



Midnight at Ravenbrook

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Nothing in this world means more to Knox than saving his baby sister from the mess she's slipped into. Fresh out of prison and staring down her five-figure debt, Knox knows he has to do whatever it takes to keep her safe—and make up for the years he left her alone.

One more job.

One last haul.

Then, they're getting the hell out of dodge and he'll see his sister sober again.

But when he hits an old mansion, Knox gets more than he bargained for. The creatures inside are anything but human, and when the job takes a devastating turn, pale Emmanuel offers Knox everything he's been fighting for.

Knox has always been okay with a little bloodshed, but Emmanuel's demands push him to his limits . . . and offer him an alluring new gift: eternity.

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CHAPTER ONE

KNOX

The house was perfect. It was a three-story Victorian that no one seemed to go into or come out of. The lawn was immaculate, and there was a regular gardener, so it wasn't abandoned, and I could see the expensive tchotchkes sitting on every other mahogany shelf on the whole first floor with my binoculars.

Maybe the family was on vacation, or it was a summer house, or... hell, what did I know about how rich people lived? All I knew was that it was full of expensive stuff, had no security system, and I'd been casing the place for three days and hadn't seen a single person inside it.

It was halfassed, three days, and once upon a time, I'd have kicked my own ass for thinking that was enough.

Just, Pigeon didn't have time for me to do this right. If I didn't pay off her dealer by Saturday, he was threatening to become her pimp, permanently, to force her to pay him back.

It had been his plan all along, of course. Pretty teenage girl, big brother jackass enough to get himself thrown in jail, no protection from the fucking drug pushers who frequented our neighborhood.

I'd thought my own sister too smart for that bullshit, but it turns out there's no such thing. Hell, if anything, maybe the smart ones are more inclined to do goddamned

drugs. I was as smart as a fucking brick, and I'd never been so much as tempted.

So there I was, with another two days to pay off my sister's five-figure debt, before she was dragged into that life forever.

My sister, who not so long ago had a perfect GPA and was talking about scholarships to the best colleges in the country.

So yeah. The Victorian was the answer.

It was the only answer I could see.

It had been helping other, more experienced men from the neighborhood rob houses that had landed us in this mess, but it was also the only way out. I'd fallen in with a bad crowd, because they were the only crowd around, and they'd started taking me along on jobs, teaching me, and giving me a cut when they did their work. Problem was that as low man on the roster, I was also the one who got abandoned to the cops when they showed unexpectedly, and did two years in jail.

Two years during which my sister got hooked on fucking drugs, something it had taken me almost another year back outside to realize, and by then it had been too late. Pigeon owed the scummiest scum of the earth almost twenty thousand dollars, and I had to find a way to get that much money before her whole life was ruined.

Then I had to figure out how to get her sober.

Tempting to chain her to the radiator in our tiny apartment and never let her out again. The outside world was a terrible fucking influence, and it seemed that she was sensitive to it. Poor Pidge. She was trying her best, it had just been a hard damned life, both our parents dying young and leaving her to me while I was still in prison for making the same damned mistake she'd made, just in a different way.

She should have been taken into foster care, but it had been all too easy for her to slip through the cracks. No one noticed and no one cared that she didn't have anybody to take care of her. Ignoring it was easy, when the other option involved bothering to do something.

Well, no one noticed but fucking Mutt, the local pimp and dealer. And he, of course, had been all too willing to "help out."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Then another. Pigeon. I was doing this for my sister. Yes, I'd promised myself when I got out that I'd never turn to robbing houses again, but there was no legal way for a man of my education and social class to make that much money in under a week, other than stealing.

There'd been no movement in the house in days, it was the dark of the moon, after midnight, and there'd be no better time to get to it. I just had to fucking do the job. One last job, and never again.

Because there had to be a way for Pidge and me to climb out of the gutter, didn't there? I had a wild moment of fantasy about just picking up and leaving. Packing our meager bags and running across the country. To another country, even. Anywhere that my sweet little sister didn't have a drug problem and owe more money than I'd ever seen in my life to a man who... well hell, I doubted Mutt had ever seen that much money at once either, except in someone else's hands.

The back door lock was a cinch, and I had it picked in under a minute, not that I was timing myself... much. I'd been damned good at this. A prodigy, one of the other guys had called me. Not that he'd helped me out when I'd been caught.

The door swung open on silent hinges, and I closed it behind me.

A shiver raced down my back, and I gasped for breath. It wasn't... adrenaline,

exactly. I'd always gotten a rush out of doing this with the boys. Now, it just felt wrong. My skin crawled, and I was almost overwhelmed with dread.

Good.

This, I'd never remember with a sort of wistful sadness, wishing I could revisit it later. This was awful, as it truly was, and as it should be. Someday... someday I'd do better. I'd be better. And I'd look back and remember this moment and think, "Thank fuck I'm not there anymore."

I tiptoed my way into the front parlor, where I'd seen tiny porcelain figurines on the shelves through the window. Not that I was planning to take those—that was a ridiculous fucking idea, and I'd like as not break them before I managed to sell them. But there'd been something else in there too. A huge floor safe, the old-fashioned kind that a man could crack into with good ears and a bit of determination. The kind of safe people kept money and jewels and other expensive things inside.

I had this wild fantasy that they'd just have stacks of bills in there, still in bank wrappers, and I'd be able to snatch just enough to pay Pidge's debt, and fucking run. Then we'd pack our bags and leave. I didn't know where we'd go, but anywhere that wasn't the cesspit we'd been born into seemed a good choice. Anywhere Pidge didn't have someone ready and happy to give her drugs till she was in debt again.

I listened to the tumblers in the safe, the way old Artie had taught me, before he'd been caught too, for the last time, and died on the inside. I'd been right, it was an easy one, the tumblers loud and clear as a bell. Less than five minutes, and the thing clicked open. I felt like a fucking champion for about ten seconds.

Then I couldn't think of anything past the idea that some god had heard my prayers, because right there, front and center, were stacks and stacks of fresh bills. It had to be a million dollars sitting there in front of me, one twenty on top of another, all crisp

and green and looking like they'd come straight from the bank.

I could have cried. Fuck, I almost did, covering my mouth with one hand and just staring for a moment.

Blinking a dozen times to get myself under fucking control, I rolled my shoulders back and nodded to myself. This was good. It was perfect. I just had to figure out how much was eighteen grand—maybe a full twenty, since fucking Mutt was bound to pull some “now you owe me interest” bullshit, liar and cheat that he was. And then get the hell out.

A dark voice in my head told me I should take more. That a stack of cash could set Pidge and me up real nice in another city, and it wasn't like I wasn't already stealing their money. What was another few thousand?

But no. I was here to get Pidge out of trouble, not line my pockets. This wasn't about me or money or anything like that. I was not going back to robbing houses for a living. I was taking what I had to have, and getting the hell out.

I barely had the first stack in my hand before I heard a hiss behind me. I thought maybe it was a cat, but then light flared at the side of the room. A fireplace, flipped on as though by magic. It wasn't a gas fireplace, I was sure—it'd had fresh logs sitting behind the grate a moment before, and not the plastic-looking fake kind.

How the hell . . .

I whipped around and found myself looking at a person. Well... maybe a person. It was sort of a woman, dressed to match the house, in a long black gown that covered every inch of her skin except her face and hands, which were paler than paper. But her visage was screwed up in rage, a snarl on her face, and teeth bared. Long, sharp canine teeth that reminded me of those schoolbooks with drawings of sabertooth

tigers. Not that her teeth were bigger than her head, just... big. Too big.

Her eyes, glittering black, were trained on my hands, where I clutched a stack of money. Her money. “How dare you?”

Shit.

“Ma’am, I’m sorry, I just?—”

“Be quiet, ingrate,” she hissed, and that was when I realized the hiss that had drawn my attention had come from her, not a cat at all. She just sounded like a freaking cat. “You dare to come into my home and steal from me? And you’re not even a pretty girl I can feed to sweet Emmanuel. No, a disgusting grown man, who would feed his unnatural urges.”

Almost faster than I could follow with my eyes, she rushed at me, a black satin blur. Unfortunately for her, I’d been in prison. I was used to being jumped on the regular, and I’d learned how to fight damned well during my time inside.

As fast as she was, she was also as light as tissue paper as I shoved her away. She came at me again, fangs flashing in the low light, and my heart leapt. She was trying to fucking bite me, with teeth like tiny daggers. When she came at me again, I shoved harder, and this time, she stumbled back, losing her balance and tumbling... oh fuck. Tumbling right into the fireplace, through the flimsy metal grate and into the flames, which she’d somehow magically started.

