

BLOOD OF A MARIONETTE

Chapter 1 "I'll bet you taste pretty sweet, too."

Scarlett pulled off her pajama top and shivered as the clothing brushed her bare skin. The morning sun coming in from the window caressed her skin, making it glow. Lazarus stared at the goose bumps appearing on her back.

"See, I told you I had an awesome tattoo," Scarlett said.

"Yeah," Lazarus agreed, who was sitting cross legged behind her, "That's one hell of an ice breaker. I mean, I wake up, and you're in my bed."

"I don't like being awkward," she said.

"What's to be awkward about? It's not like we slept together last night. I didn't even know you had stayed, since I fell asleep before study group ended."

Lazarus traced the tattoo, his fingers lightly touching her warm skin. Scarlett visibly shivered. His hands followed the tattoo's pattern from her neck, between her shoulder blades all the way down her spine, ending just above the curve of her buttocks.

"It's such a cool design."

Scarlett giggled, "Actually I think I was kind of drunk when I got it done. The whole pattern, with the swirls, little whorls, and pointed tips of each flower things were the tat artist's idea. It's pretty sweet."

"I'll say," Lazarus sighed and scooted closer to her, putting his other hand on her shoulder, "I bet you taste pretty sweet, too."

He heard her intake of breath, but then was surprised when she scooted away. Still facing away, she put her pajama top back on and then faced him. From where she sat on the bed, she was framed in the window which overlooked the lake on the university's campus. The late October sun sparkled of the calm dark blue water.

"Study group was killer last night, wasn't it?" she asked.

Lazarus smiled, "Awkward now, huh? Sorry. This is so much better than the past two months."

"What do you mean?"

"Well you're absolutely gorgeous. I thanked God for you this morning. You're the first girl I woke with this semester who didn't smell like beer."

She crossed her arms, "Don't be such a jerk but thanks, I think."

"Don't you want to have sex?"

"No," she said and giggled, "Is that your entire mind thinks about?"

Lazarus brushed back his shock of long brown hair and tried to dazzle her with his classic crooked smile, "I don't know. I guess I have a one track mind."

"I am not sure I want to know, but I guess I'll ask. What do you mean?"

"Let me put it this way," Lazarus said, scooting closer towards her end of the bed, "I was at a party two nights ago. There were girls, dancing, and alcohol. It was the bottom of the barrel kind of thing where white boys look good dancing, ugly girls looked pretty until the next morning, and the alcohol still tastes good coming up."

Scarlett crossed her arms, revealing for a second the bright red nail polish on her fingernails.

He continued, "I think I was with a girl who was seventeen, but she told me she was nineteen. She cried, and I had to drive her home."

Scarlett's eyes bugged out slightly, "Oh, you're twenty-two. This might be harder than I thought."

"What's that mean?" he asked, pushing the covers off and sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Well, she's not even legal. That makes you gross and a criminal."

"Only a crime if I get caught."

With no further room to scoot back away from the predatorily Lazarus, Scarlett got out of bed and walked to the bathroom where her shirt revealed the hint of a beginning of her tattoo on the nape of her neck, "I need a shower."

While Scarlett was in the shower, Lazarus threw on a pair of jeans and a white and grey waffle shirt and checked his email. Scarlett stepped out of the bathroom dressed. Her tight turtleneck and blue jeans accentuated her curves which Lazarus could not take his eyes off of.

She said, "Up here, buddy. Let's go get brunch."

On their way back from the local coffee shop, they noticed a crowd of students at one of the sidewalk junctions near Howe Hall. The bushes where the sidewalk met were infamous for late night rendezvous. This apparently was not a discrete meet-up. The crowd was growing and included students, faculty, and police. When Lazarus saw EMTs arrive with a wheeled stretcher, his stomach dropped.

"I thought this was a pretty safe campus," Lazarus said to Scarlett.

He saw that she was white-faced as well.

"I guess not," she said.

A burly policeman with a walrus mustache was trying to clear a path for the EMTs.

"Everyone back," he said, waving his muscled arms, "These men need to get to the front."

Lazarus finally noticed that the crowd was for the most part silent. The crowd parted like the sea under Moses, and he could hear the squeak of the stretcher's wheels over the ground. As soon as there was space a young woman, dressed in pajama bottoms, her winter coat, and tattered mud splattered Ugg boots started making a commotion. She was at the edge of the parting crowd and finally got a look at the body half hidden in the bushes. The young woman let out a keening wail that seemed to come from ground itself.

"Oh, Tommy. Tommy!" she cried out.

She rushed forward into the open space, dodged around the police officer, and grabbed at the body. Her actions pulled the obscured body out of the wet brush and revealed it to the crowd. There was a collective gasp. In the early morning light, the corpse reflected an unnatural paleness. There was a massive but for the most part bloodless wound at the neck that had almost severed the head. The woman stopped cradling the head and moved her hand to join the other in order to hug the body. With that motion the head fell back, separating the last few attached strands of flesh and fell with a gentle thump into the brush. She screamed and Lazarus and Scarlett heard someone behind them voiding their stomach of that morning's breakfast.

Scarlett leaned in and whispered to Lazarus, "Let's get out of her."

She looked sick herself.

Chapter 2 "Just like the guy who did Tommy in."

The entire university was abuzz with the murder that had taken place. Located next to a small town in New Jersey, Falhorn University was not used to being front page news for the state. Its typical crime rate consisted of cows getting hit by tourists visiting the historic town

from the nearby coast and the drunken antics of college hooligans during basketball season. It seemed that everywhere Lazarus went, whether it was Dansbury Hall, his apartment, or the bathroom in the student center, that there were police everywhere. They seemed to have come out of the woodwork. The media had also set up a large camp at the sidewalk intersection in front of Howe Hall where the body had been discovered. They would harangue passing students, staff, and the golden calf, a police officer. Scarlett was not immune either.

The two of them sat in Chucks Café, within visual distance of the media horde, and hid.

Scarlett leaned forward over her steaming mug of pumpkin coffee, "I can't believe this. Every single time I walk by those guys they recognize my face, all because I gave that stupid interview the day after they found Tommy."

"Well," Lazarus said, "I've been told that vanity is a sin."

"Oh shut up," she said, "You could at least support me in this."

"I told you not to do it. Those TV hawks are out for blood, just like the guy who did Tommy in."

"I know. I should've just kept my mouth shut."

Lazarus checked to make sure his fly was zipped up before he stood up to go to the bathroom. Standing, he almost knocked the delicate little table over. She looked up at him, cradling her mug.

Lazarus crossed his arms and said, "Sloth, gluttony, greed, lust, envy, wrath, and pride."

She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say anything, he held up his hand, "Hold that thought. I gotta pee."

"Jerk," she said and shot him daggers to his retreating back.

When he returned, Lazarus asked, "Did your professors take it okay?"

