

AN
ABSOLUTE
BLOODY
DISASTER
BOOK 1

LINDSAY CLEMENT

NOVELITICA

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Instagram: [@coverdungeonrabbit](https://www.instagram.com/coverdungeonrabbit)

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Novelitica
3842 Tuscany Dr. Unit 8
Santa Clara, UT 84765

www.lindsayclement.com

For the Rachels:

For the one who has given this story as much love as I have.

And for my creative writing teacher in fifth grade, who told me that the bloody sink in my story was “too creepy.”

If she could see me now.

PROLOGUE

San Francisco, California
Spring 2018

A STORM IS ROLLING IN.

The girl stands in front of an easel in a pair of paint-covered overalls, a wild mess of orange curls tied on top of her head with a green bandana. Her brush moves in practiced strokes as she covers the canvas with oil paints of warm Mid Yellow, blending it into vivid Vermillion, then into the deep Ultramarine of the darkening sky.

But her usual twilight color isn't hitting the right notes tonight. It's too bright, too saturated. The sky roils above her, inky tones of Prussian Blue creeping from the east and swallowing any hope she had of seeing the stars.

A sudden snap of wind stirs the stray curls framing her face, and she sighs in defeat. San Francisco has a habit of surprising her with bad weather. She starts packing up her supplies, annoyed that her painting is still too wet to store safely in its storage bag. She'll have to carry it to the bus stop and hope for the best. With any luck, she'll make it there before the rain starts.

But she has never been one to rely on luck.

Her phone rings in her pocket and she retrieves it—her brother's freckled face smiles up from the screen.

"Hey," she says, propping the phone between her ear and shoulder. Old leaves skitter around her feet in the growing wind, the sound almost ominous in its urgency.

"Hey, Al," he replies. "What's your status? I just ordered from Dragon Diner and it will be here in twenty minutes."

"Yes," she groans, her stomach growling at the mention of their favorite Chinese restaurant. She clicks the cover onto her plastic paint palette as thunder rumbles from afar, and a chill lifts the hair on the back of her neck. "I assume there will be Five-Flavor Shrimp."

"Do you know me at all?" he scoffs. "Dad would kill us if he found out we didn't honor our sacred, completely arbitrary family tradition."

"There's a first time for everything, right?" She wipes the brushes hastily on her overalls and shoves them and her other tools into a zippered pouch.

The storm clouds have moved over the bay now, absorbing what light might have been left over from sunset. Though she has visited this park dozens of times—with its little brick

pathway and time-worn sundial—something feels different tonight. Almost unfriendly, like the park is watching her. Warning her to get out.

A bright flash of lightning illuminates the sky, followed immediately by a deafening clap of thunder. She jumps. One of her painting knives slices across her skin, and she curses loudly as blood wells in her palm.

“Are you alright?” Her brother’s voice is anxious. “It’s looking pretty stormy out there. Do you want me to pick you up?”

“I’m fine,” she mumbles, wrapping her hand in a nearby paper towel. “I’ll text you when—*ah!*”

Something lands on her from behind, a pair of strong arms wrapping around her torso. She struggles against her attacker, but a hand claps over her mouth just as heat explodes at the base of her neck.

She tries to scream. She tries to run. But the arms are unyielding, the pressure in her neck blinding. She is vaguely aware of the kiss of icy raindrops as they begin to fall, biting into the skin on her cheeks, and her hands claw desperately at the demon who refuses to set her free. Her brother’s voice calls out through the pain as everything goes black.

“Alison? Alison, are you there? *Alison!*”

Tonight wasn’t her lucky night, after all.

1

San Francisco, California Halloween 2018

THERE'S SO MUCH BLOOD.

Not that I'm complaining.

A human girl sits upright at the head of the dining table, her eyes wide and glassy, a soft smile tugging at her lips. Blood oozes from two puncture wounds on her neck, a striking red against the white of her skin. It drips down her chest and soaks into the collar of her floral blouse, making her look like the unsuspecting murder victim in a B-list horror movie.

"Come on, Xander," I say, sidling over to him. The scent of the girl's blood fills the room with metallic warmth, and hunger claws its way up my throat. "Just one taste."

"No." My brother sits next to the girl, his attention divided between his dinner and the phone in his hand. He can't seem to put it down these days.

"You can't bring dinner home and expect *not* to share. It's downright cruel."

Xander pockets his phone then makes a show of dragging one finger through the girl's blood. He makes eye contact with me as he licks it clean.

I glare at him. "*Rude.*"

"You already have dinner plans," he says in that bored voice of his, as though he would rather be talking to anyone else.

"Yes, but there will be *rules* there."

"There are rules here, too. 'Leave no—'"

"I know," I snap. I'm talking through my fangs now—they have a bad habit of showing up when I'm hungry. And I'm hungry *a lot*. "But would it kill you to share your food every once in a while?"

"She's not just *food*, Charlotte," Xander says, his expression morphing from one of annoyance to one of distaste. "She's a human being."

"Right," I say, sinking into an empty chair with an audible *thump*. It creaks loudly, and Xander winces. "What's this one's name?"

Xander always learns a human's name before he feeds on them, a habit I've never understood. It doesn't matter to me if I know the girl's name or not. She'll taste the same either way.

I'm sure Xander would love to offer a scathing remark—maybe something about my complete lack of respect for our overpriced European furniture—but instead, he coaxes the girl's head sideways with two fingers to her chin. "Go ahead," he murmurs, capturing her glassy gaze with his. "Tell her your name."

Until now, the girl hasn't moved or spoken, thanks to Xander's Compulsion. But now she looks at Xander like he's the most beautiful person she has ever seen.

Show-off.

"Amy," she says dreamily, offering Xander a lovesick smile. "My name is Amy Wilde."

"Great," I say, laying on the sarcasm. "Now I'll always remember her. 'Amy Wilde, the meal Xander wouldn't share.'"

"I'm not obligated to share with you," Xander says.

"Of course you are." I swipe a finger through her blood and suck it clean, groaning involuntarily at the familiar coppery taste.

Delicious.

Xander snarls when I make a second attempt, swatting my hand away. "I said no, *repa*. I've already fed from her, and I don't trust you not to kill her."

"It's been two hundred years, Alexander," I say, glowering. "When will you stop using that nickname?"

"As soon as you cease being my sister, Lottie."

"And what a glorious day that will be." The chair legs screech as I push back from the table. Xander winces again.

"You know Victoria will kill you if you scratch her floor."

"Oh, it's even her *floor*, now?"

I may live in this house with my brother and his perfect fiancée, but the two of them have made it very clear: nothing inside it belongs to me. At this point, I'm not even sure if my bedroom is my own.

Xander turns to Amy—his fangs emerge, pressing on his bottom lip—then pauses, fixing me with a sidelong glare. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

When I don't move, he shrugs, leaning to bury his teeth in Amy's throat.

I watch him for a few seconds, fuming, before stalking away, not stopping until I'm in my room on the other side of the house.

Xander and I used to share all our meals. Granted, that was before we cared about not killing people. Somewhere along the way, Xander grew a conscience and I—well, I grew an appetite. My brother has become practiced and careful when he feeds, unlike me, the two-hundred-year-old vampire girl with no self-control.