I leapt forward, unthinking, to grab her and help her out, but the moment she touched the fire, her dress caught. She screamed like... well, like a person on fucking fire, and thrashed around. For some reason, she didn’t push away from the hearth, just... rolled in it. I tried to come forward, to help her out, but she slashed at me with suddenly clawed fingers, black and glistening and wicked, and I leapt back. I wanted to help.

Hadn't actually wanted to hurt her at all. But she wouldn't let me help her.

Even on fire, she was shrieking something about me being ungodly, a monster from hell, and I... she had teeth like an inch long, had tried to bite me, and I was ungodly? She wasn't wrong; I didn't much believe in any god, but she was a literal nightmare monster.

I tried to take hold of one of her feet and pull her out of the fire, but she kicked out at me with surprising strength, screeching for me to keep my filthy hands off her. By the time I caught my breath from where her kick had knocked it out of me, she'd stopped thrashing.

I stared into the fire for a moment, mouth hanging open and eyes round. She was... dead. A woman was dead and I'd killed her. That wasn't another few years in prison. That was forever. If I believed in a god, that was eternity.

The money. I had to—had to grab the money and go. Get out. Escape. I couldn't have gone through all this for nothing. I had to save Pidge.

I turned back toward the safe, only to realize that there was a man standing next to me. A young man, maybe Pigeon's age, pale as the woman had been, with white-blond hair and... red eyes. Piercing, almost glowing, red eyes.

He was staring at the smoldering, smoking remains of the woman, a dispassionate expression on his face. Then he turned to look at me, shock in his voice, and said, "You killed Mother."

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CHAPTER TWO

EMMANUEL

It was impossible.

Mother couldn't die .

Years on years on years had ticked by, achingly slow, and she'd never so much as shown a wrinkle. Almost two hundred, I thought. I'd been born in eighteen thirty-two, and while Mother had never allowed me to speak to the gardener or his employees, I had caught sight of the cheques Mother had written to them, and the dates?—

Good god, so much time had passed, and my world had only gotten smaller and smaller.

It'd started when I'd gotten sick—tuberculosis—and the dark, quiet room they'd shut me in. The warning that my sinful nature had weakened my body. Then came the leeches, then—then my mother had come to me with pale skin and red eyes, and she'd sat at my bedside and touched my face with her cool fingers and promised to make it all better.

She'd bitten me, cut her wrist over my cracked lips, and I'd woken up like this.

Hungry .

But I hadn't died. I hadn't needed prayers or doctors to use my lungs again.

And still, my world had only gotten smaller. No sunlight, no escape. There was a heavy compulsion on me, whenever Mother said to do anything. I couldn't go outside, couldn't look at the gardener, couldn't?—

Couldn't live. I wanted to think it was because I'd already died, but it was more than that. It was Mother—she wanted to keep me safe, closed away from—from myself. I wasn't to be trusted. It wasn't my fault, that my eyes drifted, that I wanted something other than what I was meant to.

That was the devil whispering in my ear, and she only meant to keep me safe from him. Safe and shut away and so, so alone.

Still, she brought the girls—the prettiest ones she could find, with delicate features and high voices that cried out at the first brush of a fang. I was so hungry, so I killed them. But it didn't make the sin disappear, didn't make the devil go away.

And now, she was dead, and I didn't feel the devil rush in to take her place. Instead, everything was light and clear.

Everything but the smoke billowing up the chimney, thick with the scent of meat and ash.

Vampires burned quickly. What was fire, if not the diluted heat of the sun? In mere minutes, she'd be gone.

I watched her burn away at the intruder's side, my neck stiff, ears pricked for the sound of his movement. Perhaps he'd go for me, tie up loose ends, but his heart was hammering in his chest. He was frozen in terror, weighing his options, no doubt. And I wouldn't let him get the better of me.

Not now that . . .

Holy hell, I was free—free to do anything I liked. I could drain the whole world dry, and who would stop me? Perhaps my appetite wasn't that large, but I could try.

I could?—

“—mean to. She was right there, and she wouldn't let me help her. I swear, it was an accident. I'm just—I needed—my sister's in trouble. You have to understand?—”

He must've been talking for a while, but it was like the cotton had just fallen out of my ears and I could hear for the first time.

My gaze landed once more on the intruder, and my breath caught when he spun my way. Without thinking, I lashed out, my palm stinging with the crack of a slap as I hit him.

“Don't look,” I hissed between my clenched teeth.

Don't look, Emmanuel.

The sharp sting of my skin when my mother pulled me aside, away from the temptation crawling through the streets. The men I admired.

You're not to look at them.

The sin will eat you from the inside out.

But how would I know? I hadn't seen myself since—since before.

“Wait—” I turned from the fire and raised my hand, dragging my fingers across his

cheek. It was rough with stubble, slightly pink from the slap. I could feel his pulse thrumming beneath his skin. So fucking warm. And the way his scent bloomed when his heart started to race was just amazing.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m sorry. Please, do look.”

His jaw clenched, tight beneath the heel of my palm. He swallowed before raising his eyes to meet mine.

My breath hitched, my exhale shook.

Someone, a stranger, was looking at me. Seeing me. It’d been so long since I’d felt this solid, this real.

“What do you see?” I whispered.

The man scowled. “What?”

A spark of annoyance flashed through me, but I wanted something. Even if I wasn’t entirely sure what that was, I’d spent too long wheedling and trying to please someone who’d despised me to lash out at him again. Only honeyed sweetness would get me what I craved. “What do I look like?”

He leaned back, scowling, stretching his neck to get a better look at me. I didn’t like that. The further away he got, the less I felt his warmth. “Well, you’ve got light blond hair, red ass eyes, freaky big teeth. You’re paler than a fucking cave fish.”

“Oh...” None of that was particularly good—just, freaky and pale. My chest ached. What had I expected? The sin would eat me from the inside out, she’d said. And I’d never been right to start. Not manly enough, not?—

“I like your nose,” the stranger blurted out.

I refocused on him, not daring to blink as I stared up at his face. “My nose?”

He nodded. “Very straight. Basically perfect. It’s a nice nose.”

“You think I have a nice nose?” I grinned. It was such a little thing, not romantic, but I would take what I could get.

I was not a rotten husk of a thing. I had a nice nose. Straight. Perfect .

“Uh, yeah.”

He had a nice nose as well. A bit crooked, with a bump like it’d been broken and healed. He was rough looking, all hard lines and masculine features. I wanted to taste his blood, how it’d burst across my tongue as his heart hammered in his chest like a frightened rabbit, almost too fast. “What’s your name?”

“K-Knox?”

“What else do you like about me, Knox?” I stepped closer, bumping against him until our chests touched. When I bent my knee and pressed it forward, it slipped between his legs and he stumbled back.

God, she was really gone. Not there to berate me for my hunger or tell me to get away from him, her voice a compulsion that drove me back even when I struggled against it.

I’d half expected to hear her unholy screeching from beyond. Sin, sin, sin , she’d cry.

But she was gone, and if my hunger was a sin or if it wasn’t, she was no longer in

control of it.

“You’re so pretty,” he stammered, catching himself on a side table. “Handsome, I mean. I just—listen, my sister’s waiting for me, and I—I have to go.”

He shifted to the side, and I leaned over to stop right in front of him, blocking his escape. “I’ll be alone,” I said, frowning. “You can’t go.”

“I have to—” His eyes darted toward the open safe, the money, the door beyond it.

“I said,” I hissed, reaching out to grip his throat, “you can’t go.”

No, he was mine now. I could keep him.

There was no one in this world who could stop me.

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CHAPTER THREE

KNOX

The man ... creature? Vampire. The guy was a vampire. I wasn't some kind of huge reader or anything, but everyone had seen a Dracula movie at some point, hadn't they? Red eyes, pale skin, long fangs... what the hell else could he be?

And I'd killed his mother, another vampire.

Except, he didn't look much like me or Pidge when we were eleven and five and our mom had died. He looked more like I might if Mutt fell off a building to his death. Like he'd just been freed from shackles, and he thought he might be able to fly if he tried hard enough.

Could he? Dracula could, in some of the movies.

The notion that the crazy woman who'd screamed at me for trying to help her had been somehow holding him in check was... well, I didn't know what to do with that. She'd been awful, and I didn't want to imagine my life if she were the boss of me. But the look on his face didn't bode well either.

