebrow. “Really?”

“Because I’m happy. I’m so fucking relieved and happy.”

He smiled, and my stomach swooped in a way I couldn’t blame on the elevator moving. “That’s all that matters.”

* * *

I lay submerged in bubbles and resting against Russel’s chest, playing with his fingers, when my phone began ringing on the bathroom counter.

“Leave it,” Russel said.

I had no intention of picking up. I burrowed into his embrace, the water churning.

The shrill tone stopped, but started again, bouncing off the tiles.

With a groan, I wiped my hand on a towel and reached for the annoying device.

When I saw Sheri’s name, I swore.

“What?”

“I forgot to tell Sheri I won’t be home.”

I climbed out and wrapped myself in a bathrobe. Leaning on the counter, I called Sheri back. Russel gazed at me from the tub, relaxed and sexy as sin.

“I’ll be right back,” I mouthed, and he smirked.

“Eddie! Where the fuck are you?”

“I’m at Russel’s.”

“Again? If you go on like this, it’ll blow up in your face.”

“Everybody knows.”

“Huh?”

“Russel told Anthony, and Cat saw Russel and me leaving together, so by Monday, it’ll be all over the office.”

“Shiiit! Are you alright?”

I eyed my man in the tub, his powerful arms resting over the edges, his wet hair curling above his forehead, the stubble... “Never better.”

“Explain, for fuck’s sake!” Sheri demanded.

“Russel gave his notice this morning. Anthony wants to keep me. Russel and I are...”
What were we doing? “Dating.”

He frowned at me, and I shrugged.

“I’ll need more words than that,” Sheri said.

“How about dinner at home Sunday night? I’ll bring your favorite Thai. I’ll tell you everything, I swear.”

“You’d better.”

Russel shifted in the tub, bubbles swaying and water sloshing. He leaned his head

back, and the exposed column of his throat just begged for me to kiss it. “I have to go now, but I’ll see you on Sunday.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go have copious amounts of sex with your hot vampire boss. I’m not jealous at all. I guess I will have to take your friend Cat to a dinner club soon.”

“Please, do. She’ll be so excited.”

“On Sunday, you’ll be here with my Panang curry and ready to spill. And I want extra spring rolls.”

“You got it.”

I ended the call, and Russel crooked a finger at me. “Come here.”

After hanging the bathrobe back on the hook, I stepped into the water and lowered myself back into his arms.

“Dating, hm?” he rasped into my ear, then gently bit my earlobe.

“Aren’t we?”

“I don’t know. Sounds so mundane.”

“Mundane can be good. Comforting.”

“Hm.” He grazed my neck with his teeth. “I’m dating the love of my life. Dating the man of my dreams. Dating.” The swipe of his tongue made me shiver even as I lay in warm water. “Nah. We need a better word.”

“Going out?” I teased. “Seeing each other?”

The tips of his fangs poked my neck like little needles, but they didn't pierce my skin. He let out a low purring sound.

"We're not dating ." He said the word with such disgust it made me chuckle.

The tiniest sting on my neck. I moaned as my cock hardened.

"You're mine, Eddie."

Russel wrapped his hand around it and stroked me underwater.

"All of you."

"Yes," I breathed.

His fangs sank into my flesh, piercing the vein on the side of my throat, and searing pleasure engulfed my entire body.

"Love being yours," I managed before the orgasm overwhelmed my senses.

Russel licked the wound, humming. The tingles receded, and I squirmed against Russel's erection nudging my lower back. I knew what I wanted.

"Let me suck you."

He stood, water cascading down his body, and I admired his veiny cock before I wrapped my lips around the head. Closing my eyes, I gave it my all.

Once upon a time, I'd invested significant energy into learning the skill so I could impress my first boyfriend. This time, I didn't need to prove anything to anyone. I didn't need Russel to think I was the god of blowjobs. I just craved hearing his moans

and feeling his pleasure.