Scarlett shot him another look and then said, "Dr. Reyman didn't. He loves his students, even though Tommy wasn't one of them. My other professor, Pyrle, took it in stride. I think he views all students as kind of disposable."

"Oh yeah," Lazarus said, "that asshole. He's the one who gives you impossible amounts of work, even for a law student, and expects you to do well with it."

"Yep, but I wouldn't call him an asshole. He's just demanding and a good professor, too. Probably the best one here."

Lazarus did not want to argue with her, so instead he just took a deep drink of his tea. Scarlett was facing away from the window, so Lazarus was the one to perk up when he noticed the commotion at the bushes where the media hovered like restless alligators.

"Scar, check it out. There's something going on over there."

"Over where? Oh," she said, turning around.

Lazarus took his eyes from the commotion for a second to take in Scarlett's profile. The sunlight cast shadows against her body caressing her up and down with its weightless touch.

"Well, speak of the devil," she said.

This outburst shattered his momentary visual consumption, and Lazarus's eyes went back to the window.

"It's him," she said, "That guy talking to the media. That's my professor."

Lazarus stared at the man who was making Scarlett's life miserable. He was small and short of stature, but the way he stood there talking, he could see that he had made himself the center of attention. From this distance, Lazarus couldn't see much in the way of detailed physical characteristics but he noticed his dark brown hair.

"Let's go," Scarlett said.

“What?”

She put on her coat in a rush, almost knocking the table over in her hurry.

“Where?” Lazarus asked.

“I gotta go see what he is saying,” she said, “Will you pay?”

Before Lazarus could respond, she was gone, leaving a solitary leaf spinning just inside the door of the café from the breeze. Lazarus took his time paying, not willing to rush over to see another man that Scarlett was so enthralled with. When he got out there, Pyrle still seemed to have captured the audience, and Scarlett looked pale again.

Pyrle was speaking, “was a sad day to find out that he was a student among us. I will be providing council to all my students in the event that they need it. I have heard it been told that in times of great crisis, such as this, that people rise up and form community and create healing. I hope I can do my part.”

As soon as he closed his mouth, the media began to snap. They shouted out questions, thrust forward microphones, and their camera lackeys flashed pictures.

Lazarus leaned in next to Scarlett and asked in a whisper, “What’s up?”

She did not respond for a second. Appearing that she was getting ready to faint, Lazarus grabbed her around the waist with one arm and her hand with his other, “Let’s go sit down.”

She nodded. They found a quiet bench a few yards away.

Scarlett finally found her voice, “They found the guy who did it. His name is Carlos. He was in Pyrle’s class, my class.”

For once, Lazarus did not say anything.

“He came forward and admitted it on his own free will,” she continued, “It’s just so-”

Lazarus squeezed her to reassure her. Neither noticed that during Pyrle’s questioning by the mob that he never took his eyes off the two of them as they sat together on the bench.

Chapter 3 Lazarus and Harry, in unison, gave the old lady the finger.

Lazarus stood at the airport waiting for Harry’s plane to arrive from San Diego. The airport smelled too clean, like antiseptic. It reminded him of the doctor’s office and that all the people were patients waiting to be seen. He smiled as his best friend since the second grade stumbled out of the crowd bleary eyed and obviously already fighting the jet lag.

“Harry!” he yelled.

Harry spun around, long hair whipping around into his own face. He broke into a grin and ran to Lazarus.

“Hey, buddy,” Harry said in his deep Barry Manilow voice, “How’s it going? Still dressing like a prep, I see.”

They embraced, and as usual, Lazarus had trouble wrapping his arms around his burly professional football player-sized friend.

“You’re still getting stares, too.” Lazarus said, pulling away and helping him with his bags.

“What are you saying? Are you making fun of the way I dress? It’s not everyday you see a 250 pound cammo-pants wearing, dragon pendant-sporting, cut figure like myself.”

They began walking to the enormous asphalt parking lot. People parted for them as Harry cut a swath to the exit.

“Yep, I guess it’s the boots. They make you look taller.”

Harry punched Lazarus in the arm, causing him to stumble, and he said with a smile, “Don’t mess with the boots—Italian leather. They were a cool 500 bucks.”

They got into the small blue Jetta with the Tinkerbell decal on the back window. As Harry struggled to fit his large frame into the small passenger seat, he frowned across to Lazarus.

“When did you get a car, and why the hell did you decorate it with Tinkerbell? You’ve got some obsession, dude, as you are now the only guy I know with Tinkerbell seat covers. Congratulations.”

“Don’t worry,” Lazarus said, as he started the car, “It’s not mine.”

Harry let out an overly dramatic sigh of relief, “Well that’s nice. Whose is it? Some girl you hooked up with last night?”

Lazarus swallowed and kept his eyes fixed on the road, “It’s my girlfriend’s.”

He risked a glance over at his friend and smiled when he saw that his jaw was hanging open. The dragon pendant glinted in the November sunlight.

“Wait, what? You wanna run that by me one more time?”

“I said it is my girlfriend’s car.”

Harry’s mouth worked for a second opening and closing, making small futile sounds. He reached over and started to touch Lazarus on the shoulder, smacking him gently on the face, pulling his hair.

Lazarus pushed his hand away and smiled, “Cut it out, I’m driving.”

“Sorry,” Harry said, “I was just checking to make sure that you were still human because you aren’t acting like you.”

He shook his head, “You, with a girlfriend? Lazarus, you realize that I am talking to you, right? I mean the guy, who in high school had a contest with me to see how many girls we could sleep with?”

“Yes, I know. I’m monogamous,” he shook his head, “It still feels like a dirty word.”

“It is a dirty word,” Harry said, and punched him in the arm again.

Lazarus almost hit the car that was passing him on the left. The other driver’s horn sounded out angrily. Lazarus and Harry, in unison, gave the old lady driving the Volkswagen the finger.

“We should kill her,” Harry said.

Lazarus looked at him and then waved at the old lady, “Sometimes I don’t know when you are joking or when you are serious. You know why I won that bet in high school, right?”

Harry crossed his arms and smiled.

Lazarus continued, “It’s because I didn’t wear a dragon pendant on my ear.”

“Say what you want. It’s my mojo. Will I get to meet this girlfriend of yours?”

“No, she’s out of town this weekend, visiting family. Are you sure you can’t stay longer than three days? It’s been three years since we’ve hung out for more than a day.”

Harry sighed and looked out the window at the passing trees, “I wish I could, dude. You know that but I got this meeting in the Barrens I’ve got to go to. You know how it is.”

Lazarus did. An uncomfortable silence settled in the car, and Lazarus wished he had not brought up the subject. Harry solved the problem by turning on the radio and they rode in silence the rest of the way home.

Chapter 4 “He’s weird like that.”

Scarlett strode out of the arrivals gate, flowered luggage bag in hand, “I’m back sweetie.”

“Hey,” he said, standing and stretching like a cat, “How were your folks?”