A guy I was pretty sure drank blood wasn't supposed to look like a kid on Christmas morning, ready to open his presents. Chances were his presents were of the human vein variety.

My human veins, if the way he was looking at me were any indication.

I took a step back, or rather, I tried to take a step back. He didn't let me pull away from him. His intense crimson eyes were trained on my face, memorizing every line of me like it was his fucking job. A minute ago, he hadn't wanted me to look at him, so what was this?

Unnatural urges, the woman had said in the middle of her angry tirade. Unnatural urges.

I knew what an unnatural urge meant, to a certain kind of person. I'd never... that was to say, I'd never had much time to give urges a lot of thought, let alone whether they were natural or not. First Mom had died, and then I'd had to get a job, because Dad, hard as he'd tried, couldn't take care of us. Not between the poor pay he got as a janitor at the factory and the booze he spent most of it on.

Then I'd fallen in with the local guys, and thought I'd found a chance at comfort for the first time in my life, but before I'd had a real chance to start exploring the way I'd felt about my buddy Max, I'd been in prison, and had realized Max wasn't really much of a buddy at all. He couldn't even be bothered to check in on Pidge for me.

Then in prison, most of my thoughts surrounding "urges" had been about avoiding them, and more, avoiding people who had them. I'd learned quick how to incapacitate a guy and escape, and since my cellmate had been as much a nobody who wanted to avoid the others as me, it had worked out in my favor.

But now, here I was, facing the human—or inhuman—personification of my own urges. He was beautiful. Yeah, I'd said handsome, because guys tended to get offended by words like pretty. But he was beautiful. Smooth, perfect skin, high cheekbones, sparkling eyes, even if they were red... he was hardly even human-looking. More like a perfectly drawn comic book character, without a single flaw or pimple or anything.

But I couldn't say any of that to him, because he wasn't looking at me like he wanted my dick. He was looking at me like he wanted to bathe in my blood and leave my body to burn with his mother's.

"I... I've got to take care of my sister. She needs me," I said, and my voice came out as a strangled whisper. "I can't leave her. I can't. She's my responsibility."

That caught his attention, and he cocked his head, considering, eyes narrowed. He blinked slow, like a cat, twice. Then he turned to the open safe, and the money. "You want money for your sister?"

"She... there's a man who, he says she owes him a lot of money, and if we don't pay it, he's gonna make her work it off. She's real smart. She deserves better than this. And it's my fault for ending up in prison anyway, if I hadn't, she?—"

He held up a hand to cut me off, then looked at his own hand, lowering all but one finger, and so very slowly, pressing it to my lips. Just a soft touch, his smooth finger pad to my lips, but it sent a shiver through my whole body, and for some reason, that made him smile.

His fangs weren't as terrifying, suddenly. I didn't know if they'd gotten shorter, or if maybe he was drugging me into not being scared of him. Was that a thing bloodsucking creatures of the night did? How the hell would I know? Vampires were supposed to be fictional.

"There is enough money in the safe to pay off this debt of your sister's?" he asked me, voice lower than before, and it made my pants feel tighter. Like—fuck—like we were lovers, and he was talking dirty to me.

I opened my mouth to answer, but my tongue was too dry, too clumsy to form words, so I just nodded against his finger, still pressed to my lips.

The smile that curled its way onto his lips was... I didn't know if it was heaven or hell, but it promised both, and some small, horrible part of me wanted to see what came of it. What he would do to me, given the chance. That part was completely separate from the loud, screaming part of me that was screeching to push him into the fire with his mother and run as far and as fast as I possibly could. It pounded against the front of my mind chanting escape, escape, escape. Escape while you still can.

“Well then, Knox,” he told me, bringing his free hand to the top of my head, though he had to reach to get to it, since I was a bit taller than him. Then he shoved me down, down, down, onto my knees before him, and for some reason, I didn't even try to stop it from happening. “I am Emmanuel, and if you want the money to pay your sister's debt off, then you can call me master.”

CHAPTER FOUR

EMMANUEL

My mother was gone.

There was a man in my house who fell to his knees like he was meant to be there.

He stared up at me through a dark fan of lashes. Had anyone ever been so beautiful?

The angles of his face were sharp, his skin rough with stubble. His eyes were deep pools, full of a sadness that spoke to my own. My breath hitched.

He was here . I had to be dreaming, except there was no musty smell of centuries-old coffin lining or that haze that accompanied dreams.

There was just a man, his pulse ringing in my ears, drawing me in. I'd been so hungry, so needy, for so long, I hardly knew where to start with him.

“Master?” Knox echoed, his voice rough.

I nodded. “That’s right. You belong to me now.”

I bit the edges of my tongue. What did I do with him? How did I—

Admittedly, all the things I wanted were built on dreams spun around and around in long hours alone, locked in my coffin, safe from the world and all its temptations.

“Please me,” I said, hoping he would—he would know. He would do what I wanted, even if I couldn’t put words to it.

He swallowed hard, the sound of his throat clicking in my ears before he reached for my waist.

I froze, stunned as he ran his hands down to my thighs, up again. The cloth of my trousers tugged against my skin, my cock swelling at just the simple touch. He was close, but it was—it was more than that. A man in front of me, on his knees . I’d imagined this, but I’d never thought I’d live to see my desires realized.

Knox reached for the buttons of my trousers, and I couldn’t breathe. I watched as he undid them one after the other. He tugged the fabric by my knees and they slithered down my legs to pool around my ankles.

When he traced his fingertips up my bare skin, my whole body shook. The touch of another—it wasn’t like my own. A pleasant tingle rushed through me and I bit my tongue hard, sure that if I opened my mouth, nothing would come out but a moan that’d let him know he had the better of me.

He eased my small clothes down, and there was—there was something dark in his eyes when he watched my cock spring free, standing straight out in front of me. I stopped breathing, caught as he leaned in.

His first lick was quick, like a kitten. The next, he laved the flat of his tongue beneath the head.

My hand stretched over the back of his skull, urging him on. “Like that,” I rasped, flexing my hips, thrusting into the hot wet cavern of his mouth.

It was sloppy—my fault, no doubt, as I was overeager and untried, but it was—it was

so good that I would weep for joy if not for infinitely more pleasurable occupations.

My breath rasped, my hands quivered, and I gripped him tight. The crest of a wave broke over me all at once and I clutched him close, shoving against the back of his throat. He gagged, but his throat flexed as I pumped down it.

I'd—

Another person.

I'd come with another person.

I dragged him to his feet at once. He was panting, his lips slick and swollen, his pupils blown wide. And I dove in, thrusting my tongue into his mouth, determined to taste my bitter spend and prove that it was real. This was real.

The taste made me groan.

With my fingers twisted in the front of his shirt, I held him close. “Now, I’ll taste you,” I hissed, shoving him back onto the couch—velvet upholstered with large buttons, well stuffed. I’d always been afraid to sit on the couch, to leave an imprint or a mark on it.

Now, it was mine, and I was going to ruin it.

I tore at his trousers impatiently. Buttons, zippers, all of it was ridiculous and impossible and—fuck, finally. I shimmied them down his hips, and long, bare legs stretched out before me. When he shifted, the muscles of thighs moved beneath his skin, round and well-formed and so perfect.

I didn’t have the patience to strip him bare, but his shoes, I yanked off. His pants

followed. And his shirt, I pushed up to the gratifying sight of his stomach, rising and falling quick with his panted breaths.

“Gorgeous, darling,” I whispered, leaning down to kiss beneath his bellybutton.

His pulse raced, and I could smell his blood just beneath the fragile skin of his inner thigh—so soft, so delicate, it’d hardly take any pressure at all to pierce it.

I dragged my teeth across his thigh, high, so near his balls that they brushed my cheek when he jerked. Then, I slipped my fangs in.

Blood filled my mouth, rushing hot and fast. I groaned, sucking it deep, my hand wrapped around his rigid cock.

I stroked him while I fed, and he squirmed beneath me, alive and wonderful. I’d never felt so full, so excited. Was this what it would’ve been like, to be alive? Even when I had been, I’d never really known.

His racing heart began to slow, and I flinched back. I—I could drain him dry. Wanted to. Wanted to kill him and keep him for myself.

But then he’d be like me. Empty. Dead.

No, no it was better to leave him like this, that I could come back and taste him again. Have him. Feel alive.