As his hard cock slid into my throat, his fingers combing through my wet hair, I understood why the word “dating” annoyed him. I couldn’t even suck him off casually enough. I worshipped his cock, and every drop of precum on the back of my tongue was a gift.

I loved him, and I would only grow to love him more.

He came for me, his cock jerking and his unique cum flooding my mouth. It tasted a little sweet, as if laced with honey, and I gulped it down eagerly. The venom in his cum would make me horny, the effect milder but lasting longer.

Russel stroked my hair. “I thought you were tired,” he murmured.

I kissed his cockhead and spoke with my wet lips against it. “I want to make love for hours. Sleep is overrated.”

I licked his slit, chasing the last traces of his cum. The copper hues in his eyes felt like a reward. He was well fed and sated. I was taking good care of my vampire.

We rinsed our bodies in the shower because, ugh, cummy bathwater. Then Russel threw me over his shoulder and carried me to the bedroom.

He spread me out face down on the bed and proceeded to rim me into oblivion.

It was past midnight when he moved inside me the second time, my body jellified from venom-induced orgasms. Time flowed thickly like syrup as I basked in ecstasy. Could I really have this from now on? Without guilt and repercussions? It seemed unreal, too good to be true.

Russel came with his hand on my underbelly, over the spot where his cock was nestled deep inside me. His breath heated the side of my throat, and he sounded like he struggled to put words together when he spoke.

“Eddie, my sweetheart, how can it be so...? It feels...like it’ll burst out of my chest.”

“What, Russel?”

His arms around me tightened. “I love you.” Some of the tension seemed to leave his body when he said it. “There. That’s better. I love you, Eddie.”

I closed my eyes and let the love he’d given me suffuse my whole being. I wanted to say it back, but my throat got thick. I’d only break down and cry if I tried to speak.

Russel must have known. He didn’t wait with bated breath for my reply. He just held me, kissing and nuzzling my neck.

A little later, after his softened cock slipped out of me, I rolled to face him. He looked at me with infinite understanding and patience. When there was no outside threat looming above us, I could fully appreciate how safe and cherished he made me feel.

So I swallowed against the tightness in my throat and told him.

“I was so scared I’d fall for you.”

“Oh, Eddie...” He caressed my cheek.

“As if I could have done anything to stop it.” He half-smiled, and I traced the curve of his lips with a fingertip. “I love you, too, Russel.”

His name was still on my lips when he hauled me to his body and kissed me.

Crippling fear had been holding me in its sticky claws even before I met him. I'd been terrified to let myself enjoy the simplest things because at any second, with the tiniest misstep, the joy could have been taken away from me.

Russel chased the last of my fears away. It seemed I was finally allowed to be happy, and I would savor every second.

21

MY SIREN

RUSSEL

Just as Eddie's blood replenished my energy, his happy smiles fed my soul. And I had to feed him a good breakfast. This time, I'd prepared better. I even made eggs—it was quite easy when I was paying attention. I was surprised how satisfying it felt to watch Eddie eat something I'd made for him.

"I've been reading this book," Eddie said as I drove us south of the city on Saturday.

"Oh?"

"It's called Common Vampire Myths and the Truth Behind Them . Anthony told us to check it out before he hired you, but I didn't understand why it was important and didn't have the time. It lay on my nightstand, untouched for weeks. But then I met you, and I started reading it."

I checked my blind spot and changed lanes. "I feel a question coming."

"It's about siren blood."

"Ah. What about it?"

"Have you heard of it?" he asked. When I glanced at him, he bit his lip, his cheeks

heating.

“Not until recently,” I replied. “But after the night I fed from you the second time, I asked a friend about the effect you had on me. He mentioned siren blood.”

“Is my blood like that? For you?”

The traffic was chaotic this close to the city, and I had to watch the road, but I could feel his anxious eyes on me. “Maybe. But I decided it doesn’t matter.”

“No?”

“Yes, it was your blood that drew me in at first, but then I got to know you.”

“I didn’t bring this up to ask for reassurance. I’m just curious.”

“So you don’t want me to tell you how I feel about you?”