Maybe one day I'll be as disciplined as he is. But I doubt it.

* * *

I emerge from the shower into a bathroom full of steam. The words, “I WANT TO SUCK YOUR BLOOD,” are written on the fogged surface of the mirror.

“Ha ha. Very funny, Victoria,” I mutter, and a bright giggle echoes from somewhere upstairs.

I use my forearm to clear the remaining condensation from the mirror and find a ghostly figure staring back at me. There was once a time I couldn’t see myself in mirrors at all. Something about the silver backing, I think. Now I stand here in perfect reflected clarity, somehow both pale and dark, with green eyes too big for my face and wild, umber hair and lips that are somehow always chapped.

And of course, there are my freckles. I had always hoped I would grow out of them as I aged—that my skin would smooth and the annoying dark spots on my nose and cheeks would fade. But they remain, infuriatingly, the way they were on my nineteenth birthday in Belarus. The day I stopped aging. The day I was Turned.

Some birthday present.

A loud ping from my phone announces a new text message.

Be there in five, collwr llygaid doe.

I glare down at Pippa’s insult.

**Who are you calling a doe-eyed loser,
you bottle-blond Welsh demon?**

Ooh, good one!

She follows it up with a thumbs-up emoji.

I smirk and chuck my phone onto my bed. The last thing I want to do is be late for the biggest party of the year. It’s a good thing I’m speedy.

Four minutes and forty-seven seconds later, Pippa’s car horn blares outside.

“You’re early!” I yell, struggling to pull on my second boot.

I bolt into the hallway and almost run into Xander, who is carrying a sketchpad and a coffee mug filled with colored pencils.

“Charlotte,” he scolds, whirling out of my way, “watch where you’re going. One of these days you won’t be paying attention and you’ll end up with a handful of pencils in your chest.”

“Already happened.”

Xander’s eyebrows flick upward. “Come again?”

“It was sometime in the fifties, I think,” I muse, plucking a green pencil from the cup and twirling it between my fingers. “You were out seducing some poor housewife, and I tripped and landed face down on a cup of your charcoal pencils. Missed my heart by a good six inches, but it hurt like hell.”

“Why haven’t I heard about this?”

“Because I didn’t tell you. The pencils may not have killed me, but you certainly would have.”

The pencil slips from my hand and Xander snatches it midair, shaking his head in exasperation. “I’m surprised you haven’t killed yourself by now, Lottie. You’re clumsy enough.”

I shove his arm. “I’m surprised you haven’t gotten yourself killed by now, Xander. You’re obnoxious enough.”

Pippa honks again.

“I’m *coming!*” I bark, knowing she will hear.

Her voice echoes quietly in my ears. “Hurry up, slowpoke! The Majestic is waiting!”

“How do I look?” I ask Xander, giving a little twirl. I somehow managed to tuck my flowy white shirt into a pair of extremely tight leather pants I found at the thrift store. They are at least two sizes too small, but I don’t technically need to breathe. So, they’re great.

Xander smirks and the collection of steel rings in his nose and ears glints in the dim hall light. “Positively offensive. An insult to vampire-kind.”

“Perfect.”

Pippa is waiting outside in her red convertible Corvette—a car that pushes the boundaries of being ostentatious—her platinum hair fluttering in the cool breeze. She waves enthusiastically as I head down the marble steps and onto the moonlit pavement.

“Girl, you look *hot!*” Pippa calls, shooing Nik into the backseat with Rose. Nik fixes her with a withering glare, but silently obliges. “Where did you find those pants?”

“Rose’s closet,” I jest, hopping over the car door to land semi-gracefully in the passenger seat.

“Hey!” Rose flicks me on the back of the head. “Just because I like fashion doesn’t mean I like dressing like a prostitute from the eighties.”

“That’s because,” Nik inserts dryly, taking a quick swig from a leather-wrapped flask, “you already went through that phase when you actually *were* a prostitute in the eighties.”

Rose raises a sardonic eyebrow. “Right. *Me*. A *prostitute*. That’s like saying Pippa was a nun for a period of time.”

I burst into laughter, joined loudly by Pippa as she shifts the car into gear.

* * *

Every Halloween, the pompous traitor known as Kaleb Sutton manages to throw the most ridiculous, unnecessarily lavish costume party in the state, and half the world wants in. He only gives invitations to vampires of the San Francisco “elite”—whatever the hell that means—while the humans are chosen at random by some sort of lottery system. I can only imagine how many hopeful sorority girls are disappointed every year.

The party is at the old Majestic Theater, across from which a collection of lovesick couples stares out over the water, watching the yellow lights of the Oakland Bay Bridge as they shine eerily through a blanket of chilly fog. Their dreamy gazes and dark coats are a sharp contrast to the scantily-clad party-goers standing in line, ignoring their sightseeing opportunity as they wait desperately for a last-minute opening on the airtight guest list.

As we approach the front doors of the theater, I can’t help but laugh at our assortment of terrible vampire costumes. Rose is in a white cocktail dress, the color striking against the warm brown of her skin, with blood dripping from her “sliced” neck; Nik, in all his brooding glory, is wearing a beautifully-detailed—though painfully stereotypical—vampire costume that Dracula himself would envy; and Pippa looks more like a bleached-blonde Morticia Addams than a vampire, the neckline of her form-fitting black dress plunging into a deep V ending just above her belly button. I look like some kind of suave, swashbuckling vampire-pirate hybrid, complete with knee-high boots and a black silk cape. We look completely ridiculous.

The four of us walk straight to the theater’s doors, garnering dirty looks from those waiting in line.

“Invitation?” The big, human bouncer folds his arms across his chest with a suspicious frown.

I roll my eyes. We have never received an invitation to Kaleb’s party, but that doesn’t stop us from attending. Anything to spite that backstabbing sociopath.

“Oh, we don’t need an invitation,” Rose sings, her voice light and haunting with its slight French lilt. She reminds me of a songbird, her petite frame and bouncing dark curls giving her an air of innocence. Though with how practiced she is at Compulsion, it might be more appropriate to compare her to a siren.

Rose steps directly in front of the bouncer, locking eyes with him. “Kaleb invited us. We’re his guests of honor.”

The bouncer stares at her, wide-eyed and transfixed, then blinks a few times. “Yes, of course. Kaleb’s guests of honor. Right this way.”

A girl in a provocative nurse costume glares at us and hisses something to the Grim Reaper standing next to her. I can’t see a face under the hood, but the figure nods solemnly.

Rose smiles sweetly and we follow her through one of the many gilded doors leading inside.

The Majestic was once a beautiful theater reserved for fancy, highbrow events like symphony orchestras and operas before it went bankrupt sometime in the nineties. It has

since been turned into the most amazing party venue in San Francisco. The seats have all been removed and the ground leveled to make way for a huge, polished dance floor, though the ornate stage and carved balconies remain, usually reserved for private parties, weddings, or quinceañeras.