She came up to him and gave him a tight hug and quick peck on the lips, “Exhausting. They always have so much energy and want to take me out to dinner, go hiking, or whatever. Now I just want to go home and nap with you.”

“Well let’s do that. I hate airports.”

Lazarus was ready to be out of the timeless doldrums of the airport and was afraid that any longer and he was going to get stuck there waiting for someone else. When they got into Scarlett’s car, with her driving again, Lazarus sat back and relaxed. Even though it was a little chilly outside, the sun had warmed the seat up enough to make him relaxed and sleepy.

He said to Scarlett, “It’s good to have you home, babe.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Lazarus opened his eyes and saw that she was thumbing through a dog eared journal with a cracked aging leather jacket. Loose sheets of paper poked out from it and there were water stains on the edge of the pages. Scarlett had her nose buried in the book.

“What’s this?” she asked him.

“Don’t know,” he replied, “It’s not mine. Can I see it?”

“Yea, in a second. Who is Benjamin?”

“I don’t know. Let me look at the book.”

She handed it over to him, and he thumbed through it. Immediately, he recognized the cramped scribble and knew it was something of Harry’s.

“Oh shit,” he said, “This must be Harry’s journal. It was on the dashboard, right? He must have left it there right before he got out of the car.”

Scarlett started the car, “Oh yeah! How was your boy’s weekend out? It was kind of dumb to forget it when it is sitting in plain sight, don’t you think?”

“I guess,” Lazarus said, “Harry was kind of distracted, but we still had a good time. He wanted to go to a strip club and do all the sort of things we did while in high school, but I wasn’t really up for it. I mean being with you and everything. So instead we played Scrabble all weekend.”

Scarlett looked over at him surprised.

He smiled, “Just kidding, we got drunk and watched movies.”

“You know there is nothing wrong with scrabble.”

“Yep,” Lazarus said, gazing at the now closed worn diary in his hands, as if it was all that was left of his friend.

Pulling onto the highway, Scarlett asked, “Can’t you call him and tell him that he forgot it?”

“He’ll probably realize it once he gets to where he is going, and he doesn’t carry a cell phone. He’s weird like that.”

Scarlett snorted and she turned the conversation away from Harry and back to her parents’ crazy activities, and for that Lazarus was glad. The sun shone brightly off the car, glinting as it sped like a bug down the highway back towards their backwater college. It was just one among many thousands of bugs crawling along the highway, no different than any others in intent or purpose.

It was a dreary sunless morning of the beginning of December. The kind of day where Lazarus would rather spend it listening to his favorite Eagles album or sipping hot cocoa spiced with rum instead of trudging through ankle deep snow, exhausted after already cracking books for eight hours. Scarlett met him halfway to back to his apartment.

Sliding up to him she said with a smile, “Hey, I got someone you might want to meet, sweetie.”

“Yeah? Who would that be?” he asked.

They walked next to each other for a moment content to be in each other’s company in silence. The snow crunched under their feet. He took her hand.

“Wooh! Your hands are cold. His name is Pyrle. He is one of my professors.”

“Your how to be a lawyer class? The one you’re always doing work for. You never talk about it.”

“Well, now I am. He wants to meet you and possibly become your mentor as well.”

“Who is this guy?” Lazarus asked, “He’s some sort of shadowy figure as professors go. Why now?”

“Well,” she said, squinting out into the distance, “He, uh, didn’t really want to talk with you until you cleaned up your act a little.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes again as Lazarus digested this new bit of information. The only movement from Scarlett as she matched his pace was her ponytail swinging in the biting wind.

Lazarus withdrew his hand from hers, “So what you’re saying is that you were sent to reform me or something so I could be worthy of this man’s attention?”

“What? No!” she said, but it came out too quickly, “I mean, in a sense, yes, but after I met you I grew to like you and who you were.”

“Right,” said Lazarus reaching for the door handle to the entrance. He hissed at the coldness of the handle on his naked palm, “I think I’ll be eating alone tonight.”

“Please don’t do this,” she said, “I don’t want us to fight.”

Lazarus relented, “Fine. Come inside. But no promises on dinner.”

As the door closed sealing them in the mouth of the old building, the words, “You’re lucky, I like you, Scar,” slipped out only to be lost on the ears of the wind.

Chapter 5 “Hey, chill, Damocles.”

Lazarus stood before Scarlett in his underwear, “I’m ready.”

“Well it’s about time,” she said, “Get dressed and then go to his office.”

“You still haven’t told me what he does here,” he said not moving.

“I told you,” she said, “He’s my mentor and the professor of how to be a lawyer class.”

“Yea, and he’ll be mine, but that doesn’t tell me what he does. Actually, you never even told me the course number.”

“Woah, it’s not guaranteed that he’ll be your mentor,” she said, “But if he does you’ll start his classes and then get on the fast track once you graduate to becoming a partner at Truste, Loade, and Surn. At least that is what he tells us.”

Lazarus choked on his spit, “The blood suckers? They’re notorious. I had no idea they recruited from this campus. I would’ve though getting into Falhorn would’ve been more competitive because of them.”

“Well they just set up shop here within the past couple of years, and Pyrle keeps it kind of low key.”

“Hot damn,” Lazarus said skipping a few steps, “Let’s go get ‘em!”

They stood in front of Pyrle Lefter’s door.

“You look a lot more nervous now, champ,” Scarlett said.

“Weren’t you when you stood in front of this imposing oaken door with the possibility of your future hanging by a horse hair?”

“Hey, chill, Damocles. Calm down and just be yourself.”

“Which one,” Lazarus said, giving her a sidelong glance, “Me, or the me you’ve tried to create over these past three months since we’ve been together?”

“Just who you are,” she said, smoothing back her hair.

Lazarus shook himself out and opened the door. The couple stepped into stillness. It was a dark room because of the heavy curtains over the windows and because of the man who sat behind the giant mahogany desk in the middle of room. Strange paintings hung at perfect angles across the wall depicting demons battling several different Christian knights. There were other paintings also, ominous, full of dark colors, violent whorls, and unheard screams. Scarlett closed the door and took a seat just outside the seeming circle of darkness around the man in the imposing chair.

“Welcome to my office,” Pyrle said.

“Uhh, thank you, professor. I just wanted to say thank you for this opportunity to become your student. Let me just say that I have heard great things about your-”

“Take off your clothes,” Pyrle interrupted.

He did not appear to be a man worth crossing. His dark suit and even darker hair flecked with gray spoke power, but what really stood out was the silver cross hanging on his neck and his perfectly shaped white, white teeth.

“What?” Lazarus asked.

“Take off your clothes. Now.”

Pyrle got his point across without having to raise his voice, as the light in the room seemed to fade a few degrees more. Lazarus spared a glance at Scarlett who sat still as stone, and he began to strip. He stopped when he got to his underwear, but, still, nobody moved. Lazarus looked at the man behind the desk and at his sad pile of clothes on the floor. Then he removed his underwear. He stood naked and shivering, feeling violated as Pyrle’s eyes roamed his body.