From the corner of my eye, I could see how he smiled, suddenly a little coy. “Sometimes, you can tell me.”

I took his hand over the console and brought it to my lips. “I love everything about you, Eddie. Your blood is just a bonus. A delicious, tantalizing bonus.”

“I can live with that. I feel a similar way about your venom.”

“Good. Then we can love each other and have wild, all-consuming sex.”

Eddie chuckled. “Not dating.”

“Ugh. No.”

In fact, I hoped I could convince him to move in with me before the summer was over.

When we exited the car and the protection of my tinted windshield, Eddie handed me my sunglasses, which he'd meticulously wiped. At first, I was taken aback by the strange gesture. But then it hit me. It was what couples did, right? Me taking care of him was almost instinctual—I didn't have to think about it. And now he was taking care of me. As if I could be any happier.

At the exhibition, he stood before every painting, studying them in detail and asking questions. I answered the best I could.

We lingered in front of a watercolor of a barley field dotted with bright red poppies when Eddie asked, "Would the scene really look like that to you?"

"Color-wise, yes."

"But if you see colors differently than I do, you must see the painting differently as well. It's nearly impossible for me to find out how things appear to you." He sounded frustrated.

"Let me show you something."

I grabbed his hand and led him to the adjacent room. There were no paintings inside, but one wall was just a floor-to-ceiling window, overlooking the grassy sand dunes on the coast and the ocean in the distance. A white-painted lifeguard tower with a red roof was the only man-made structure in sight. I took a pair of augmented-reality goggles from a nearby stand and handed them to Eddie.

"Have a look."

Frowning, he put the goggles on, adjusting the strap. “What now?”

I found the discreet button on the side and turned the goggles on.

Eddie gasped.

“It’s not entirely like that,” I said, “but I’ve heard it’s close.”

“Oh my God. Everything glows!” He stepped closer to the glass and stared at the view. “This is incredible. But I understand why sunlight can give you headaches.”

Then he turned to me, and his lips parted. I couldn’t see his expression when half of his face was covered by the goggles. He lifted his hand and brushed my cheek with his fingertips.

“Your eyes. It’s like you’re made of rainbows. Is this how you see me?”

I smiled. If he only knew. Or maybe he did?

“Your face is the most beautiful sight on earth,” I said.

Eddie’s lips twitched, and he pointed at the goggles. “Even right now?”

I laughed.

* * *

That evening in the hotel room, I covered his skin with open-mouthed kisses. Last night, we’d made love, needy for reassurance and closeness. Tonight would be different. Desire rolled off Eddie in waves, and I heard it in his sighs even before he asked for what he wanted.

Eddie lay on his stomach and lifted his hips, his lower back and ass forming a beautiful curve.

“Bite me all over. I want to burn for you.” I grazed his ass cheek with my fangs, and he moaned. “Bite me. Want to bleed for you when you fuck me.”

I didn’t hold back. He didn’t want me to.

I left stinging bites all over his ass cheeks and around his waist, on the insides of his thighs and even in his crease. Eddie spread his legs and rocked back and forth, his hard cock brushing the sheets. I licked his skin, closing the wounds, before I bit him again and again.

Then I kissed his hole, my fingers digging into his thighs, and he sounded like he was drowning in ecstasy.

I recalled how he wanted to see the bite on his throat on our first getaway, and something occurred to me. I glanced at the mirror covering the closet door. Eddie would love that. I grabbed him around his torso and hauled him to the foot of the bed so he could see himself in the mirror.

“Russel? Lube?”

“I got it.”

I slathered my cock with it and found Eddie’s hole with my cockhead. His body opened for me, hot and silky-soft flesh yielding. Holding Eddie up with one arm over his chest, I grabbed his hair with my other hand, tilting his head to the side. I sank inside him as I bit the vein on the side of his throat.

Eddie cried out.

I sucked for a heartbeat, then let go. With my mouth parted over the open wound, I glanced into the mirror. His pupils huge, Eddie gazed at me through our reflection.