I bit the tip of my tongue and smeared a drop of my blood across his puncture wounds. Vampires didn’t scar—our blood healed our bodies, so even when I bit my own arm, desperate and hungry, locked away in the dark, it had never left a mark.

When I looked up at Knox, he was shivering, but his cock in my hand sported a slick

red tip. He still wanted, and a thrill rushed through me to think that he might be trapped in this beside me—it wasn't just me that was wrong and wicked.

I licked a stripe from the base of his dick to the tip, and Knox whined, thrusting toward my mouth, dazed and mindless and oh so pretty.

I paused to suck my fingers into my mouth, spit and blood mixing sticky and wet. When I pulled back, circled the pad of my middle finger around his hole, Knox's breath caught. His eyes fluttered open, and I watched his neck go rigid, his back arch, as I worked my finger inside him.

His groan was deep, guttural. If I could just?—

There. A few strokes, hooking my finger just so, the way I liked when I fucked myself, hidden away in my coffin, terrified Mother would know, and his legs spasmed, flexing tight around my shoulders before spreading wide. He rolled his hips, and his flushed cock bobbed against his lower belly, dribbling against his skin.

My hunger for blood sated, I dove in to take his dick in my mouth. I may have taken too much blood from him, because it wasn't as hard as it'd been, not silk-wrapped steel, but fleshier. Still, he whined, and the bitter taste of precome spread across my tongue.

His hands spasmed on the couch, like he searched for something to cling to and hesitated to reach for me. Something in that ached, but I swallowed the feeling down with the head of his cock, stretching my throat, choking me in a way that felt all too real, despite knowing I didn't have to breathe.

The sound Knox made went from a whimper around gasped breaths to a constant whine. He curled his toes, slipping them beneath my shins. I put another finger beside the first, and the two of them thrusting inside Knox's tight ass made a wet, sucking

noise. His hole softened, so fucking warm around my fingers.

His face screwed up, and with a shout, a bitter flood burst across my tongue, his dick twitching between my lips, the veins plump and soft and fuck , I scarcely remembered the softness of a ripe peach, but that's what I thought of—something decadent and juicy and mine .

I pulled off him, and he gasped, sinking down into the couch, his stomach heaving beneath his shirt, rucked up around his waist. He looked down at me, dazed and dizzy. A little pale.

His heartbeat was hard, but slower than it should've been. Oops.

I touched his throat, felt the pulse beneath my fingers. He'd—he'd recover. I just had to give him time.

“What a good pet you've been,” I whispered, stroking the corner of his jaw. Gently, I tipped him back onto the couch. He made a strangled little sound, flinching as if he expected harm to follow, but when he was tucked onto his side and I pulled a blanket over him, he sighed and his eyes slipped shut. “Rest now, love.”

I bit my thumb and smeared the crimson blood across his lips, beneath the bottom one, against his tongue. He'd be mine. I'd have him. Keep him. Use him.

For the first damn time, I could have what I wanted. And him? I'd see he had what he wanted too.

His sister's debts paid. Hell, they could have everything in the safe, for all I cared. What was money to me?

Nothing, next to freedom.

CHAPTER FIVE

KNOX

I woke alone, still laying on the couch, wearing nothing but my shirt and socks, a blanket tugged over me.

So... had the whole disaster been some sort of bizarre fever dream from an illness I hadn't realized I had? A hallucination brought on by not enough food and sleep for weeks on end?

The single piece of paper sitting on my chest said otherwise. It felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, like I couldn't move from my spot unless I picked it up and read it first. What the hell was that?

Without another choice, and coming up short of breath the longer I resisted reading the damned thing, I picked it up. The handwriting was looping and perfect, old fashioned, like someone had spent years making it just so, almost more like art than writing.

Knox darling,

As I told you last night, take the money you need from the safe and handle the matter of your sister, then return. I expect you to be inside the house tonight when I rise. Do not force me to come looking for you.

If you're a good boy, your sister can have whatever she needs and wants, but our deal

stands.

You are mine.

Emmanuel

What the actual fuck.

The whole thing had happened. Vampires. Vampires existed, and I'd accidentally killed one. And the other had... pushed me to suck his cock, and then returned the favor, right there on the couch. It left me in sort of the same situation Mutt was trying to put Pidge in, sucking cock to repay a debt, but somehow, it at least felt less awful when it was me. Also, it turned out I kind of liked sucking cock—at least, that one.

I sat up, too fast, and went dizzy.

Blood. He'd sucked my blood. So much blood.

I'd been convinced he was going to kill me instead of giving me a fucking mind-blowing orgasm like he had, but then he'd stopped, and gone back to my cock while I had still been drifting on the strangely pleasant haze of blood loss.

Was that what it felt like, when Pigeon did whatever crap Mutt had hooked her on? If so, no wonder she'd gotten addicted.

Not that I'd ever blamed her. We'd had too shitty a childhood for me to begrudge her any ounce of joy she could squeeze out of life. Life was fucking hard.

Just, I thought it was worth it to try to survive, and being a drug addict was no way to do that. I couldn't blame Pidge for being on that edge of giving up, though. I had my moments sometimes, late at night, wondering if there really was any chance things

would get better, or if all life was a downward spiral from birth to death getting worse and worse as you went, like a nightmare rollercoaster that crashed at the end of the ride. Maybe all the happy rich people on television and in magazines were fictional.

Except vampires were real, so maybe nothing was fictional.

Maybe I didn't know a fucking thing. But... take the money you need from the safe .

Take it. Just like that, he'd ordered me to take the money. Something unlocked in my chest at the very thought, like I was absolved of wrongdoing. Like there was no chance I'd go back to prison.

You know, other than for accidentally killing his mother.

I looked to the fireplace, and there wasn't a single sign that she'd ever been there. Not a scrap of satin or an ash astray. Well, no, there was a little dent in the mesh grate she'd knocked out of place when she'd fallen, and I didn't think that had been there before, but that was it. A tiny indentation to indicate the death of a whole person.

A person I'd killed.

Or had I? I mean, if she'd been a vampire, she'd already been dead, hadn't she?

No, that was justification. I wanted it to be okay, so I was telling myself that her life didn't matter. Even if she'd been terrible, I hadn't had a right to kill her.

On the other hand, she'd probably intended to kill me, and she didn't have that right either. If it came down to me or her, I wasn't sorry I'd made that decision.

I thought back to Emmanuel and his reaction to her death. He hadn't been an emotionless automaton, but he hadn't seemed to muster any emotion for his mother's

death. Not sorry or sad or angry, he'd just... stared. And then had sex with me right there in the room with her body.

Yeah, killing her didn't make me a monster, I didn't think.

On the other hand, I didn't much want to come back after I took care of Pidge. I didn't ever want to see this house again.

Searing pain ripped through my guts, and I tumbled off the couch and onto the patterned rug, clutching my belly.

Do not force me to come looking for you.

It was all I could think. Emmanuel had told me to return. Return. It hadn't been a request. I was to return. I had to do as my... my master said.

Fuck.

What was this?

I was struck with the sudden image of the scrawny little weirdo who ate flies in the Dracula movie. Renny or something. The vampire told him what to do, and he giggled like a lunatic and did it.

Jesus, was that me?

It was. That was me. The vampire had me in his thrall, or whatever they called it.

Still lying on the rug, I thudded my forehead against the floor repeatedly, somehow dissatisfied when the rug cushioned it and it didn't hurt at all. Nightmare rollercoaster, I reminded myself. Nothing would ever get better, only worse and

worse, faster and scarier and more vomit-inducing, until I reached the end and hit the wall head-on, maybe literally.

I was the creep in Dracula, and sooner or later, I'd end up eating flies. Tying up pretty girls and leaving them to be ravished and devoured by Emmanuel, then getting rid of their bodies.

Instantly, a dozen places in the city I could dump a body came to mind, because of course they did. I was that guy. Not that I'd ever killed a person before last night, but hell, I'd been in prison. How big a leap was it from house robber to killer?

Not as big as I'd believed, apparently.

Almost mechanically, I dragged myself to my feet and went to the safe.

Take the money you need from the safe and handle the matter of your sister, he'd said in the letter. Handle the matter. What exactly did it mean? Pay off her debts? Send her to Hawaii? Go with her and never ever—okay, no, not that. I gasped, clutching my aching belly.

Rehab. I could send her to rehab. Not so much as a twinge at that. I could do anything for Pidge, it seemed, so long as I didn't intend to slip out and never return.