Pyrle looked behind Lazarus, “Good choice, Scarlett. He’ll do.”

“I’ll do...sir?” Lazarus asked.

“Pyrle turned his attention back to Lazarus, and he shrank back a little under the intense stare, “I agree to be your mentor. You will report to class with Scarlett starting next week. Put your clothes back on.”

Lazarus watched himself get dressed in the large mirror behind the desk. He watched his pale flesh disappear under business casual, saw Scarlett’s eyes roaming up and down his body, and saw the rear profile of Pyrle sitting in his chair with his neatly combed hair, broad shoulders, and straight posture.

“Uh...thank you, sir.”

“Think nothing of it,” Pyrle said coolly, “See you next week.”

The two left and walked the short distance to Lazarus’s apartment. When they got in Lazarus poured himself a drink and started talking.

“What the hell was that all about?”

“It’s what he did to me and to my sponsor—I mean friend before that.”

“It was totally humiliating. Wait someone had to *sponsor* you?” he asked, “Just like you *sponsored* me?”

“Kind of,” she said.

“Well, who was he?”

“She, actually. Her name was Samantha, and she was my sponsor for a year when I was a sophomore,” she said, staring into her soup.

“Well what happened to her? Where is she?”

“She graduated,” Scarlett looked up with a tear sliding down the delicate curve of her cheek, “I don’t know. No one does. They are just called up by Pyrle and then they go. It happens when they graduate. I guess we can only assume they go to work for the firm. But me, I mean, we, never hear from them again.”

“Wow,” said Lazarus, his eyes were wide, “I won’t let that happen to us.”

Scarlett snorted and then said, “Don’t think that’s never been said before, by Samantha, by her sponsor. We’re not strong enough to stop this process.”

“We’ll see about that,” he said taking her hand.

She said quietly, “It’s been said before.”

Chapter 6 The next thing Lazarus remembered

Pyrle’s class added only another layer of work to his already hectic schedule; he was only sitting in for last two weeks of the semester and would become a full time member of the class in January with the start of the next semester. Winter break was short, only two weeks long and in no time Lazarus and Scarlett were back in school. Now the only time he and Scarlett spent together was to sleep next to each other, to eat together before rushing to class, and to study. Pyrle’s was composed of twelve members; there were no other freshmen and most of the class was juniors and seniors. Scarlett was one of the juniors. It was rigorous—several hours of reading per day as well as frequent quizzes and tests. Pyrle was training them to be crack lawyers. As the weeks progressed, Lazarus began to notice Pyrle’s mood swings in his teaching style and general personality.

In late January, Lazarus walked into the small classroom in the old mansion at the top of the hill. The fireplace roared away fighting the winter chill which crept in through the thin windows. Pyrle was pacing the room as he did during the periods of his erratic behavior. Pyrle walked from behind his desk gesticulating with his hands as Lazarus was learning he always did expounding on the problems of courtroom ethics, when he laid a hand on Leslie’s neck. She was a beautiful senior with delicate matching tattoos of tribal lines just visible at the cuffs of her shirt. His hand stayed there, and he stopped speaking for a second and closed his eyes. Then he removed his hand and began talking again.

“Creep,” Lazarus muttered to Scarlett.

She gave him a silencing look. Then it happened again, but this time he put his hands on Jordan’s neck. Jordan was a big brawny senior rugby player, but he did not say anything.

“Double creep,” Lazarus said again.

“Shut up, Laz,” she said back under her breath.

Pyrle continued his circling. Lazarus felt his presence behind him, heard his slippery voice. Then he felt a snaking warm dry hand come to rest on his neck, expertly finding his carotid artery and feeling the pulse. Lazarus stood up knocking over his chair. The others were startled by his sudden movement.

“Excuse me, sir, but what the hell are you doing?”

“Relax, Lazarus. It was nothing. Please sit down,” he replied, silver on his tongue.

“Sir, what were you doing?”

Pyrle's voice grew hard, "It is a need to know basis. Accept it as everyone else does, or get out of my class and never come back."

Lazarus looked around the room and was surprised to find not faces of support but faces of anger and discomfort. He looked to Scarlett expecting support, but she merely mouthed 'sit down.' He picked up his chair and sat. Pyrle continued as if nothing had happened.

Lazarus and Scarlett waited inside the room after everyone had filed out. They stood on opposite sides of the room.

"What the hell was that?" Lazarus asked, "Why was he touching people and me?"

"Sweetie, it's on a need to know basis. Trust me, when it's time, he'll tell you."

"How much do you know?" he asked, scooping up his books and loading them into his tattered book bag.

"Not much more than you. I'm still relatively uninitiated," she said.

"Initiated?"

"Yea, well. Pyrle will pull you aside and let you in on some of the workings on becoming a lawyer at this firm."

"Oh?" said Lazarus, raising his eyebrow.

"Yes," Scarlett said not looking at him.

"What?"

"Let's get some food," she said and went out the door.

As he walked out the door, hurrying to catch up to her, he decided not to press the issue just yet, knowing that it was fight he was probably not going to win. The first test in Pyrle's class was in the middle of February. Lazarus and all the students poured their blood, sweat, and tears into the blue books. Pyrle watched each of them as he collected their essays.

As Lazarus handed him his exam, he said, "Wait a minute, Lazarus. I would like you to come by my office tomorrow evening?"

"Why?"

Pyrle gave him a wry smile, "Need to know."

Lazarus showed up the next day in a blue fleece and faded jeans. The fleece tickled his neck. Lazarus swallowed and knocked on the door, and it swung in on its own accord.

"Come in, Lazarus," said Pyrle.

Pyrle was once again seated in the same position behind his desk in the same position and in the same darkness the last time Lazarus was in here.

"Please sit," Pyrle said indicating to the chair now in front of his large imposing desk.

"What do you want from me, professor?"

"Not much, Lazarus. I just want to know you're committed to this track."

"I am, sir."

"Yes," Pyrle said, "Your performance shows this."

"Thank you, sir."

"Well, I think you're ready for the next step."

"Really?" Lazarus said, sitting up.

"Yes, let's have a drink," Pyrle said.

He got up and went to the edge of the room which was bathed in near darkness. From its depths he brought back two glasses full of a brown liquid. The glasses were enveloped by writhing metal serpents.

"Have some whiskey? It's fine."

"Thank you, sir," Lazarus said, taking the glass, "Cheers."

Lazarus threw back the whiskey not taking time to celebrate the flavor, too intent on his promotion to notice that Pyrle just stood watching him and grinning.

The next thing Lazarus remembered was waking up in his own bed with aches along his arms.

“What, what happened?” he said to no one.

Lazarus scratched his arms and gasped in pain, and then looked at his shoulders and biceps, “Oh dear lord!”