My fangs dripped with his blood, and the twin wound on his throat oozed two thin trails of red.

His Adam's apple bobbed.

I gave him a measured thrust, then harder. His blood trickled over his collarbone. Liquid rubies. One of the rarest treasures on earth, second only to Eddie's heart.

Heavy-lidded and with his mouth open, Eddie watched himself bleed, and I fucked him. His hard cock bobbed in the air, the tip leaking precum. His hole loved me, tightening around me, and I thought I could see his underbelly move when I pushed deep enough.

I adjusted my grip on him, smearing the blood on his torso, and Eddie let out a guttural groan.

His cock jerked, and his cum splashed through the air. I didn't take my eyes off him as I fucked him through his orgasm. His insides clenched around me, drawing my cum out of me. The scent of his blood burned through me, and I bucked into him to the root. With bloodied hands and mouth, I clutched him to me. My everything .

Moaning wildly, he jutted his ass out, still in the throes of his climax. He stroked his chest and over his nipples until he was covered with red smears.

Tingling all over, I hugged him with his back to my chest. The aftershocks of our pleasure flared and died out.

As I breathed him in, the scent of his blood was so powerful, it scared me.

I depended on this fragile human for everything. He was my love and the source of my life. I needed him for survival.

“Eddie...”

The image in the mirror made my heart flutter in my chest like a hummingbird. All that blood on his pale skin... I needed to lick the bite so it wouldn't scar. I needed to take care of my sweetheart.

“Eddie, let me close the bite.”

But Eddie grabbed my thigh, staying seated on my cock.

“No.”

“It'll leave a scar.”

He nodded, his eyes closing. “Yes.”

I couldn't take my eyes off the picture we made. The vampire and his victim. But Eddie's cheeks were a healthy shade of pink, his chest was rising, and his cock remained half hard. He stroked my forearm where I held him around his waist.

“Let me at least clean you up,” I rasped.

“Okay. But leave the bite.”

I gently laid him on the sheets and proceeded to lick and kiss him all over, carefully avoiding the two red dots at the base of his throat. My conscience niggled at me whenever I glanced at them.

“Eddie, baby, last chance. Or the scar will never disappear.”

He peered at me from underneath his eyelashes.

“That’s the point.”

“Why?”

He licked his lips, his eyes shifting between mine.

“If the myth is true, and I’m your siren, you’ll never feed from anyone else. Maybe you think I don’t notice the fear flash in your face sometimes when you look at me, but I do see it, and I understand. I want you to see the scar and know that I’m yours, to the last drop. I’m here for you. Forever.”

His words stole my breath. I could only stare at his beauty, the bite marring his impeccable skin, and let the love consume me.

His blood drying on my hands, I kissed him. Eddie kissed me back, then burrowed into my embrace with a soft moan.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” I whispered.

“It stings, but I like it.”

Huh. Maybe I didn’t mind seeing the traces of red on our skin and sleeping on stained sheets.

“Eddie, sweetheart, you’re my everything.” My voice still wouldn’t work properly.

“I know. I guess, I’m just that lucky.”

Even when I felt like I might drown in my love for him, Eddie still made me laugh.

22

PEACE AND QUIET

EDDIE

I rested my head against the wall behind me. The elevator buzzed, and I could feel the quiet sound resonating through my skull. The headache was killing me, but soon, I'd be home.

I let myself into our apartment, and Russel came from the living room, wearing nothing but loose yoga pants. He took one look at me and sighed.

"Sweetheart, come here."

He put my laptop bag aside and pulled me closer. I laid my head on his shoulder while he tugged the jacket down my arms and hung it on the coat rack. Then he unbuttoned my shirt and slid his hands underneath. He ran them up my back.

"God, you're tense."

"Uh-huh."

"Who's the culprit?"

"Charles Carlsson Jr."

“What did Charlie do now?”

“An insignificant right-winger joked about Charlie wearing a baby carrier. He said that the greatest action hero of our time had quit his career to become a nanny and that he’d been neutered. Just one of those bitter incel podcasts, you know, which would have had zero reach.”