I took the money for Mutt, then more. I'd get her squared away. Pay off Mutt and tell him to stay the fuck away from my sister from now on, or... fucking tempting to tell him "or else my new boss will literally eat you, because that's how he fucking rolls." Paint Emmanuel like some kind of Hannibal Lecter guy, and it wasn't as far off as I might have liked.

My thigh didn't hurt at all where he'd bitten me, completely healed over, but I hadn't forgotten how it felt. To have him drawing off my lifeblood, and wonder if he was

going to kill me.

A shiver shot through me, and sick enough, my cock hardened at the memory.

Jesus, I was one screwed up son of a bitch. Probably just as well, since I was also screwed.

CHAPTER SIX

EMMANUEL

I was flat on my back, staring up at the upholstered lid of my coffin, waiting for Mother to come and open it and let me out.

Only she was gone, and the coffin wasn't locked from the outside, and that knowledge had roiled through my belly all day long. I wasn't safe. I might escape, land in trouble, burn in?—

No. No. None of that. I didn't have to hold myself to her delusions anymore.

I could open my coffin on my own, even as unease twisted through me to be so exposed.

The hinges creaked as I eased it open, and I sat up, staring around my dark room. It was a small, simple, room, unlit candelabras on the side table that—that Mother usually lit before she let me out at night.

This wasn't one of the rooms meant for living . There was no farce of life, no furniture, no comfort. It was merely where I slept, where I spent the long daylight hours dead to the world.

As I sat there, I pricked my ears for the sound of Knox downstairs. Vampire hearing was superior to what I remembered from being human, but it was still not good enough to tell?—

Had my compulsion worked? Was he down there now, or was I alone in this place?

A shiver ran through me and I crawled out of my coffin.

For the first time, perhaps ever, there was a reason to go through the motions of preparing for the night. Mother had not let me leave the house unchaperoned, and she disliked when I preened and primped and tried to polish my appearance. She thought I was trying to catch roving eyes, behaving not as a man, but like a foolish girl who knew nothing of the ways of the world. She'd abhorred it, and in time, I'd simply stopped trying.

I'd let my hair hang loose, uncombed, let my clothes wrinkle, walked around the house forlorn and barefoot, dragging like a ghost between rooms that held no interest for me.

But now, I had company. He had to return—it was the gift of the blood, I told myself, the same compulsion that had allowed my mother to dictate my every move for centuries, and I would not be alone. I had every reason in the world now to comb my hair.

So I did. Assiduously.

Perhaps I couldn't see myself in a mirror, but I could still try to look presentable for my guest.

I wore my best waistcoat and though my trousers were threadbare at the knees, I hid their frayed cuffs in knee-high boots and—yes, good enough. Had to be. He would find me impressive and romantic and alluring and I would not be alone.

I wouldn't be.

As I made my way downstairs, I heard the quick rapping of his heel against the floor and smiled. He was there ! He'd returned.

Mine, mine, mine , I wanted to sing to the rafters.

But he was there, and I meant to impress him. I didn't trust my singing voice to do that.

At the door to the drawing room, I cleared my throat, and Knox sprang off the couch at once.

"What did you do to me?" he demanded the moment he saw me, fists clenched at his sides.

My gaze dropped to them briefly, but I was faster than he was. Stronger, most likely, given how recently I'd fed and how recently he'd fed me.

He posed no real threat, so I met his eye once more and smiled. "I gave you my blood, darling. It healed you, and it made you my own."

"I can't—you're fucking controlling me," he hissed.

I scoffed, leaning against the back of a chair, my fingers digging hard into the cushion of it. "Did I not give you exactly what you came for?"

Knox's mouth snapped shut, his jaw flexing in his anger.

"Tell me," I pressed, "is your sister's debt settled?"

"Yes," he sneered between his teeth.

“And you’ve taken care of her?”

He swallowed hard, looked away, but in the end, he couldn’t resist answering me, even as he pressed his fist against his belly. I knew that feeling all too well, like snakes in your gut every time you tried to exert your own will.

“She’s in rehab.”

“Rehab?”

“Rehabilitation.”

I frowned. “I’m not familiar.”

“For drugs. She was on drugs.”

“Like opium?”

He let out a short laugh. “Sure.”

“And they didn’t . . . help her?”

“Definitely not.”

“But the money did.”

He growled. “That is not the point. You—” He looked at the fireplace, haunted by something I couldn’t see.

“It’s why you weren’t upset when I killed her,” he said quietly.

I flinched, all that fresh blood in my veins turning to ice. “What?”

“Your mother was controlling you, wasn’t she?” He rounded on me, eyes wide, tilted grin triumphant. “That’s why you weren’t upset? And now, it’s what you’re doing to me.”

The wood beneath the cushion on the back of the chair groaned and cracked under my hand. “I am not!”

It broke, and I pushed the whole chair aside, toppling it over and stalking into the room as Knox scrambled back. His shoulders hit the wall beside the fireplace and I shoved myself against him.

“It is not the same,” I sneered, pushing up on the balls of my feet so I was only inches from his face.

Knox, despite fleeing from me a moment before, stuck out his sharp chin. He was taller than me, and had to peer down his nose to keep my eye. “Then why are you so upset right now?”

I—I couldn’t say. But I was , and it took every ounce of my self-control not to shove my hand through his chest and grab his heart just to show him how it felt when someone else had your very life in their hands.

But he was... he was handsome and warm, and he’d come back, and he was mine . There was no one else. Without him, I’d be alone. Couldn’t hurt him. Couldn’t?—

I snarled, pushing a hand against his chest to keep him pinned to the wall.

“It is not the same,” I whispered, deadly quiet, “because you may keep your days, your life, your sister, all the money you want, but I will have your nights.”

When I shoved back from him, he grunted at the pressure and rubbed his stomach again. I turned away, toward the empty fireplace, a headache pulsing behind my eyes.

“Upstairs,” I growled. “The master suite. At the end of the hall. Draw yourself a bath, clean up, then get in bed.” If he was not happy about this, fine. How many years had I spent unhappy with my lot? I’d never even had the leisure to really look at a man.

I shook myself. Time enough tonight for that, at least. “Naked. I’d inspect every inch of my new plaything.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

KNOX

Maybe it was the years in prison. Maybe it was the fact that I'd lived my whole life on someone else's leash, be it hunger, or the gang, or the state correctional facility, but being ordered around wasn't new to me. It wasn't all that uncomfortable.

Fuck, if anything, it was the opposite. If someone else was telling me just what to do, I knew I wasn't doing the wrong thing.

There was just something wrong with this.

Not Emmanuel. Well, no, there was a lot wrong with him. But there was a lot wrong with me too, and I didn't judge for that. The world was a fucked up place, and we were all built in its image. But there was something else about him, not just being a vampire or taking away my choices or any of the obvious stuff that was making my stomach squirm.

Something about how much he hated his mother, and now seemed to be taking her path. I'd disliked my father for a lot of my childhood because of the drinking, so I'd chosen not to drink. Why was he doing the opposite, when he'd clearly not even loved his mother enough to be sorry she was dead?

How could I convince him he was doing it wrong, when he had control of me? If all I had were my wits, we were both pretty fucked, and I'd already made him angry.

And dammit, I wasn't sorry. Because I was fine following orders. Hell, the biggest part of me was even fine following his orders, this near stranger, even though I was still half convinced he'd almost killed me last night. He hadn't killed me in the end, and he had given me what I'd needed to take care of Pidge. I'd been able to shove that money in Mutt's face and drag her off to rehab in the next moment so he couldn't get his hooks back into her. Then I'd packed up everything I cared about in the apartment, and left. Told the landlord neither Pidge or me were ever coming back.

Left Mutt staring after me in shock as I'd walked away.

Ass hadn't even thought quick enough to insist that there had been some unpaid interest on Pidge's debt that was also now my responsibility.

I'd have said he hadn't expected me to walk away from my whole life, but who expected that? Not even me, the night before. And then I'd wandered the streets for hours, thinking about not going back to the Victorian, and feeling sick every time I tried to consider it.

More, I'd thought about Emmanuel. Beautiful, quick, sharp Emmanuel. Angry Emmanuel.

Sad Emmanuel.

I didn't know him at all. Barely knew his name, let alone more, but there was something about him that wouldn't let me go, and I didn't think it was just the way he'd pressed me into service. I'd felt it before I fell asleep. Some connection. Shared misery and loneliness.