Tonight, however, the whole theater is filled to bursting, and the five gold chandeliers on the ceiling make the room glow with a hazy sheen. The floor, balconies, and stage churn with hundreds of humans in a wide variety of costumes, their bodies filling the air with the scent of sweat and alcohol and ecstasy. At least, *most* of them are humans. I spot a few other vampires gliding in their midst—fangs glinting wickedly under shadowed eyes—but they pay us no notice.

Pippa nudges Nik and points to a particularly drunk-looking group of college girls. “Dibs.”

Nik flashes her a challenging, languorous grin. “Not if I get there first.”

He slips away, stalking through the crowd like a lion on the prowl, and Pippa trails after him with determination.

I glance at Rose, who has her sights set on a pair of tipsy boys leaning on the bar, a predatory smile tugging at her lips. At one time, she might have drained the two of them in a few remorseless minutes, but not anymore. Now her self-control is near perfect, her siren’s call used for nothing more than a quick meal and a quicker release. Now she can focus her attention on other things, like keeping my appetite in check.

It’s a good thing, too. There will be no killing tonight. Not when Kaleb’s watching. “*Nullum corpus*,” as he would say. Not that I care anymore.

“Well,” Rose says, her voice carrying over the loud music, “shall we?”

* * *

An hour or so later, I’m leaning against the wall with a bright-eyed Rose, hidden in the inky shadows of the mezzanine. I am hypnotized by the darkness, the music, the pounding of warm blood under sweat-soaked skin. I rest my head on the wall behind me, reveling in the boozy scent of human intoxication.

“This is what I imagine Heaven will be like,” I say, glancing at Rose. I draw a hand across my mouth, wiping away the remnants of my last sample. She was sweet, like hot apple cider from my earliest memories, and tinged with the bright bitterness of cranberry vodka. “If we ever make it there, of course. I wish we could do this every night.”

“If we did,” Rose smirks, watching Pippa as she carefully lures her next victim into an alcove near the stage, “we might drain the whole city.”

“And I should care about that because...?” I sound drunk. In vampire terms, I probably am.

Once upon a time, I cared about not murdering people. But becoming a vampire changed something in me: the desperation for human blood overpowered any inhibitions I had about the sacredness of life.

Needless to say, my moral compass doesn't exactly point north anymore.

Rose snags a drink from the hand of a brawny Roman centurion. He gapes at her for a few seconds before grinning, his angled eyes raking her from head to toe. For a moment, I think he might make a move, but Rose fixes him with a murderous glare that sends a chill up my spine.

"Don't touch me," she Compels through a snarl, and the centurion's eyes widen in shock before he slips away.

I look back out over the sea of squirming people. Nik has one hand on the waist of a green-haired witch, the other caressing the exposed hollow of her throat, and she visibly melts under his touch. His hips sway fluidly with hers, and I smile as he bares his fangs and sinks them into her neck. The girl sags against him, her eyes closed, her lips parted in unmistakable pleasure.

Only Nik can drain the life from someone and leave them begging for more.

"Hey, beautiful."

My head snaps sideways to stare at the Roman centurion standing a few feet from me. Strands of once-tidy black hair stick to his damp forehead, and his dark, slanted eyes meet mine from under thick lashes. I have no doubt that he has had one too many drinks tonight, made obvious by the fact that he seems a breath away from falling over.

"Can I help you?"

"I love your vampire costume." He grins drunkenly. "Very gory."

I smile down at the fresh blood staining my shirt. "Thanks."

"Do you want to dance?" He offers a hand.

I raise an eyebrow. Everything about this guy screams, *Guy Who Only Got Into College Because He Plays Football*. He is most decidedly not my type.

"Sorry, Six Pack. I'm not here to meet my soulmate." I grin, flashing my fangs, but he doesn't flinch. All part of the costume, I suppose.

"Come on, sweetheart," he croons, taking a step closer. "You're the hottest girl I've seen at this lame party. And I can't leave until you give me at least one dance."

Something in his tone raises the hair on my arms. I don't know if it's his words or the surety with which he says them, but I want nothing to do with this hammered jock. I open my mouth to shoot him a scathing response, but am interrupted by a hand clapping down hard on his shoulder.

"Dude, leave her alone." The hand belongs to another centurion with sandy blonde hair, undoubtedly a friend. His voice holds a calm command, and I get the impression that he has diffused similar situations before. "Don't be a creep."

Centurion One glares at him. “You only live once, man. And this vampire chick is super hot. I have to dance with her.” He speaks as though I can’t hear him. It’s infuriating. Disgusting.

Centurion Two’s freckled face twists into a grimace. “Jason. *Stop.*”

Centurion One—Jason—shoves his friend aside, his eyes never leaving mine. He wraps a muscled arm around my waist, sliding his hand down to the base of my back, his fingers pulling at the fabric of my shirt.

My hand is instantly at his throat, squeezing just below his jaw for maximum discomfort. Heat rushes to my face and I know that my eyes are darkening, sinking, turning me into the monster that I am. I watch with sick satisfaction as his face morphs from confidence to disjointed confusion.

“Listen here, asshole,” I growl. “I said *no.*”

Both his hands clamp onto my forearm as he struggles for air, the skin of his cheeks deepening from pale gold to deep fuchsia. His pulse quickens under my fingers and my mouth begins to water. It would be so easy to take him, right here in the shadows, and drain the life out of him until the lewd smirk has been wiped from his stupid face...

“Charlotte.”

Rose’s warning snaps me from my trance just as Nik appears next to her, his eyes narrowed.

“That’s enough,” Nik says, his voice tight.

“Is it, though?” I purr. “Shouldn’t he be taught a lesson?”

Without waiting for an answer, I pull Jason toward me and tear into his neck, holding him tightly as the sweet nectar of his blood coats my tongue. I feel him thrashing as Rose’s arms tighten around my midsection, but I don’t care. The blood renews my energy and wakes me from my drunken stupor as electricity crackles through my veins.

Anger does tend to add a bit of a kick.

Nik’s fingers dig into my biceps and I’m suddenly flying backward, my fangs catching for a moment on the skin at the boy’s throat. I cry out in surprise and Rose regretfully catches Jason before letting him slump to the floor.

“You shouldn’t have stopped me, Nikolas,” I snarl through a heaving breath, wiping the blood from my chin with the back of my wrist.

“You know our rule, Lottie,” Nik murmurs, caging me against him. His cognac eyes are unreadable. “*Leave no bodies.* Not even by accident.” He glances upward, anxiety darkening his expression. “And especially not here.”

Pippa appears from out of nowhere, staring down at an unconscious Jason with curious, judgmental eyes. “Probably not a good idea to break Kaleb’s rule when we’re at *his party,*” she mumbles, and I shoot her a cold glare.

“But I didn’t break it,” I say. “And besides, I wouldn’t care if I did. I stopped caring the moment Kaleb left New York.”

Nik’s mouth contorts into a crooked frown. “Well, we care, Charlotte.” His voice is deep with worry. He doesn’t look at me. “Rose, get her out of here. Pippa and I will take care of...*that*.” He motions to the heap of bleeding jock that is Jason.