“Except Charlie took the bait.”

“Yup. He replied. Left a thread of comments, some in all caps.”

“He never learns, does he?”

“Nope. The podcast blew up, and the asshole is rubbing his hands because Charlie’s rants brought him several hundred K new followers in just a few hours.”

“Pierce must be furious.”

“Let’s just say that I hope Charlie’s into spanking.”

Chuckling, Russel picked me up, and I wrapped my legs around his waist as he carried me to the living room.

“So you spent the afternoon cleaning up their messes yet again.”

“We’ll be having a serious meeting on Monday. Pierce wants me to help him convince Charlie to relinquish his social media accounts to us so we can manage his presence.”

“They should have done it months ago. Charlie is hopeless.”

“He’s a good guy, but he sure has a temper.”

Russel tugged my pants off and sat on the sofa with me straddling his lap. He massaged my shoulders, and I kissed the side of his throat. I could feel his half-hard cock against mine, but I wasn't in a hurry. We had all the time in the world. I would have to work on Sunday afternoon, but for now, there was just my vampire and me.

"Do you want to talk it through?" he asked. His fingers dug into my tense muscles, and I felt myself melting in his expert care.

"Nah. Maybe on Sunday after lunch. I'll have to work a bit then. From now until then, I want to pretend none of that concerns me."

"It doesn't. It's their mess, not yours. If they don't listen to your advice, that's their problem."

"That's what Anthony said. He was really chill about it. He even hinted that we have lucrative long-term clients as long as Helen and Pierce are with Charlie because he'll always stir shit."

"There's that."

"We might ask you to come in next week and sit with Charlie for a few hours. He listens to you more than me. But we won't talk about that now. Not until Sunday."

"No work until Sunday."

At least I didn't have to go see Mom this weekend. Since Russel began coming with me, the visits had been easier to navigate. She seemed scared of him and even showed signs of grudging respect toward me when she witnessed his apparent devotion to me. But thinking of her still made me anxious, and right now, I wanted to forget about everything except Russel.

His lips brushed my forehead, and I knew what I needed to let the last of the tension

go.

“Bite me?” I whispered.

I tilted my head to the side, and Russel nuzzled the tendons on my throat. He pressed a lingering kiss to where I knew my scar sat like two diamonds embedded in my skin. Then he licked and teased around it with gentle nips until I was shivering.

“Please.”

He parted his lips over the vein, and my heart picked up with anticipation.

I moaned when his fangs pierced my skin. The adrenaline rush came first, then the wave of arousal, and then...pure joy.

Closing my eyes, I let everything go. Russel sucked the stress out of me and replaced it with desire. He spread his hands on my ass cheeks, and I thought of how I'd get on my knees for him later tonight and have him fuck me through the mattress.

He licked the wound to close it, laid me next to him on the sofa, and freed my cock. Wrapping his lips around my cockhead, he cupped my balls and rolled them in his hands. Like always, with a fresh dose of his venom in my system, I came in seconds. I bucked into his mouth, and Russel swallowed everything. He sucked until I stopped shaking and finished with a soft kiss against my slit.

Then he gave me a cocky grin. “Better?”

“Much better. Want me to suck you?”

I loved doing that. He always looked at me with such adoration; it made me feel all-powerful. But Russel shook his head.

“Later. First, I’ll make dinner.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You will?”

“Uh-huh. Trying a new recipe. I’m curious what you’ll think.”

“You don’t eat food. Why do you keep cooking for me?”

He shrugged. “I like it. It’s fun. And I love watching you eat what I’ve made.”

Russel’s first experiments in the kitchen had been pitiful, but he’d improved vastly over the past few months.

I scraped my fingers through his stubble. “What are you making tonight?”

“Carbonara. I went to the Italian deli, and I bought Guanciale, Parmigiano, and Pecorino Romano. It’s the original recipe from Rome.”