Loneliness, so awful I was thinking about just letting go and sinking into letting him order me around. It didn't sound so bad, all things considered. He was pretty and strong and had changed my life. Had fixed a situation I couldn't have hoped to. As

much as I'd been determined to try, it hadn't been likely I would have been able to steal enough to pay off eighteen grand without him and his money.

I tossed my clothes around the room as I did as he'd ordered. Jacket on the corner of the bed, one glove in front of the fireplace and the other on a small table, shirt on the floor in front of a chair. Just making it as clear as possible that I'd been an asshole because he'd left me the opening to be.

Then, frankly, I took the most luxurious bath I'd ever taken in my life. His bathtub was big enough to fit two whole people, side by side, and the water came out piping hot, filling the whole thing to the brim. Our apartment had always had about five minutes of warm-ish shower water, but we hadn't even had a bathtub. I'd always thought of porcelain tubs as something only rich people on TV had.

The warm, wet heat seemed to suck the tension right out of me, leaving me floppy and loose-limbed, and I was just starting to worry that I was going to be useless when I got out, when Emmanuel marched into the bathroom.

He looked determined when he came in, but then paused and cocked his head. "Hot water," he said, low and a little thoughtful.

Did he take cold baths because he was dead and didn't need warmth? That sounded dumb. Warm was pleasant, no matter who you were, wasn't it? It was just, like, human instinct. And whatever Emmanuel was, he'd been born as human as me, unless all the vampire myths were a lie.

Part of me, the part that was still angry about being cast as that little fly-eating dude in Dracula, wanted to tell him to get the fuck out while I was taking a bath, because I was still my own man and no one owned me. Another part remembered the night before, and how he'd returned the favor and sucked my cock, and how he'd been so... determined. So focused.

I wondered if he'd never sucked a cock before.

Somehow, that whole line of thinking made me want to hug him and feed him soup. Clearly, his mom had been fucking nuts, with her screeching about “unnatural urges.” Okay, maybe the screeching had mostly been the fire, but it wasn't like she'd been rational before that.

“Hot water,” I agreed. “Want to try it out?”

He blinked at me, stunned. “You're angry with me. Because... because of the thrall. You hate me.”

I rolled my eyes. “I'm mad at you because you took away my choice. That doesn't mean I hate you. It means you did something bad without my permission. Sometimes people do that, even people I like. I'm mad at my sister because she started doing drugs. Still love her. Still gonna take care of her. Doing something bad doesn't mean you're a bad person. It means you didn't know what else to do, so you did what you thought you needed to.”

That seemed to catch him off guard. He crossed his arms over his chest and bit his lip, glancing away from me, down at the floor. His voice was low and a little petulant when he mumbled, “I'm not like her.”

“When I was a teenager, I got drunk once. Fourteen years old, and no one on the block was surprised. They just sighed and rolled their eyes and told me to go sleep it off. Even though it's illegal for a kid that age to drink and I'd never done it before, and they should have been outraged.” I leaned on the side of the tub, laying my arm on the porcelain and then my head on my own arm. “You know why they acted like it was no surprise?”

He looked up at me, met my eye for a second, then looked away, shaking his head.

“Because my father drank. He drank himself to death a few years ago. So when I did the thing I’d grown up watching him do, everyone thought ‘yup, that’s how Knox is gonna spend the rest of his life,’ and they never thought about it again.”

“I’m not?—”

“And then I never drank again,” I added, interrupting him and bringing him up short. “Because I saw it. I realized they were right. And I didn’t ever want to be like him, so I stopped. Sometimes we do things like that. We make mistakes, because it’s all we were taught to do. Like Pidge doing drugs to escape our shitty life. Like me getting drunk. Like you taking control of me. Doesn’t mean it’s who you have to be.”

I let myself settle better into the tub, motioning to the water. “Instead, you could come join me in here. We could talk. Maybe see how things fit together. See if we like hanging out without all this control shit. You’re hot. You saved my ass. I owe you. I’d like to get to know you better. Why don’t we give it a shot?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

EMMANUEL

What Knox was offering was impossible.

He couldn't want to get to know me better—not in the way that I wanted him to. Not if anything Mother had said and done these past centuries had been real or true.

Despite knowing that she was... misguided, it was still difficult to reckon with losing my whole life because she'd been wrong. It was almost easier, assuming that she was right and all I'd been through wasn't for nothing. Somehow, it had to be my fault or failing, not just something awful that'd happened for no reason.

Still, Knox sat in the tub, looking up at me with an open expression, like he really meant it.

If he did? Well, there was nothing I had that wasn't worth risking for a chance to keep him for real.

With a shaky inhale, I nodded and shed my velvet waistcoat, my shirtsleeves, my boots and trousers and, naked, I turned to him and saw him staring. The weight of his eyes brought a creeping heat up from my chest, but it was almost pleasant, as much as I wanted to squirm.

I—I wasn't deluded enough to think that he was looking at me with lust or anything like it, but?—

“I’m actually quite cold to the touch,” I said, stepping over the side of the tub and sinking down into the warm water. “What did you mean, that I’m hot?”

“Sexy?” Knox said, shifting to move his feet out of the way as I sat across from him.

I blinked. Not a word I was familiar with, but I got the general feeling of it.

He laughed and settled on, “Attractive. You’re nice to look at.”

I stared at him, taking in every masculine feature, every hard line of his face, the broadness of his shoulders. Mother would’ve been quite pleased to have a son like him.

“Really?”

He nodded. “Really. The red eyes are a little creepy, and the fangs brought me up short at first, but—yeah, Emmanuel. You’re gorgeous. Don’t you... know?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t seen my reflection since I turned. I... used to like how I looked, I think? I hope it’s not much changed.” All those hours spent trying to look presentable, only to realize I wasn’t the right sort of presentable. Still, I’d liked the way my hair fell, how my lips looked when I bit them and they flushed.

I glanced at Knox from beneath my lashes. “You’re also rather—rather hot.”

When I smiled at him, his laugh turned loud, filling the room and—god, had I ever felt so alive as I did surrounded by the sound of his laughter?

Surely this was some game, some trick to put me on my back foot. I curled up at the far end of the tub, and Knox watched me with a strange, lopsided smile on his face.

“Gonna sit all the way over there?”

I nodded, wrapping my arms around my bent legs.

“That’s fine,” he said, sinking back into the water with his arms draped over either side. “Wanna give me your foot though?”

What the hell did he want with my foot?

Still, I—I could. It wouldn’t kill me to stretch my leg out.

The water sloshed against the side of the tub as I moved, and Knox reached out to cradle my heel, pulling it into his lap. A moment later, his thumbs dragged over the arch of my foot. My breath caught and I shivered.

“Nice?”

I nodded, staring. What was this?

Watching him offered no real explanation. For a minute or so, he just set to the task of massaging my foot. Then, he asked, “How’d you become a vampire?”

I shrugged, entranced by the way his arms moved so subtly as he worked magic under water. “I was sick, and my mother—for a woman of faith, she was always so afraid of dying. Perhaps she was just afraid that, were I to die so young, so... sinful, I would be damned. She always said she was protecting me.”

Knox grimaced, but the gentle sweep of his thumb up and down the sole of my foot barely stuttered.

“She found a vampire to turn her, but when it was time, she went prepared. Staked

him before he had the chance to exert his control?—”

“So I could kill you?”

A cold, slick feeling crawled through me when he asked that, but he wasn’t looking at me with malice in his eyes. Only curiosity.

I bit my lip. “Not if I tell you not to.”

“Are you telling me not to?”

With a rough swallow, I sucked in my cheeks and shook my head. The sick truth was, I’d rather he kill me than leave me alone in this horrible house with my horrible life stretching out before me forever.

For some reason, that made him frown. I’d half expected to end up under water, his knees bearing down on my chest while he tried to pry my head off in the bath. He might not even realize I didn’t need to breathe to survive.

But all he did was reach out. “Other foot?”

I lifted it and let him draw my ankle into his lap.

My brow pinched with curiosity, I stared down at the spot where his hands moved beneath the water. His touch was steady, attentive. I swallowed roughly as I watched the water ripple.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

“Do you want me to stop?”

I shook my head, sinking down deeper into the water, so my light golden hair floated out around my shoulders and I could press my foot so deep into the water that my toes curled against his belly.

His smile tilted again. I liked that expression, a little wry but patient instead of angry.

“It seemed like you could use some comfort,” he admitted. “Do you like it?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Good. Nothing better than a foot rub.”