A soft face appears to Nik’s left, and I recognize him instantly as Centurion Two. His eyes are widened in horror and something akin to fascination.

“You—you just—” he stammers, searching for words he’ll probably never find.

“No, it wasn’t—” I start, but he has already disappeared into the crowd. “*Dammit!*”

I dart after him, ignoring the concerned voice of Nik behind me. If I let this boy get away, he could ruin everything. And worse, Xander would have my head.

As I brush past werewolves and nurses, angels and harlequins, something green glints from a balcony above, where two shadowed figures whisper together. They motion toward me and I curse internally, knowing whose icy eyes are watching. I flash him a defiant middle finger as I make my way out of the theater.

Kaleb is not going to be happy about this.

I burst through the front doors and slam directly into the Grim Reaper I saw earlier, though his nurse companion is nowhere to be seen. It seems that he still hasn’t been allowed inside; he must not have an invitation. We topple to the ground in a tangled mess of black fabric, and I catch a full-lipped grimace peeking out from underneath his hood. He yells a loud, “Hey!” as I scramble away from him, but I don’t look back as I tear down the sidewalk.

Centurion Two is nearly to the end of the block, half-walking, half-running toward what I assume is his car. He reminds me of a gazelle from a nature documentary, his strides bouncing and purposeful, his entire body on alert.

“Centurion Two!” I call after him. His head swivels to look at me and his eyes widen before he breaks into an impressive sprint.

Really?

I close the distance between us easily and grab his arm, swinging him around to face me. He tenses as his frightened, golden eyes meet mine, and I’m suddenly aware of Jason’s blood crusting around my lips.

“Who—” He pauses, then starts again. I can hear the pulse thrumming wildly at his throat. “What on Earth was that?”

“That’s an odd question.”

“Well, if I saw what I thought I saw, then you’re an odd person.”

I blink. “Excuse me?”

He frowns at his captured arm and frantically tries to yank it away. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were a—”

“What, a vampire?” I sneer, squeezing his arm tighter. “It’s a Halloween party, dumbass. Costumes exist.”

His wary eyes find mine and there’s a distant uncertainty swimming in them, more puzzlement than fear. I stare at him curiously for a few seconds, trying to unravel the emotion playing on his face. One could almost call it intrigue.

The golden boy takes advantage of my small lapse in focus and manages to wriggle free. He turns to run, but I grab him by the strap of his fake centurion armor and flip him around again, a snarl grinding in my throat.

“Listen,” I snap, digging my fingernails into his tanned forearm. I feel a sudden sense of urgency; for all I know, Kaleb could be spying through a secret window to make sure I erase this poor boy’s memory. A chill creeps through me as I imagine his disconcerting pale eyes boring holes into my skull.

Now that the idea is in my head, I can’t seem to shake it. Someone is *definitely* watching me.

“I am nothing,” I hiss at the boy, the words tumbling out in a rush. Something shifts in the corner of my vision and my eyes flicker sideways, but I see only the night-darkened street. “I am no one. Your friend is an incompetent idiot who drank way too much, and someone spilled fake blood on him. You called him a cab and now you’re going home. You won’t remember me or my friends. Got it?”

Centurion Two stares at me blankly for a few seconds as the Compulsion sinks in. He finally nods once, dazedly, then disappears down the sidewalk, leaving me alone in the seething shadows cast by the Majestic’s shimmering marquee.

I SIT ON THE CURB outside the theater, my arms folded in defiance, and Rose and I watch as, one by one, bright yellow cabs pull up to taxi the drunk party-goers home. I usually love the expressions on the cabbies' faces when they see which half-dressed, sweat-covered booze hound is about to slide into their backseat. But tonight, my enjoyment is dimmed by anger: at Jason for putting his hands on me, at Kaleb for his threatening omnipresence, and at myself for being so out of control. It puts a damper on what would have otherwise been a fabulous evening.

The stream of people exiting the theater is thicker than usual, like a dam has opened and is emptying the entire building onto the sidewalk at once. I get the sinking feeling that the party is over. And that it may be my fault.

Nik's familiar footfalls sound behind me and I turn to see him crossing the wide sidewalk with a look of apprehension. Pippa trails silently.

"Charlotte—" Nik begins, but I stand abruptly, cutting him off.

"I know. I'm sorry, Nikolas."

Nik lifts my chin with gentle, cool fingers, urging me to meet his eyes. The incandescence of the theater lights makes them glow like a pair of dying embers. I have always thought that Nik belongs in movies with his long legs, broad shoulders, strong jaw, and head of thick, auburn hair. He even has an alluring scar cut through his eyebrow, an accent of imperfection on the otherwise pristine angles of his face. Any Hollywood actor would sell their soul for a face like his.

Rayna, Nik's twin sister, always said his profile belonged on a coin.

The worry in Nik's molten eyes has simmered to regret, and his eyebrows pinch together.

"No, I'm sorry, *darahi*," he says, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that. But when Kaleb gets upset..."

He trails off, but I mentally finish the sentence: *When Kaleb gets upset, there's no telling how he'll react.* And we don't particularly want Kaleb reacting to anything.

Shame burns in my throat. Rose's jaw is clenched, and Pippa watches me with disinterest; it's nothing they haven't seen before.

"Let's just go home," I say quietly.

Nik kisses me softly on the forehead. "That sounds good to me."

The ride home is long and silent. I know Nik will be fine—forgiveness is a superpower of his, with Kaleb as the glaring exception—but I can't help the guilt bubbling in my chest. Not for hurting Jason, but for making such an absolute spectacle of myself. And at Kaleb's party, of all places. It's like I have a death wish.

Pippa slams her car into park and we pile out of it in a cloud of awkward tension. The first glow of morning reflects warmly off the towering, whitewashed facade of the house; the ivy creeping up its walls stands out like a dark spiderweb.

Xander greets us at the door, dressed in black running pants and a black turtleneck, his feet bare. He holds a glass of scotch in one hand and wears a considering smirk.

"I see the night was a success," he muses, taking in our bloodstained costumes. "I hope you got your fill of blatant rebellion for the year."

"You could say that," Rose mumbles.

Xander shoots her a questioning look, and she stands on her tiptoes to whisper something in his ear. He nods. "Well, Victoria will kill anyone who gets blood on the floor," he says slowly, "so the four of you might want to shower."

Pippa takes off toward my bedroom.

"Hey!" I cry, but she's gone. I can already hear the shower running. "Don't you dare touch my lavender body scrub!"

Nik and Xander exchange a tense glance—a standard greeting for them, these days—before Nik slips away and disappears downstairs to use one of the guest bathrooms. Xander squeezes Rose's hand and she smiles up at him before flitting up the grand staircase leading to the loft.

When we're alone, Xander frowns. "Rose tells me there was an incident."

Tattle-tale.

I worry at the edge of my cape, where a few dark drops of blood have painted a constellation on its ivory inner lining. "Yes. One involving a very handsy Roman centurion."

Xander's face is stoic. A beat of uncomfortable silence passes before he asks, "Did you kill him?" The words come out tightly, as though he is bracing himself for my response.

"No, I didn't *kill* him. 'Leave no bodies,' and all that."