His arms were thick with ink from his shoulders to his elbows, and with just a little bit of tattoo reaching onto his shoulder blades. They were swirling patterns, almost arabesque in their but instead of plant designs they were strange markings. There were some that looked like animals like giant bees and others that looked like no animals on this earth, great big beasts with twin elephant trunks and dagger-like blades at the end.

“What the hell?” Lazarus asked himself.

Just then Scarlett walked into the room with a tray for breakfast in bed.

“Hey, honey. Here’s breakfast.”

“What. The. Hell. Just. Happened. To. Me?”

The last two words came out as a shriek.

“This is not something you can explain away as something on a need to know basis. I was fucking drugged, and then given some insane tattoos up and down my body.”

Scarlett opened her mouth to speak.

“No,” he continued, “I’m not done yet. How do I know I’m not infected with HIV now? What is the rate for AIDS on this campus? Or how about in our little group? Is he turning us all into AIDS victims, so we will have nothing to live for except the hope of quick promotion to the top of the firm? I mean, come on! What is this shit?!”

He almost began again and then sucked in his breath, finger held up in the air as if he was having a eureka moment.

“Take off your shirt,” he said pointing to her top.

She complied without speaking and automatically turned around. Lazarus stared at her tattoo, obscured only slightly by her black bra strap. He gasped.

“If I take a picture of yours and my tattoos, they would fit together, wouldn’t they?”

Scarlett turned and knelt at the edge of the bed and stroked his feet under the covers, “Sweetie, calm down. This is exactly how I felt, exactly how Samantha felt, exactly how we all felt. Shh. The tattoos would fit together.”

She continued to stroke his feet, “It all turns out okay. This is just the first step. You’ve now been officially accepted into the group, “Welcome and enjoy it.”

Scarlett slowly moved her hands up his legs still massaging his legs out.

“But who did the tattoos? Why did I have to be drugged?”

“Because you would’ve resisted,” she said, her voice smooth as silk, “Like you did when you woke up.”

“What are you doing?” Lazarus asked, as she pulled down the covers and began to unbutton his pants.

“I want you to not worry about the tattoos, and I think I ready to go to the next level with you,” she said, looking into his eyes.

“But the needles,” he said, his voice failing as he pulled her close.

“Shh.”

As they made love for the first time, Lazarus could not help but wonder, Am I ready for the next level?

And he was not sure if he was talking about Pyrle or Scarlett.

Chapter 7 “Like I told you, it’s just the next step.”

The reset of the semester flew by in a haze of studying, working, and love making, and then it was summer. It came and went in a flash. Scarlett went back to Georgia and Lazarus back to Colorado. They saw each other a few times but before either of them knew it, they were back in class studying hard and praying for the weekends. The class was now down to eight with the five former juniors now currently seniors. Scarlett was among that bunch. On the first day of class, Pyrle was back as his usual enigmatic but demanding self.

“Well, I guess we shall have to do some more recruiting this year to make up for the crop we lost,” Pyrle said, walking into the classroom and surveying the remaining group.

The way he said those words gave Lazarus the chills, and he moved his hand taking Scarlett’s in his. Lazarus did not see Pyrle’s eyes flick toward this movement and back again.

“On another note,” he continued, “the seniors will have their first meeting with me after class today.”

Then the drudgery began. Scarlett and Lazarus said goodbye after class which ended at nine p.m.

“I don’t know why I feel like this,” Lazarus started, “But I just want to say be careful. Be careful.”

“Shh,” said Scarlett, putting her finger to his lips, “Everything will be okay. You worry too much. Like I told you, it’s just the next step.”

Lazarus sighed and squeezed her hand looking into her eyes as if for the last time, “See you tonight.”

Lazarus went home, did some reading, and checked his watch. Then he did a little more reading and checked his watch again. When he finished with his homework, he watched television, and at each commercial, he checked his watch. It was now 12:30 a.m., and Scarlett still had not shown up.

There was a knock on the door, and Lazarus scrambled up from where he was sitting at his desk. He caught Scarlett as she stumbled into his arms.

“Oh, baby,” she said, “It’s good to see you. I never thought I would get out of there alive.”

“What? What are you talking about? Do we need to call the police?”

She looked up at him with tired eyes, “It was so boring, even worse than his class.”

“Come in. Let me get you something to eat. You look tired,” Lazarus said, carrying her to the living room.

He turned on the light and led her to the couch. Illuminated, she looked even pale as if the blood had been drained from her body.

“What happened?” he asked, as she lay down on the couch.

“Huh?” she replied.

“What happened in that meeting?”

“The next step,” she said her voice a hair’s breadth from sleep.

“What do you mean?” he asked, running a finger down her cheekbone.

But he got no response. Scarlett had fallen dead asleep. Lazarus sighed and put a blanket over her. She had not even taken off her shoes. Lazarus went to bed and dreamed. Scarlett was there sleeping in his bed and he was unable to wake her. As he shook her, his tattoos moved off his shoulders and onto his hands. This action pulled his hands back off her body and put his hands around his own neck. Now he was fighting himself. In his struggle he saw Scarlett's tattoo slide around to her neck like a snake and constrict around her throat. Through the haze of oxygen deprivation, he saw Scarlett wake up and begin clawing at her through, opening up deep gouges in her skin. By that time for Lazarus, the world had gone black. Lazarus woke up sitting straight upright. Over the buzz of his alarm clock he heard, Scarlett signing softly in the kitchen as if nothing had happened last night.

That day in Pyrle's class none of the new seniors showed any sign of change like Lazarus had seen in Scarlett last night, but Pyrle acted differently. He seemed to speak with a purr that had not existed before and his dark olive skin seemed to glow. He did not place his hands on anyone's neck this time but resonated power.

Chapter 8 "Everything's good. I'm gonna get some sleep."

The weeks passed and Scarlett would come home tired like the first time every once in a while. The third time this happened Lazarus decided to follow her and spy on this meeting that all the seniors were required to attend.

On Thursday night at 9:11 p.m., he found himself crouching out in the weeds and bushes outside Pyrle's office's large windows. Lazarus waited for the class's oldest members to file into the Pyrle's office. Exposed as he was through the thin foliage, they would not see him because the students were coming from the other side of the building straight from the class. He could feel the hydrangea's whispering touch, as if trying to caress him into a sin-filled night. At his eye level a line of ants marched on, oblivious to his raspy breathing from his spy activities on the warm early October night. A cricket buzzed on his left. He was afraid he was going to have to squish it just so he could hear through the drapes. Lazarus tapped at the window and was reassured by the shudder of thin glass. He heard the door opened and the group of five plus the teacher filed in.

"This is it," Lazarus said to the ants, which scurried away as his breath moved over them. The disembodied voices floated out of the wind only slightly muffled by the heavy carpet-like drapes. A smooth voice made even more elusive by the curtains reached Lazarus's ears.

"Please sit down. We will begin as usual in a few minutes."

There was the sound of scraping chairs, though Lazarus had never seen more than one or two chairs in the room before.