I blew a breath out between my teeth. I could think of one or two things that were better, but this was pretty nice.

“Was last night your first time being with a man?”

Sputtering, I jerked upright and gripped the edge of the tub. “Of course! I’m not?—”

Knox held tight to my foot, and it kept me from pulling away from him. “There’s nothing wrong with being gay, Emmanuel.”

I scoffed, turning into my shoulder.

So he tugged on my foot and I slipped down a few inches. “I’m serious,” he insisted. “Sexuality doesn’t make you a good person or a bad one. Your mother was wrong about that.”

I glanced at him sidelong. “You’re not bothered?”

Knox shook his head. “I’m not bothered.”

For another minute, he just rubbed my foot. When he was done, he set my heels on top of his thighs and pressed the tops of my feet so the balls of them pressed against his stomach. I could feel the deep breath he took before his next question.

“Why’d you make me your thrall?”

I wanted to jerk away, flee, especially when he met my eye directly, but he held my feet and—and yes , I was a vampire. Obviously I could’ve torn away from him if I’d really wanted to, but there was something in the way he was watching me that made me wonder if this really wasn’t all some ploy to turn the situation to his advantage.

As if he could.

So I swallowed, my mouth already dry, and admitted, “I don’t want to be alone.”

We stared at each other, and he didn’t say anything.

And I was a damned fool, so I rushed to fill the silence. “I’ve never been on my own. I don’t know how. What to do. How to stay safe or?—”

I sucked in my cheeks, thinking of how pitifully I’d rested, knowing that my coffin wasn’t even locked. I’d been so exposed, fear whispering through my head even as I tried to sleep.

“So why let me take your money? You have enough to get anything you need.”

I grimaced. “It’s not mine . Or, I guess it is, now, but what the hell would I do with it? Money won’t fix what I am .”

Knox’s scowl turned heavy. “And that’s it? You’re just afraid to be alone?”

I ducked my head. The steam rising off the water felt stickier all the sudden, like it was clinging to my skin. “Well, no. You—you freed me. And you’re—” I glanced up at him, and immediately back down at the water, at my hands twisting in front of me. “I want you. Not just your blood, but... everything. Company. And the care you showed your sister, the risk you took—it’s kind. I thought, if I gave you what you wanted, you might tolerate?—”

“Tolerate?”

“My . . . attention. Or my—my touch.”

Knox let me go and I shrank back, sure I’d encroached and he was going to tell me that nothing I could give him would make that tolerable.

Instead, he moved to his knees and leaned over me. “Do you want to touch me now?”

His skin was pink from the warm water. Mother had always demanded cold—that warm water stoked my unnatural urges . And, well, yes. The way his skin had darkened did do something for those.

I took a shaky breath, drawing the scent of his clean skin deep into my lungs. “Yes.”

“Then do it,” Knox said, picking up one of my hands and easing it to his slick chest.

I spread my fingers wide and looked up at him. Really? I hadn’t ordered him to do this, hadn’t even asked him. But when I met his eye, his lopsided smile was back. He nodded and I?—

I let myself feel his skin, the pulse of his heart beneath his ribs, the body I wanted so desperately.

And something about getting to—being allowed to have this, made my breath hitch and my eyes sting and?—

“Please,” I whispered. “Please don’t leave me.”

CHAPTER NINE

KNOX

Our neighborhood back in the city had always had a feral cat problem. I'd never thought of it as a problem, so much, because I liked feral cats.

Thing was, when you approached one, it didn't matter if you had the best or worst of intentions, the cat brought its own baggage to that interaction. If lots of humans had kicked it in the past, it wouldn't be inclined to purr and let you pet it. It'd hiss and take a swipe at you.

Emmanuel was a cat who'd been kicked over and over, for fuck only knew how long. He was a vampire, so he could be ancient for all I knew. Hell, he might not even know how old he was, with how controlling he said his mother had been.

So when I'd been there, the next best target when his mother was gone, he'd hissed and scratched me. Well, sort of. Hard to really compare an exchange of blowjobs with being scratched.

The forcing me to do his bidding, on the other hand...

Well, I didn't think we were entirely past that, but like I said, feral cats. You could feed one of those cats for months and years, and slowly, they'd learn to trust you. They'd come in close and let you pet them. But every once in a while, they'd turn and scratch you, because they were still a feral cat, whether you were friends or not.

So either you had to not be friends, or you had to accept that sometimes, you were gonna get scratched.

Me, I'd always been okay getting scratched sometimes. It was worth the risk of a scratch or two, to have friends who wouldn't lie to you or betray you.

Besides which, my life had already been crumbling to dust. It was time to take a chance on something new.

Having decided all that, I smiled at Emmanuel. "I'm not planning on going anywhere. I've got a lot of stuff to teach you about modern life. Wait till you discover nightclubs. I feel like you're going to like dancing a lot."

His bright eyes went round, and he looked to the door—like he was expecting his mother to come busting in, screeching about sins and dancing and the devil. It was going to take him a while to move past that, I suspected. It had probably taken him a long time to get to that point, and a lot of training.

"Now, if you're not gonna come down here, we're going to have to get out of the tub before you can... what was it you called it? Inspect your new plaything?" I was teasing a little, hoping I could get away with it. The way he ducked his head, he would have flushed, if his skin did that.

"I didn't?—"

"It's fine," I promised. "Can't say I've ever been anyone's plaything before. No one ever wanted to play with me that much."

That, apparently, got his back up. "Why not? You're perfectly attractive. Big and strong. No pox scars. Straight, white teeth."

That... well, that said a lot about how old he was, didn't it? I didn't know what "pox" was, but I suspected it was one of those old timey illnesses that people didn't really get anymore. And I hadn't had any dental work done, so my straight white teeth were just the way I was born combined with the magic of toothbrushes.

As for the big and strong part, well, again, it was just the body I'd been born with, combined with years of mostly manual labor for a living. I wasn't an athlete or anything.

Still, it was nice to be appreciated.

So I smiled at him, giving up on the whole getting out of the tub thing, and on him taking the initiative. He wanted to jump in and take charge, and frankly, I kinda wanted him to. But first, he needed to know that it was okay. That his mother wasn't going to come screaming into the room, and I wasn't going to change my mind, and no vengeful god was going to come murder him for the crime of existing while queer.

I slid around until we were sitting next to each other, and he looked like he was going to have a heart attack. I tried the gentlest smile I could. "Can't say I've ever been called attractive before. Not that I'm worried about it, just, I never spent any time with anyone who might have thought of me like that."

The look he gave me was dubious, but I'd at least distracted him from worrying about getting caught having fun. So I pressed my luck. I reached across and cupped his face in my palm. His cheek was smooth under my hand, marking him barely a man when he... died? Became a vampire? Either way, he'd never grow a beard. It was okay, I could grow enough stubble for the both of us and then some. He was beautiful as he was.

So I leaned in and touched my lips to his.

He gasped at first, but didn't pull away. After a moment, he transformed into the starving creature of the night before. Not desperate for my blood this time, but for contact. For a connection. For the touch of another man, that wasn't steeped in pain and future punishment.

A second later, he was climbing atop me, grabbing my wrists in his hands to steady himself on the slippery porcelain. Also, to show me where he wanted me. To press my wrists into the edge of the tub as he straddled my body, clenching his thighs around my waist with almost alarming strength.

In an instant, my cock was at attention. It had been growing in interest since he'd come to the doorway, his lithe frame lounging in the door like a vampire in a movie, but this? Having him climb onto me? This was everything I wanted but hadn't ever been able to talk to previous partners about. I was a big strong guy, so I was supposed to be pushy. I was supposed to demand and be forceful.

Emmanuel jerked atop me, shaking his head and turning to loose the stopper in the tub, letting the water start to drain. When he turned back to me and I raised a brow, he shrugged. "Can't have you getting hurt. Your head might slip under. You'd drown."

A curious feeling fluttered in my guts. Someone cared if I dropped dead. Someone who wasn't Pidge, who didn't need me to take care of him, not really. How strange.

I ignored the stinging behind my eyes at the very idea, and instead, pressed my hips up to meet his. "Fair enough. Wouldn't want to get hurt while I'm taking care of you."

He bit his lip, clearly not sure if I meant what I was saying. But back to the feral cats, there was only one way to prove that intention: keep showing up. Keep feeding him. It wasn't a short-term project.

Getting off? That was pretty short-term.

As though he'd read my mind, Emmanuel leaned back to look at my cock, then back up to my face. "Can... can I?"