He nods, his lips pursed. Disappointment rolls off him in waves. "I assume Kaleb saw you."

I think of the shadowed figures watching me from the balcony, the bright spot of green winking at me in the darkness like a tiny emerald flame. "Yes."

After another beat, Xander sighs. "For your sake," he says, rubbing his temple with two fingers, "I pray Kaleb will let this one go. But in the meantime, it sounds like you need a drink."

I follow him into the kitchen, where Victoria has appeared in an oversized white sweater and gray leggings. Her black hair frames a pale face with high cheekbones and a pair of

shimmering, slanted eyes. Xander pecks her quickly on the lips before sidling over to the wet bar.

“Red wine, X,” I call to him, and he responds with a tiny nod.

I slide onto a barstool next to Victoria and she smiles knowingly.

“Rough night, huh?”

“You have no idea.”

Victoria’s eyes flicker to my bloodstained shirt, then back up. “It looks like you may have had a little too much fun. I hope none of you tracked blood into my house.”

“*Our* house,” I counter, and she smiles. “And we did have fun. Until I did something stupid, as usual.”

She laughs and pats me on the shoulder. “There, there. You know you can always talk to me.”

“Gross,” I growl as I slap her hand away, but I find myself laughing with her.

I wasn’t sure about Victoria when we met her in the 1920s. She was everything I wasn’t—voluptuous, charismatic, and drop-dead gorgeous—and it was easy to be intimidated by the way she oozed confidence and magnetism. Xander, on the other hand, fell in love with her at first sight. She is Xander’s other half: where he is unyielding and passionate, she is flexible and level-headed. They are perfect together. And I hate it.

“Alexander,” Victoria trills, waving her manicured hand in the air, a massive engagement ring sparkling on her finger. “Pour me a glass, will you?”

Xander scowls at her, but expertly plucks another wine glass from the cabinet and fills it without looking.

“So, tell me what happened.” Victoria narrows her dark eyes, regarding me with genuine interest. Her skin is perfect. Freckle-less. Porcelain.

“Well, there was a guy dressed like a Roman centurion—”

“Ooh, sexy.”

“Shut up,” I groan. “But yeah, he might have been a *little* sexy. That is, until I refused to dance with him and he put his hands all over me like a sex-crazed frat boy.” I grimace. “So, I grabbed his face and, uh...I drank him.”

Victoria shakes her head thoughtfully, taking the glass of wine that Xander waves in front of her. “And let me guess: Nik freaked out a little?”

I nod, taking my own drink from Xander and chugging half of it in one gulp.

“Because of Kaleb?”

I nod again.

“Listen, Lottie,” Victoria says, taking my hand. “We all do stupid things from time to time. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Plus, the guy sounds like he deserved it.”

“Oh, he did,” I smirk, and she laughs.

* * *

When I finally make it downstairs after a long and arduous shower, the others have already claimed their sleeping spots for our annual post-rebellion slumber party, spreading out on the game room floor in a giant pile of pillows and blankets. Victoria has herself draped over Xander, Pippa is on her side with her back pressed into the sectional, and Rose is curled into a ball in a nest of pillows. Nik, in typical Nik fashion, is flat on his back with his hands clasped over his ribs; he would look like a corpse if it weren't for the subtle rise and fall of his chest.

I climb quietly onto the sectional and watch their shallow breathing, my mind replaying the night's events in an infinite loop. My behavior was impulsive. Reckless. It's something that wouldn't have happened if Rayna were with me. I can't help but wonder how the night would have ended if I had just let Jason go, but wondering has never gotten me anywhere.

I wonder every day what Rayna would do if she were alive.

A sharp knock at the front door cuts through the silence. It is short, quick, and its syncopated rhythm is unmistakable. I haven't heard that knock in over a century.

Nik bolts upright, followed more slowly by Xander, who gently nudges Victoria off his chest with a soft kiss to her forehead. He rises calmly but reluctantly, fixes Nik with a warning glare, and slips upstairs.

"What the hell is *he* doing here?" Pippa hisses, sitting up.

"Isn't it obvious?" I ask, glancing down at her. "I ruined his stupid party."

"You did not," Rose says, though the tightness in her voice suggests otherwise.

Victoria frowns. "Wait. Are you saying *Kaleb* is at our front door?"

"Yes," I grumble, collapsing against the pillowed back of the sectional.

"Awesome. Maybe I'll finally get to meet the bastard."

The front door creaks open upstairs and a painful moment of stillness follows. Nik shifts to sit next to me on the sectional, his eyes wary, his broad shoulders stiff. The five of us wait in palpable silence, not daring to breathe. It feels like an eternity before Xander finally clears his throat.

"Kaleb."

"Hello, Alexander." Kaleb's velvety, British voice is strained but not unfriendly. "It's been a while."

"Has it?" I can practically hear Xander's grimace.

It's been a hundred and twenty-one years, but who's counting?

There's another long pause, during which I can only assume Kaleb quietly judges the cut of Xander's sweater. "Though I would love to catch up, I'm not here for you, my friend. I'm here to see your lovely sister."

"She's *out*." Xander enunciates each word sharply.

“I’m not an idiot,” Kaleb snaps. “She may as well have been screaming with how loudly she and the others were whispering downstairs. Charlotte, dear,” he calls, “do come here.”

Four heads snap in my direction, and I roll my eyes before jumping to my feet. If Kaleb wants to see me, I’m not going to deny him the pleasure.

“Lottie,” Nik says, his eyes bright. “Let me come with you.”

I raise an eyebrow. To say that Nik and Kaleb parted on harrowing terms is an understatement. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

We emerge into the foyer to find Kaleb standing regally under the portico, his blazer rimmed with a halo of morning light. I squint, my eyes burning.

“Xander,” I say. It sounds like a question.

Xander purses his lips but ushers Kaleb inside, closing the door behind him. I exhale in relief as the foyer plunges into comfortable darkness.

It has been a long time since I’ve seen Kaleb—let alone *spoken* to him—but he hasn’t changed a bit in the last century. He stands tall, but not *too* tall, with coiffed walnut hair and striking, winter-blue eyes glinting with unearned confidence. A shadow of perfectly-sculpted stubble lines his jaw. His clothes are pristine, from his rose velvet blazer to his pressed black slacks. Even his shoes are polished to a bright sheen. The emerald at his throat winks menacingly from its gold setting as he regards our small group, and I resist the urge to rip it from his neck.

“It seems,” Kaleb muses, “that you have continued to live nocturnally. You do know that you can build an immunity—”

“We know, Kaleb,” Nik remarks warily, his gaze fixed somewhere near Kaleb’s shoes. “Get to the point.”

One of Kaleb’s eyebrows flicks upward and he examines Nik curiously, as though observing an old painting for the hundredth time. “Ah, Nikolas. I do miss your forwardness.”

Nik presses closer to me but says nothing more. His hand is tense where it rests on my lower back.

Xander stands near the door with his arms folded tightly against his chest; I can tell he is restraining himself, his eyes regarding Kaleb coolly. Part of me wishes he would reach out and snap Kaleb’s neck. Not that it would kill him, but it would sure be fun to see.