"We need to discuss our recruitment strategy for this year. Some of you, like Scarlett, our young prodigy, already have someone. I want to hear how others are faring and their selections. If you were all as gifted as Scarlett and could have gotten special permission to recruit early, we wouldn't have this annual problem right now."

Leslie, with the tattoos on her arm spoke up, "I think I am about ready to make contact with my person."

"His name is Colin, and he comes from Alaska, pretty much the other side of the world. He is a loner but is really smart at mathematics. With a little bit of tweaking, I think I can turn his oral skills around."

There was a brief chuckle.

She continued, “And have him using that math and logic skills to win cases in the courtroom.”

“Wow,” said Pyrle, “Good speech, but don’t let it sound so prepared next time. Lawyers can pick that up but good choice. I give you permission to make contact and begin your training.”

Two others went and Pyrle approved them both, a Darcy and a Michael. Lazarus vowed to keep an eye on them.

“Now,” said Pyrle, “to the main event. Leslie, if you would.”

“I don’t want to, sir,” she said.

The silence was deafening to Lazarus, and he wondered what it was like to actually be in the room.

“It’s not that I don’t want to,” she continued, “Well, it is that I don’t want to, actually. I don’t like it.”

“Please reconsider,” Pyrle said, “Because it wasn’t really a request. It was more of a demand.”

“Please,” she said, her voice going faint.

There was a scuffling and a squeal. Lazarus jumped, cracking a branch. The muffled resisting inside continued uninterrupted.

“Please, please, please,” Leslie kept repeating.

“Professor,” Scarlett’s said, “I’ll do it. I don’t mind.”

“Very well.”

Lazarus could hear Leslie sobbing under the window he was at, repeating the words, “No more violation.”

“Please remove your jewelry,” Pyrle said.

Lazarus felt his stomach drop and thought, What’s going on?

There was a moan that sounded a lot like Scarlett’s voice and then silence. Lazarus’s brain went into high gear imagining all the possibilities of what could be happening, each getting more outlandish than the last. He was about to bang on the window when he heard Pyrle speak again.

“Here. Thank you, Scarlett. Daniel.”

There was a scraping of chairs as Scarlett and Daniel moved around. Lazarus heard him moan too. After a minute, Lazarus heard Pyrle speaking again calling Jordan’s name.

“Thank you. You have sated my lust yet again,” Pyrle said, “You may all go.”

“Oh, Leslie,” Pyrle said, “Would you please remain behind.”

Lazarus wanted to stay, but he would now be exposed to the other students in the room, who would be coming to get their cars on this side of the building. He fled home.

Scarlett came home later with Starbucks, one for her and one for him. She was pale and seemed to sway a bit.

“Hey, honey,” she said, “I brought you your favorite energy, coffee.”

“Thanks,” Lazarus said, sitting in the living room not getting up, “How was the meeting?”

“Oh fine. Pyrle just gave out some more assignments.”

“Did you get any more work?” he asked, taking his coffee from her.

“No, but I helped someone else complete one.”

“Oh,” he said, “Is this why you brought coffee? Was it exhausting?”

“No,” she said eyeing him up, “Is everything okay? I’ve got a test to study for in history.”

Lazarus said, “Everything’s good. I’m gonna get some sleep.”

Scarlett watched him walk away without taking a sip from his coffee. If he had turned around, he would have seen the perplexed but worried expression on her face.

Chapter 9 Burst Artery

The next day Leslie was not in class. Pyrle strode around Lazarus’s desk, strutting like a peacock.

“Laz, can I call you that? I would like to speak with you after class since you seem unable to answer my very simple question.”

Lazarus snapped out of it. Hearing his pet name come from the lips of his professor whom he had grown to hate overnight because of what he heard last night at Pyrle’s office caused a burning sensation within his stomach as if someone had dropped a spoonful of acid.

“Yes, sir. I will meet you,” Lazarus said, wishing he had said, Sir, What the fuck are you doing to my girlfriend?

Lazarus let himself into Pyrle’s dark office and stood waiting in front of his desk. Time stood still as if it had found a hiding spot within this dark, curtained, and musty room while trying to avoid the man who owned it.

Pyrle strode into his office, “Lazarus. Lazarus, what are we going to do with you? I sense a feeling of anger coming off of you. I mean I’m pretty good at reading people. Your posture—it’s so tense. Relax.”

Pyrle came up and put his hands on Lazarus’s shoulders. He shrugged out of them and spun around to face his professor.

“I demand to know what is going on here,” he said, crossing his arms and puffing up his chest.

Pyrle raised an eyebrow, “You demand, do you? You’re not really in a position to demand anything seeing as how I’m blocking your only exit.”

“Is that a threat?” Lazarus asked and added almost as an afterthought, “Sir.”

“No, no, no,” he crooned, “Please, sit. I merely just want you to see it from my perspective.”

Lazarus sat, and Pyrle smiled. He circled around to the other side of the desk. Lazarus waited for the other shoe to drop.

“Have I taught you nothing about how to be a lawyer? Where’s your tactics?” Pyrle asked, pulling open a drawer and withdrawing a fifth of gin, “Drink?”

“You taught me to be assertive, to go for the kill, and to quote you, Go for the fucking jugular, rip it out, and let the blood bathe you in your glory.”

“Ahh, so you do pay attention,” he withdrew the bottle as Lazarus ignored his offer and poured himself a glass.

Lazarus got the feeling he was being toyed with and the drink was only an excuse for delay.

“Tonic, too. Can’t forget the tonic,” said Pyrle, as if he were at a dinner party where he did not care about anything except getting drunk and knew that he had a right to do so.

Behind Pyrle the setting sun struggled to get into the office. What little illumination got through the gaps in the curtains, shot daggers of light filled with dancing particles of dust. Their recent movements had stirred these particles into a whirling frenzy in and out of the spotlight in a mad dance.

“So let’s get down to business. What’s your problem?” purred Pyrle.

“I want to know what goes on in the senior meetings, and I want you to stop sexually using my girlfriend.”

“And that would be whom?” asked Pyrle, eyebrows raised.

“Oh, you know very well who that is. You approved of me. It’s Scarlett.”

“Please consider what you are saying,” he said, “These are some pretty heavy accusations.”

“Stop playing dumb with me, Pyrle,” Lazarus said leaning forward, “I was outside the curtain. I heard things—sexual things. And while we’re on the subject of demands. I want to know what you saw in me.”

“As to the second, you should ask Scarlett-”

“I will,” interrupted Lazarus.

Pyrle frowned. Lazarus could that he was getting to Pyrle, or at least he hoped he was. Lazarus wanted to find out something to justify these seeming random happenings that led down a road where he did not know nor could even sense the destination—meeting Scarlett, getting into Pyrle’s class, finding out he was on a track to go work for Truste, Loade, and Surn, and discovering that something not kosher was going on at these senior meetings.

“But I will tell you anyway,” Pyrle continued, “I liked this—your arrogance, brashness, and stupidity to barge ahead without thinking of the consequences. If you survive law school, you will make a good lawyer.”