My lips twitched at his impeccable pronunciation. He’d been watching Italian cooking channels online. “Sounds amazing. I’m hungry.”

He grinned like a kid at a fair. “Then c’mon! I have everything chopped and grated, ready to go. It’ll take ten minutes. We can open a bottle of Sangiovese. I got us the real deal, from Tuscany.”

* * *

Pleasantly full and relaxed after the glass of excellent Italian wine, I took a long, hot shower. I used the douche bulb to clean myself up. We hadn’t had time for a proper fuck during the hectic week, and I craved Russel in me. I wanted it rough and thorough.

I didn't bother putting on the robe or underwear. I walked naked straight to the bedroom. Russel waited for me on the bed, a book in his hand. He put it aside as soon as he saw me.

I loved that he still looked at me with the same desire as he did a year ago. He threw the blanket away, and I crawled on my hands and knees toward him. I gave him a biting kiss.

"Fuck me hard, please."

Instead of replying, he let his fangs drop.

His sinister smile sent a wave of raw want through me. I drew in a shuddering breath as I lowered myself to my elbows with my ass in the air. I didn't have to play coy.

Russel gave me a few shallow bites on my ass cheeks. The heat spread through my skin and muscles, making my balls draw up and cock throb. Then he licked up my spine, and two lubed fingers breached my hole. His cock pressed to my thigh.

"You want it hard, huh?"

"Yes."

Another bite, this time on my neck. One more. My skin felt tight on my body, and my erection tingled. Russel rained open-mouthed kisses all over my back and down to my ass. He pulled my ass cheeks apart and bit the soft flesh in my crease. Then he found a vein on the inside of my thigh. When the venom entered a major vein, the aphrodisiac effect grew in pulses. Every heartbeat sent me higher and higher, until I was whimpering with need.

I clung to the pillow, my fingers curled around lumps of crumpled fabric, as I struggled to stay still. He licked over the wound and to my crease again, then kissed

my pucker. Opening his mouth wide, he grazed his fangs over it.

“Please!” I was losing it.

The sting just by my hole drove me wild.

“Please! Fuck me!”

I was going to self-combust.

I let out another whine, but finally, the mattress dipped by my knees. Russel’s cockhead nudged my hole, he shifted behind me, and then came the blissful fullness.

Groaning, I pushed my ass out, meeting his slow thrust. He filled me up in one long slide, stretching my insides and sending sparks of pleasure into my body. I could tell from the angle and weight that he crouched behind me. When he grabbed my hips, I only had a split second to prepare before he rocked out and pushed back in. The rough thrust punched a wail out of me.

“Like this?” he asked, his voice sounding almost evil.

“Oh fuck, yes!”

“Whatever you need, my love.”

He was spectacular. With measured but rapid fucks, he drove in and out of me, all but milking my prostate. His balls slapped into my crease with the force of his thrusts.

The energy built in my core, like a roaring fire in the pit of my stomach, and I mewled like an animal. He fucked me through my orgasm and beyond, and when the pleasure began fading away, he bit my shoulder, feeding the blaze.

The last few thrusts were slow but deep. I could feel him shudder, and his cock jerked deep inside me. With a blissful smile on my lips, I collapsed on the bed. He stayed in me as he lay over me and bucked his hips a few more times.

“That was epic,” I mumbled.

Chuckling, he pulled out and rolled off me. I turned my head to look at him. His eyes were almost always copper as he fed from me in small doses every other day. Now they had the color of the sunset above the ocean.

“I think we need to do this a few more times this weekend,” Russel said. “To manage your stress levels.”

“Uh-huh. Very wise.”

With the last of my strength, I shuffled to press my body to his side. I lay my head on his chest with a sigh.

He hugged me and breathed into my hair. “I’m going to spoil you this weekend, my love.”

“You spoil me all the time,” I murmured, already sleepy.

“You deserve that and more.”

I didn’t have the energy to protest, and probably no reason either. “Love you,” I whispered instead.

“I love you, Eddie. Sleep well, my sweetheart.”

The End