Kaleb takes a few steps forward with his hands clasped pretentiously behind his back. “Charlotte.”

“Yes, Kaleb?” I say, my voice sickly-sweet. “Why are you here?”

Stupid question. Stupid, stupid Charlotte.

Kaleb’s eyes narrow, as if to say, *You know why*. “You’ve cleaned off all the blood, I see.”

I look down at my red silk camisole. “I’m surprised you can tell.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, but his eyes darken with disappointment and something that may or may not be pity. Anger flares in my chest.

“I was watching you tonight, Charlotte,” he says, taking another step. I recoil as his familiar scent of crisp cologne and cigarette smoke fills my nose. “You were doing so well. Ambrosia hardly intervened. Until, of course, you went overboard with that dashing Roman centurion.” He leans in and his fangs slip from his gums, glinting dangerously behind his upper lip. “You know I can’t have you causing trouble at these parties of mine. I am your Alpha, after all, and outbursts like the one I witnessed reflect poorly on my leadership abilities.”

“Assuming you had any to begin with,” I mutter, and Xander glares at me.

Kaleb’s eyes don’t leave mine, but he continues as though I said nothing at all. “You were *seen*, Charlotte,” he says, putting emphasis on each word. “By *humans*. I had to end the party prematurely due to your lack of discretion.”

The blonde-haired centurion’s face flashes in my mind, his eyes glazing over as I Compelled his memory away. “But I fixed it,” I say, remembering the feeling of watchful eyes on my back. “You know that. I caught up to that boy before he made it to the next block.”

Kaleb stares at me, unblinking, for a few long seconds, and I shrink under the intensity of his gaze. “You must know the centurion boy isn’t the only one who saw you. There were at least ten others that I counted. We had to Compel all of the humans—and I mean *all* of them—to be safe.”

I open my mouth to reply, then close it again. I hadn’t considered the fact that others may have seen me. I was too caught up in my desperation to remove myself from the memory of a single golden-eyed boy.

“I have been more than lenient by allowing you all to ‘sneak in’ to my Halloween party every year,” Kaleb says. “But if you attempt to murder my guests, I can’t promise I will grant such leniency in the future. You remember our rule, don’t you?”

Oh, I remember it. No one will let me forget.

Nullum corpus. Leave no bodies. The idea may have been Kaleb’s, but I’m surprised how often the words fall effortlessly from the lips of both Xander and Nik.

“She didn’t break the rule, Kaleb,” Nik says carefully.

“Don’t think I wasn’t watching you as well, Nikolas.”

Nik flinches, but his hand doesn’t stray from my back.

Xander clears his throat. Kaleb’s eyes flicker in his direction and he stills. It’s a reaction I would usually associate with fear or embarrassment, though if Kaleb feels either, his expression doesn’t show it. His eyes are unyielding as he stares down at me, and a chill of defiance shivers in my chest.

“You’re just lucky we behave as well as we do,” I snarl at him. “It’s not like we have anyone to impress. If we wanted to, we could have drained half the party before you had even descended from that ivory tower of yours.”

“Careful, darling,” Kaleb says, halving the distance between us. He adjusts the buttons on his sleeve once, twice, three times. His tone is menacing, but the dispassionate stiffness doesn’t leave his shoulders. “Remember that while you are in my city, your life is not your own. I could reduce it to ash with nothing but a word.”

“Or with a match,” I retort, and Kaleb’s eyes harden to flint. “Besides, I don’t see how you could possibly ruin my life more than you already have.”

Kaleb stares at me for a few seconds, his expression unreadable, before Pippa’s sharp voice cuts through the silence.

“I think it’s time for you to leave,” she says, emerging from the basement stairwell with Rose and Victoria close behind her. The three of them cut a trio of menacing silhouettes in the darkness.

“Hello, Philippa,” Kaleb says with infuriating fondness; Pippa flinches slightly, as though the sound of her name surprises her. “Ambrosia.” Rose stares at him, her eyes dark and watchful. “And—” Kaleb looks at Victoria and frowns, his head tilting to one side. “I’m sorry, I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“Victoria,” she replies in a clipped tone. “And you must be Kaleb. Charmed, I’m sure.”

Xander bites the insides of his cheeks.

“Well, my friends,” Kaleb says, eyeing us all warily, “it has been a pleasure to see you all, but I feel I may be unwelcome.”

“What was your first clue?” I mumble.

Kaleb’s footsteps echo loudly in the vaulted entry as he moves toward the door. “Charlotte, darling,” he says, glancing back over his shoulder, “do behave yourself. We don’t want another scandal, do we?”

His words slice through the dark like a scythe. While our little gang has been involved in a number of unsavory situations, I can tell by the way Kaleb watches me—his gaze steady and direct—that he has a specific instance in mind.

And he’s right. We don’t want another scandal. Not like Golden Gate Park.

Kaleb stares at Nik for a long moment, then throws the door open and disappears down the front steps. A strip of sunlight passes over Pippa’s face and she hisses loudly before Xander slams the door shut. We all stand in stunned silence until Victoria breaks it.

“So, that was Kaleb. What an *ass*.”

I nod in agreement and stare after Kaleb, hoping I’ll gain sudden x-ray vision and be able to see him through the door. Kaleb wasn’t always so cold; there was a time when we all trusted him with our lives. But then Rayna happened, and our trust dissipated like morning sunlight burning fog off the bay.

AFTER KALEB'S UNWELCOME HOUSE CALL, I want to be anywhere but this mansion we call a house. The sharp scent of his cologne still lingers in the foyer like an intrusive memory, sparking aggressive bouts of *déjà vu* each time I walk by. It isn't an unpleasant smell—it's bright and cold and infused with something almost minty—but the negative emotions it brings to the surface are enough to drive me mad. I can practically see the starry sky and feel the heat of the flames as they flicker in Kaleb's pale blue eyes while he watches, unruffled, as our world burns to the ground.

Why Xander insisted we move to San Francisco to be under Kaleb's manicured and bloodstained thumb, I'll never understand.

"Hey, X?" I call, shaking my head to dislodge Kaleb's lingering presence. "I'm going out."

Xander appears from around the corner, a blue pencil tucked behind his ear. "You're doing *what?*"

"I'm going *out*," I repeat, emphasizing each word slowly. "Do I really have to explain myself?"

Xander crosses the kitchen to peek through the back window where the sun is doing its best to break through a weak cloud cover. "It's the middle of the day, and the storm is still a ways off. You're not getting suicidal on me, are you?"

"No, moron," I say, snatching my jacket from a hook on the wall. "I just need to get out of the house. I'm not Nik."

The words are out before I can stop them, and Xander glares at me reproachfully. The topic as it relates to Nik is taboo in our house, forbidden by Xander after a certain sunny day in Chicago. He has yet to explain exactly what happened.

Xander narrows his eyes and I avoid them, staring instead at a stray sliver of sunlight on the floor that has managed to slip through the curtains. It highlights a few dust motes in the air, and I have the sudden urge to reach out and touch them. Anything to distract me from the painful, omnipresent discomfort that hovers between me and my brother.