Pyrle got up, going over to the curtained windows directly behind the desk.

“I like that about you, Laz. I like it a lot because it’s not me. Because I hate everyone that is not me.

“Sir?” asked Lazarus, sitting back and crossing his arms protectively.

“You said you wanted to know what we do in our meetings. Sure, I’ll show you, but only because it will have a calculated and drastic effect on you. Everything I do has maximum impact, and this will be one of them.”

Lazarus moved to rise out of his seat, but Pyrle flung open the blinds and closed them again. For an instant Lazarus saw the beauty of the room which was eternally cloaked in darkness by Pyrle’s curtains. In that snapshot of time and space, Pyrle stood framed in the light, a mere shadow of black against the blinding yellow of the setting sun. Lazarus flung his arms up to protect against the intruding light. Then he felt Pyrle’s hands on him.

How had he moved so fast? Lazarus thought.

This time however the hands were not calm and encouraging or needy and seeking. They were rock hard, vise-like, and paralyzing. One held his mouth and the other was on his shoulder, cementing him to the seat.

Pyrle’s mouth was next to his ear, breath tickling the nape of his neck, “You see, Lazarus, this is what we do. It is slightly sexual but not anything you probably imagined with your mind as it is—conditioned by hours of that disgusting pornography us humans are fascinated with. No, there is something much better than that and something which violates so much more while feeling so good. This is a bit unorthodox, taking you this early, but you are unorthodox.”

Pyrle stopped and breathed in heavily through his nose.

“Your blood smells so sweet.”

Wh-What?” Lazarus tried to say.

“You see, you are unorthodox. You are not blinded as the others in your cohort by greed and power. The ones who can stomach it, my class, only care about getting to the top. It is part of my vetting process. However, somehow you slipped in. You are willing to stop and question and spy. I blame Scarlett. It makes you strong, but it also makes you trouble. I shall remedy that.”

“err oo a ammbire?”

“No, not quite. It is much uglier than and not as nice as me. You may meet my maker in time.”

Lazarus began a futile struggle as he felt Pyrle’s warm mouth press against his neck and the sharp pinch of pointed teeth on his neck. Instead of the burst of pain Lazarus expected to feel, he felt an intense wave of pleasure. He could feel Pyrle’s tongue tickling the burst artery as if that were the only spot of contact between them. A moan escaped his lips, and he felt Pyrle smile. The whole process seemed to last an eternity but in reality was only a few seconds.

Pyrle stepped back, releasing him, “Just a taste.”

Chapter 10 “Or he’ll get dinner from you.”

Lazarus slumped in the chair exhausted and panting. He now understood Scarlett’s strange behavior after each of her meetings and put a trembling hand up to his neck. He was surprised to find it did not come away bloody.

“Isn’t that funny?” Pyrle said as he licked his lips, “No blood. It’s too precious to waste. There is a serum secreted by my body which creates a seal when I am finished, allowing me to suck again and again and again, and trust me, what you felt was not nearly as good as what I experienced. Since you have been bumped up, so to speak, on the ladder to senior privileges, I now have an assignment. Her name is Amelia.”

Lazarus nodded weakly, and the sun went down.

He returned home that evening still woozy from his encounter with Pyrle. When Scarlett opened the door, she saw him and pulled him to her.

“So,” she said, “He got you too.”

Lazarus pushed her away.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He blinked, trying to stop the room from spinning.

He glared at her and said, “Did you not tell me because you didn’t want me to stop you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The feeling when he is sucking your blood—it’s marvelous. Is that why you didn’t tell me, so you could keep cheating on me?”

“What?! Cheating on you?” she asked, putting her hands on her hips, “I have never cheated on you. We weren’t allowed to tell. It would have cost us—it would have cost us a lot.”

Lazarus placed a heavy hand on the wall to support himself and walked by her, “I need to sleep. I guess I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Let me take care of you,” she said to his retreating back.

Scarlett stood in the hall shocked, as he disappeared. She listened to him walk to his bedroom and shut the door, and then ran out into the night, tears of anger and hurt streaming down her face.

Lazarus and Scarlett sat in the living room of his apartment, he reading the paper, and she doing here homework. Two hours earlier Scarlett had walked in without a word. She had said nothing to him, but her face spoke volumes. There were lines on her face, and her eyes were still puffy from crying. Her clothes were wrinkled as if they had been slept in. Lazarus was not used to seeing her like this, as she was usually so put together. It threw him off.

“Hey,” Scarlett said, finally breaking the silence, “Do you want to order some dinner?”

“Why bother?”

“Well, if you want, we can make dinner.”

“I don’t think it will make a difference,” he said, “I’ll just be hungry later.”

“What are you saying about my cooking?” she asked, putting down her homework and crossing her arms.

“Babe, I don’t know? What’s the point? Won’t you just get dinner with Pырle, or he’ll get dinner from you?”

“Woah,” she said and stood up, “Where did this come from? I was asking about dinner? Why is this bothering you so much?”

Lazarus sighed and stared out the window for a long while. His profile caught the sun’s rays just as they emerged from behind a cloud. It illuminated his exposed half in a brilliant gold while throwing the other side into dark, dark relief.

“I’m bothered because it feels so good,” he said, looking into her eyes.

“What?”

“I feel like...since you didn’t stop getting your blood sucked—you even volunteered.”

“Wait. How do you know about that?”

“I sort of spied on you guys. I was curious, so when I found out, I freaked out.”

Scarlett grabbed his hands which were clenched together, knuckles turning white.

“I volunteered to save Leslie, but it still didn’t work.”

“You did? Wait, why?”

“She won’t be in class tomorrow again either,” Scarlett said, “or anymore for that matter.”

“Where’d she go?”

Lazarus freed his hands and cleared off his books, and Scarlett pulled herself onto his lap.

“She’s not coming back,” she said, the meaning heavy in her voice.

“Oh,” Lazarus said, “Why didn’t you stop then? I mean, I’m here. Don’t I please you enough?”

They kissed. It was gentle and forgiving.

“Honey,” she said, stroking his hair, “It’s not that. I am happy with you, but you can’t and don’t want to stop.”

“So it’s an addiction?” he asked, stiffening and the current moment was lost.

“No, maybe. I don’t know. You had it done once, just yesterday. Maybe you’ll feel it, maybe you won’t. For your sake, I hope you don’t.”

“Wow.”

“Don’t even do that to me again,” she said.

She grabbed the neck of his shirt, half joking and half serious, “I will never cheat on you. Just because I was assigned to you, doesn’t mean that I don’t have feelings for you now.”

“Okay, sorry,” he said, taking her hand.

“Do you want to make dinner now? I really am hungry and wasn’t just trying to break the silence,” she asked and got off his lap.