"Of course," I agreed, though I didn't have a fucking clue what he was asking me. That didn't change my answer.

For a man who'd been sheltered so completely for his whole life, Emmanuel knew how to work a cock. And he knew what to do with it. Without a question, without a word, like he'd been dreaming of this moment his whole damn life, he lifted up slightly, positioned his body above me, and slowly, inch by inch, lowered himself onto my dick.

My head fell back against the porcelain with a thump at the feeling of his tight, cool body squeezing around me. It wasn't... wrong, exactly. Just different than any sex I'd had before. His body had been warmed by the bath, but he wasn't hot like a living human inside. Tight, though, and the friction of movement was warming everything up as he went, sliding onto me, then off and back on with speed I could barely register.

Fuck, it was so . . . so much.

And his face was radiant, almost glowing with joy as he fucked himself on me, like he'd discovered the secret to living his best life, and it turned out that secret was ex-con cock.

The water sloshed over us as it drained, but he paid it no mind, pulling himself up and dropping down again and again, making no noise but some approximation of breathing, the slap of flesh and squeak of skin on porcelain was the only noise in the room.

Well, until I groaned aloud when he squeezed my cock with his perfect ass. His eyes flew open, and he looked to the door. Then he grinned and turned back to me.

“Do it again,” he whispered, tightening around my cock, dragging another moan out of me. So I gave it to him. He rode me, and I moaned, long and loud, letting him know exactly what he was doing to me.

He started laughing. It was strange, and maybe a little sad, but so did I. We’d both survived. Him his mother and me modern life as a poor ex con, and there we were, with this new chance, a fresh start. In each other.

I reached down and ran a hand over his cock. He squeaked and the laughter cut off, but he thrust into my hand, then back onto my cock again. And again. So I wrapped my hand around him, calluses and all, and gave him a little squeeze. It only took a few more strokes after that before he was tensing, arching up and coming in spurts across my chest. Just the way he clenched around me was enough to push me over the edge after him, and lightning coursed through my veins as I came inside him.

The last of the water drained away with a gurgle. He looked down at me, a truly open look on his face for the first time since we’d met. “You won’t leave.”

“I won’t,” I agreed. “Hell, I left my apartment. Told the landlord I wasn’t coming back. I have everything I own with me.”

His smile, at that, was radiant.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 2:16 am

The next night, I didn't tell him that he had to return. Admittedly, I was testing him. I had every intention of tracking him down and tying him up if he tried to disappear on me—I didn't have much knowledge of the modern city beyond my own home, but Knox's scent was strong in my mind and I?—

I needed him.

Not just his blood but—well, loath as I was to admit it, he had... unlocked something in me, a sense that I could be flawed and terrible and worthy all at once.

Well, perhaps I needed his blood too, if I meant to survive, but I was trying to be careful, to wait until he'd recovered before tasting him again. It wasn't too difficult, when there were other ways he could distract me. I'd gotten used to eating sparingly when Mother?—

No. Each time I thought of her, I caught myself. She was not there any longer, and Knox assured me, time and again, that she'd been wrong about so much.

I wasn't sure I believed him yet, but I believed in the way his arms felt around me, the way my blood steadied when he leaned against my side—never demanding but deliciously present. I was even beginning to believe he wouldn't flee from me.

He tolerated much, asked for little, and demanded nothing at all beyond the immanently reasonable—even if it usually took me a couple hours to come around to the idea that he wasn't asking for too much, trying to leave, thinking that I was wicked and wrong.

That made it all too easy, once my panic had eased, to lavish him with all I could think of. The modern world held many pleasures beyond anything I'd imagined, but I started with food.

There were all sorts of considerations—bank accounts, credit cards, and just as I'd gotten used to the idea of a slip of plastic standing in for supposed wealth, paying for things without credit cards and only my phone. I had my own phone .

But Knox had the knowledge and I had the resources and I very much enjoyed having a bounteous feast delivered to our doorstep.

That little brick phone he'd gotten me was a marvel. People shared their talents and all you had to do was search the internet to learn from them. I didn't have to leave the house, which, even after weeks as master of the house, was still... difficult. Easier, when Knox was beside me.

Entirely impossible without him, which I couldn't say aloud and which he was far too kind to point out.

I'd have worried he was too kind, only indulging me, if not for the way his eyes darkened when I ordered him to his knees, when I took all I wanted from him. One night, collapsed on the bed he'd insisted we sleep in—refusing to lock me in my coffin even when I said it was how I'd always slept—he'd told me he liked it. His arm had been under me, around me, his fingertips playing lightly over my elbow while we caught our breath.

He said my commands made something go fuzzy in his head. He stopped thinking. He didn't have to guess what I wanted because I was ravenous for him.

I promised that I would continue to demand all he had to give me, and he'd even smiled, the fool.

That evening, six weeks after he'd first broken into my—our—home, we'd gotten a large grocery delivery. I was going to make dinner for my Knox, feed him like he'd fed me. The first time I'd tried cooking, it'd been a disaster. He'd laughed and helped me clean up, but admitted the recipe I'd picked was beyond him.

Each time, I got better though. And it was something to do—something that had nothing to do with repenting or feeding or—none of it.

So I was determined to see it through. Make him happy. Give him a reason to stay.

Pasta primavera. It couldn't be that hard. Only the way I cut vegetables wasn't as clean and steady as the person in the video, and the water took forever to boil, and I was beginning to lose patience when Knox drifted back into the kitchen after taking a phone call.

When he came close, I reached up to glide my hand through his short hair, and he sighed, his eyes fluttering shut. He looked tired, and I didn't think it had anything to do with my feeding from him a couple days ago.

He should've been recovering, not getting worse.

"What's wrong, pet?" I asked gently, gratified when he pressed into my hand and indulged himself enough to let out a soft groan.

"Nothing's wrong," he muttered.

I huffed. "The truth, Knox."

He sighed again.

"Pidge gets out of rehab tomorrow," he admitted, opening his eyes.

I could see the frenzy of considerations that had worn him out, rushing behind his eyes, even if I couldn't name each of them. He was worried about her, worried about what was next, where she would stay and if he could keep her safe.

I could simplify it.

“Bring her here.”

His brow pinched in the middle, doubt twisting the handsome lines of his face.

“Honestly,” I pressed, leaning into him. “It’s a large house. There’s plenty of space. You and I both know I’ve no idea what to do with all the money M—that she—the money we have. And, I swear, she’ll be safe here. I won’t harm her.”

“Another human in the house won’t be too much temptation? She’s... been through a lot.”

I flinched. Clearly, he thought me capable of making things worse, wicked blight that I was.

A pang stabbed through me to know I hadn’t earned his trust. Of course I hadn’t. I’d taken his choice, his freedom. He might value himself so little that he’d subject himself to me, but he wouldn’t trust me with someone he loved.

Still, he had stayed. Been patient. Offered me, well, something. Everything.

So while my first prick of shame and annoyance made me want to lash out, I took a slow breath and shook my head. “I don’t like feeding from women,” I said. “It’s not... sexual. I mean, I don’t particularly want to have sex with a woman. But I’m only talking about feeding. Mother was?—”

When she came up again, Knox grimaced, and when I shrank before him, his arms

were right there to hold me up. He slipped them around my lower back and pulled me close, and I let my head tip against his chest to mumble the rest.

“—concerned about my predilections, so she only brought me girls. The first time I ever—I’d—in the beginning, I’d decided not to feed. To let it end as it ought to have. And after her sacrifice, she wouldn’t allow it. Said she’d given up heaven to save my soul. I wasn’t to waste her gift. When I still refused, she brought a girl, sliced her to ribbons, and locked her in my room. I hate the sounds women make when they’re afraid. They make me feel so?—”

I shuddered. I’d been starving, and still, the memory was sharp and clear and horrible.

Knox’s hand swept up from the small of my back, all the way to my nape. He held me close, tight against him, until I stopped shaking.

“Your sister will be safe here,” I promised once I found my voice again. When I raised my head, it was only to see Knox smiling softly down at me.

He twisted my hair around his fingers. I couldn’t see it, but I could feel the blissful tug against my scalp. “I think she’ll like you.”

I scoffed, straightening up, sticking my chin out. “Of course she will. I’m rich, beautiful, and mysterious. I’ll make all her dreams come true. Starting with—” I glanced at the kitchen counter, my disaster of a dinner that I was making for him. I’d have to be more methodical tomorrow night. “What should I make for her supper?”