"Give me a call if you feel like you're burning up," Xander says, boldly ignoring my previous statement. "I'll bring the car."

"Sure thing."

He turns and glides down the hallway, his strides long and purposeful. Something tells me he won't be sleeping for the rest of the day.

One perk of being a vampire is the fact that, technically, I don't have to breathe. It's a hell of a lot more comfortable than the alternative, but a lack of oxygen isn't going to kill me. After all, I can't suffocate if I'm already dead.

Since moving to San Francisco a few decades ago, I have adopted running as a hobby; it's easy to forget my anxieties when there is salty wind in my hair and asphalt pounding under my feet. It's one of the few normal things I can do to clear my head. It's either this or drain the blood from a small town, but with the constant threat of Kaleb's watchful eyes, I usually try to avoid the latter.

A dark cover of storm clouds is rolling over the bay when I arrive at the Embarcadero—just as I hoped—though bad weather never seems to halt tourism. Ferries glide lazily across the water, packed with overweight people in sunglasses and cargo pants and fanny packs who simply *must* see the Golden Gate Bridge. Food vendors call loudly from their carts, advertising churros and fresh corn dogs, the scent of hot oil mingling sickeningly with car exhaust, concrete, and sea spray. Children scream for sweets while hordes of honeymooners buy useless souvenirs. Somewhere in the distance I hear a mother frantically searching for her child, a man being mugged, two cars screeching to a halt as they collide in a chorus of scrunching metal and shattering glass.

Humanity is a glorious mess.

I lean heavily on a railing overlooking the bay and inhale deeply, breathing in the scent of saltwater and seafood and humans and blood.

Always blood.

Rayna once told me that it would stop affecting me one day. She always insisted we spend time around humans—dancing with them, drinking with them, following them to the places where they gathered—because she just *knew* it would help me learn self-control. I'm afraid it backfired rather spectacularly, considering the fact that I never managed a single outing without sinking my fangs into at least one neck.

Sometime in the 1850s, I think she gave up on me altogether.

In a sudden San Francisco miracle, the sun peeks out from behind the threatening cloud cover and the skin on my bare face and hands instantly begins to prickle. The sun won't kill me. Not right away, anyway. It's more of a slow burn, the way the sun seeps moisture from earth: a few minutes is fine, ten minutes is agony, and by thirty minutes I'm cracking and burnt like a dry creek bed in the desert. Best to avoid that.

I shove my hands into the pockets of my jacket and turn away from the sunlight, darting across the street and into the shade of an awning at an overpriced souvenir shop. A few people around me step into the cool November sun, unzipping their coats and holding their arms out, as if doing so will somehow help them absorb more of its warmth.

I suddenly find myself craving the darkness and solitude of my bedroom. The world feels too bright today, even with the threat of an oncoming storm. When the sun fades into shadow again, I make my way down Embarcadero and toward home.

A large group of people huddled on the sidewalk grabs my attention and, against my better judgment, I push through the warm bodies to see what all the fuss is about. A spray-paint street artist with dark hair and a Real Madrid sweatshirt—one of the area’s regulars—stands from his seat on a five-gallon bucket and lifts his newly-finished art piece. It depicts a starry night over the bay, the lights from the Golden Gate Bridge reflecting colorfully on the water. It’s nothing I haven’t seen before—street art like this is a dime a dozen—but I have to admit Real Madrid’s execution is impressive.

The tourists applaud enthusiastically, impressed in a way which tells me that, unlike me, they’ve never seen a street artist before. Most of them begin to clear out, but a few stragglers stay behind to purchase prints that will undoubtedly get bent in suitcases on their way home.

Just behind the artist is a tall boy accepting payment from eager buyers. He has a confident air about him, all tanned skin and honey-blond hair and a set of strong shoulders flexing under a yellow sweater. Two white earbuds hang idly from his neckline. Each customer he talks to leaves with a bright smile on their face—it feels like I’m watching the human embodiment of a sunflower in full bloom. There’s something in the shape of his face, the glow of his eyes that seems familiar.

Where have I seen him before?

He notices me watching him and his expression warms.

“Hi there!” he calls, waving me over. “Is there anything I can help you with?”

The sun pierces through the clouds for a few agonizing seconds before disappearing again, but not before it highlights the threads of gold in the boy’s hair. I take a few steps in his direction and recognition jolts through me: sandy hair, athletic build, golden eyes, and a smattering of freckles over his prominent cheekbones. The memory of last night resurfaces, a frightened face watching as I drained the life from his idiot friend.

Centurion Two.

“No,” I say sweetly, though I suddenly feel uneasy. “I was just admiring your friend’s work.”

A grin spreads slowly across his face, transforming his features the way the San Francisco sun transforms the bay. Big teeth flash behind the curve of his lips. “Noah is amazing, isn’t he? I would join him but, unfortunately, I’m a terrible artist.”

I smile, and a bit of my anxiety subsides.

“I know how you feel,” I say. “My brother is an artist and creates some *amazing* things, but the closest I’ve ever come to painting something worthwhile was when I dumped an entire tray of paints onto the floor of his art studio. The result rivaled Jackson Pollock.”

“That’s not saying much, considering the fact that any two-year-old’s art could rival Jackson Pollock.”

I stare at him. “You actually know who that is?”

“Of course I do. My sister was an art major at SFSU. What kind of brother would I be if I didn’t know an absurd number of increasingly terrible modern artists?”

Centurion Two grins again, and his eyes crinkle slightly at the corners. His good humor is effortless. Genuine. I almost laugh, though I’m not sure why.

“This might sound weird,” he says a little too forcefully, his eyes searching, “but have we met before?”

I freeze, my mind once again replaying the events of last night. I Compelled him. I told him to forget me, to forget my friends, to forget what happened to his worthless companion, Jason. No, he can’t remember.

“I don’t think so,” I say through a thin smile.

“Are you sure?” he asks. “You look really familiar.”

“Sorry, pretty boy,” I scoff, “but your face isn’t ringing any bells.” Sarcasm is a good idea, right?

One eyebrow quirks upward. “You think I’m pretty?”

I take it back. Sarcasm was *not* a good idea.

“Well, you’re not *terrible*-looking,” I say, and it’s not exactly a lie. He has a nice angled face, shaggy blonde hair, and full lips. But the *freckles*. I’ve made my stance on freckles very clear, yet here the universe is, taunting me with them.

“Thank you?”

“You’re welcome.”

He’s frowning at me now, and I can tell his mind is trying hard to recall my face. But he won’t remember; practiced Compulsion doesn’t work that way. Once a memory is gone, it’s gone. There’s no getting it back.

“Are you sure we haven’t met before?” he asks. “Do you work around here? Or maybe we’ve had classes together at San Francisco State. I swear I’ve seen your face. It seems like a hard one to forget.”

“Positive,” I say, embarrassment prickling through me. There’s a beat, during which Centurion Two eyes a pair of honeymooners flipping through paintings. The artist—Noah—is already seated at the bucket again, spraying a new page with a layer of glossy black paint.

“Well, since we apparently *haven’t* met before,” Centurion Two says, “I guess I should introduce myself. I’m Tristan.”

I take the hand he extends, startled by his casual confidence, and flinch slightly as I feel the soft pulse fluttering in his palm. Still, Rayna would be so proud of me. *Shaking a human’s hand, are we?* she’d say. *What, no teeth this time?*

I shove hypothetical Rayna away. “Charlotte,” I offer. “Charlotte Novik.”

“Nice to meet you, Charlotte Novik.” Tristan says my name like he’s known it for years. “Now I know where I’ve seen you before.”

My heart stutters in my chest. “You do?”

“Yeah,” he says slyly. “You’re the girl I met on the Embarcadero the day after Halloween.”

I sigh, relieved that he didn’t say something more incriminating. “I guess you’re right.”

It has been a long time since I’ve had a one-on-one conversation with a human that didn’t involve Compulsion, blood-sucking, or some freaky combination of the two. I am totally out of my element here. What am I supposed to talk about? Current events? The dichotomy of good and evil? Sports?

He’s a college boy. He *has* to love sports.

I’m staring at Tristan, trying to decide which sport he may have played in high school—soccer? Or maybe lacrosse, with those strong shoulders—when the sun appears again from behind the clouds, bringing a warm flush to Tristan’s cheeks. The heat-and-blood combination startles me and my fangs jump to attention. I snap my mouth closed.

Part of me—the part that speaks in Xander’s bored, commanding voice—is telling me to go home *now*, Charlotte. If not for the fact that I may shortly turn into what resembles a pile of desert sand, then for the fact that the last twenty-four hours haven’t been great for me, and I should probably quit while I’m ahead.

As if to convince me further, the sun burns brighter through the cloud cover and I’m starting to feel the familiar—and extremely unpleasant—sensation of my tongue drying to the texture of rough sandpaper. I swallow, and I might as well be swallowing graveyard dirt. I need to get back home, and fast.

Tristan considers me for a moment with pursed lips, as if mulling over a question in his head. “I know this is a little forward, but I’m just about done here with Noah—would you like to grab a coffee with me? There’s a great little café around the corner with *incredible* chocolate croissants.”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise as I try to ignore the heat scorching through me. I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth, willing my fangs back into my gums. “What?”

“Coffee,” he says slowly. “Would you like to get one? With me.” My expression must not be a good one, because his confidence falters slightly. “Or...not?”

I laugh once, bright and loud, then realize my mistake. Tristan frowns at me, a touch of hurt clouding his features.

“You’re serious?” I ask, and the words come out dry and croaking. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound...like that. But I have some really hot friends. And, when I say *hot*, I literally mean model material. I’m not usually the one getting asked on coffee dates.”

“I can’t imagine how any of them can be better-looking than you, but if they are, you might have to introduce me.”

I feel almost offended, but catch a playful glint in his gold eyes as they shimmer in the late autumn sunlight.

“I can’t do coffee,” I say, feeling a surprising pang of regret as Tristan’s expression falls. “Right now, anyway. I have to get home. I have...dinner plans. With my artist brother.”

“Oh.”

“Sorry,” I say, coughing against the creeping dryness in my throat.

“No, it’s okay,” Tristan says. “To be honest, I would have been surprised if you actually said yes.” He thinks for a moment. “This probably sounds less appealing, but some friends and I are getting together to hang out tonight. Noah will be there” —he motions to his friend— “and it’ll be super casual. Will you be done with dinner by eight?” When I purse my lips, he adds, “There will be booze, if that affects your decision. Olivia keeps her wine fridge well-stocked.”

I’m not sure who Olivia is, but it seems harmless enough, hanging out with a group of humans. Though I did nearly murder one of Tristan’s friends last night. What’s to stop me from trying again?

“You want me, a girl you just met, to come to an intimate hangout with you and your friends tonight? For all you know, I could be some psycho serial killer.”

Or a vampire.

“You don’t strike me as a serial killer, Charlotte.” Tristan’s voice resonates with an emotion I can’t place. “What do you say?”

The sun is out in full force now and I’m barely listening to Tristan. Another minute and the skin on my face will start to shrivel like a piece of old leather, and it won’t be pretty. I throw my hood on in an attempt to shield myself from the scalding heat, and Tristan’s eyebrows pinch together.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say brusquely, a familiar agitation burning in my chest at the concern in his voice. It’s the same concern that Xander exhibits when he thinks I’m about to make a poor life decision. My fangs slide out again, and I’m suddenly too aware of the pulse throbbing incessantly under Tristan’s skin. “I need to go,” I say through tight lips.

“What about tonight? Eight o’clock?” Tristan asks, his tone uncertain.

“Sure, I’ll come,” I say, though it’s more to get out of this conversation than anything. I’m already walking away, fumbling for my phone. “Pick me up at the old Pruitt mansion. Do you know where that is?”

“No,” he calls after me, “but I can Google it. Why there?”

“You’ll find out!”

I dart up the street before he can say anything else, elbowing my way through the throngs of people filling the shop-lined sidewalks. A few tourists dive hurriedly out of my way, glaring at me from behind tacky sunglasses, and I manage to knock over a wire rack with a sign boasting POSTCARDS, 3 FOR \$1. The shop owner yells a few profanities at me as I pass by, but I'm too distracted by the metaphorical steam rising from my skin to care. I squint up at the sun, annoyed by its sudden desire to be seen, and immediately hiss as the light fries my eyes.

Idiot.

Xander picks up on the first ring. "Charlotte?"

"You were right."

"You'll have to be more specific."

"The sun is out, and I'm already swallowing sand. I need you to come get me."

There's a rustling sound followed by the jangle of car keys. "Where are you?"

I stumble to an empty street corner and sag against the windows of a sage-painted coffee shop, sliding to the ground and taking shelter behind a large hedge. The dappled shade provides a modicum of relief, though my skin still feels like it might actually be on fire.

I swivel my head until I find the telltale green street signs. "Beach and Mason," I say, each word coming out more breathless than the last. "The corner of Beach and Mason."

"I'll be there soon." Xander hangs up and I'm left alone on the sidewalk, hiding from the daylight like a wounded animal sheltering from the rain. At least my skin hasn't started to crack.

Yet.

Thunder rumbles in the eastern sky, reminding me of the approaching storm as a gust of moisture-soaked wind picks up stray pieces of trash. They scuttle through the gutter as an ominous cloud suffocates the sun and plunges the world into a blanket of damp gray.

A loud chorus of male voices catches my attention, and I watch as three twenty-something boys jaunt excitedly down the sidewalk across the street. The shortest of the group holds a phone in front of him, taking what looks like a video as they laugh at some unspoken joke.

Tourists.

"Hey, are you okay?" A curly-haired girl lowers herself into a crouch next to me. "It looks like you could use some help. I'm a nurse. Is there anything I can do?"

Poor girl. She should have kept walking.

"That's nice of you," I say, squinting up at her. I can see the pulse of blood under her skin, hear the deafening sound of her heartbeat. "There is one thing you can do."

"What's that?"

I smile, draw her toward me, and plunge my fangs into her neck.