Lazarus watched her walk away and his eyes glanced first at her figure and then to the corner of his notebook where in tiny all caps block handwriting in blue ink he had written the name: AMELIA. He wrung his hands and cracked his knuckles, but the questions and worries he had were soon drowned out by the sound of frying onions.

Lazarus watched and waited. He had come to hate surveillance, especially after the fiasco outside Pyle's office. Scarlett was in class, and he was following his first lead in tracking down Amelia. Her shift started at six p.m. and went all night to closing. Pyle had only given him a first name and a place where she worked. Lazarus figured that Pyle wanted him to do some detective work to get him invested in the girl. The only problem was that he did not have any time to do this, so as he sat waiting, he poured over his law textbook and drank coffee. He was here to put a face to a name.

Chapter 11 Cuppacinno

A girl walked in wearing the Cuppacinno uniform. Her curly brown hair hung over her peach uniform shirt. His eyes went right to the bird tattoo on her neck. His recent encounters with tattoo artists made him especially aware of ink on a person's body. It was a hummingbird in flight, black wings outspread and long pointed beak aimed at her neck. His eyes got stuck on her neck. It was slender, unblemished, tanned, and shapely, like the curve of a smooth Egyptian vase. When his eyes pulled away from her neck, his mouth fell open and he dropped his ceramic coffee cup which shattered.

The guy behind the counter, Joe, yelled at her, "Amelia will you get that."

"I just got here," she said back to him and smiled, "Give me thirty seconds to put my purse away."

She still had not seen him yet. Lazarus got up as she went to the back. He apologized to Joe and left before she came back out to clean up the coffee.

Lazarus walked hands in his pockets back to his apartment.

How could it be her? he thought, Jessica's sister! I didn't even know she was into law. This is all Pyle's doing.

Lazarus walked back to his apartment, the memory of that party all too fresh.

"Dude, this party is overkill," Harry said into Lazarus's ear.

Lazarus could barely hear his best friend above the booming of Billy Joel's "Piano Man."

"I know. Isn't this great?" he said, "What better way to celebrate my acceptance than by getting smashed three nights in a row."

The apartment was crowded. People were almost forced to sit on one another and moving to the kitchen was like swimming upstream. When a drunk stumbled on the other side of the room from Lazarus, his actions sent a ripple of energy through all the others to where Lazarus stood. The wave of people pushed Lazarus into his small 1980s style kitchen and into the arms of Jessica. Already off balance because the alcohol, Lazarus looked up into her warm blue eyes and flushed cheeks with a stupid grin as he held onto her to stop himself from falling over.

"You know you are the hottest girl here," he said.

He pushed himself off her, hoping that she would think his hands had accidentally brushed her breasts.

“Why, uh, thank you,” she said.

Jessica looked around the kitchen, but the others, including her fiancé, were absorbed in their conversations, their drinks, and the party. It was already really warm in the Lazarus’s apartment and even warmer in the small kitchen.

“Do you want a beer?” she asked.

“Yea, sure, and we can take it down the hall, if you want.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Todd is on the other side of the room.”

“Please,” said Lazarus, taking her hand, “He’s too busy showing off his muscles to that group over there, and it would just be for conversation.”

The words “deltoids of compassion” drifted up from their conversation in a slightly sing-song voice.

“Okay, fine—just one beer and only because it’s hard to hear in your kitchen.”

The two half stumbled, half walked through the crowd of people. Neither noticed the eyes of the small curly brown haired girl with the bird tattoo, watching them from just outside the kitchen through the crowd of people. If they had, Lazarus would have winked, and Jessica would have been shamed by her sister. They passed his roommate’s room and heard telltale signs of intimate activity behind the door. Jessica turned and looked out the corner of her eye at Lazarus. When Lazarus opened his door, they walked in on a scruffy shirtless guy with a hippy girl entangled on his sheets.

“Out,” he said to their red faces, “This is my room.”

“Well, that’s better,” Jessica said, as she sat on his bed rubbing the red sheets with the flat of her palm.

“Yea, they’re like rabbits here. Cheers.”

They both sat in silence, sipping their beers. Lazarus gazed at his Rage Against the Machine poster, and Jessica stared at her feet. Suddenly, Jessica slipped off the bed and crashed to the floor.

Lazarus bent down and helped her up and she said, “Must be drunker than I realize. The bed sort of moved, didn’t it?”

“No, not too much,” Lazarus replied.

His arm still rested on hers, just above the elbow.

“So, Falhorn,” she said, “That’s a pretty good law program. I mean, not Yale, but good enough.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Lazarus replied, putting his other hand on her thigh, “But I can’t say I’m really concentrating on law at the moment.”

The doorknob rattled, and they heard Harry say to whoever he was with, “Score one for the Laz-master.”

The girl outside the door giggled, and they walked off. Lazarus chuckled, and Jessica looked away. He took his arm off her elbow and put it to her chin, pulling her back around. Lazarus leaned in and kissed her. At first, Jessica was unresponsive, but then her lips moved against his. They fell back on the bed, and he felt her hands undoing the buttons on his shirt. After shedding his button down, he pulled her sweater off revealing her smooth cream colored skin.

“I’ll just get the lights,” he said.

Lazarus rolled off the bed and hit the switch on the other side of the room. He climbed back into bed next to Jessica and leaned in for a kiss, but he stopped when he heard her light snoring.

“Damn,” he said and flopped over next to her eventually joining her in the sleep of the drunk.

Lazarus reached his apartment door and stood outside for a minute. His hand went to his jaw which ached from the memory. Todd had punched pretty hard and then had thrown him out of his own apartment. He could not believe he was back in this family’s life with her sister.

Chapter12 “Babe,” she said, “I have to go to Truste, Loade, and Surn.”

Scarlett and Lazarus sat at his table in the apartment ready to dive into a dinner of chicken parmesan and broccoli. It was a week before fall break. Lazarus uncorked the bottle of Pinot Noir and poured a glass for each of them. She watched him as he did this.

Seeing her looking at him, he smiled and said, “Okay, now what is this all about. Why are we having this fancy dinner?”

He watched her face get sad and saw a year’s worth of apprehension descend upon it.

“Uh-oh,” he said, “Unless I am interpreting this wrong, something bad is coming. Let’s make this a happy dinner and talk afterwards, especially after the wine had been flowing.”

She smiled, and they started eating. After the dinner was done, Lazarus poured them each another glass of wine, and they retired to the couch right behind the table and sat facing the fireplace. Scarlett put her legs across his lap, and he stroked her legs.

“Babe,” she said, “I have to go to Truste, Loade, and Surn.”

Lazarus choked on his wine, spilling a little on the black but already stained couch.

“What? Why?”

“It’s part of the requirements. Pyrle says it is just for the week. Trust me when I say that I didn’t know about it until today.”

“And he expects you to drop everything and go there during break?”

She nodded and put a hand on his shoulder. Then she put her wine glass on the table and leaned in and hugged him hard. He could hear her crying into his shoulder, and it turned into huge rocking sobs. Lazarus put his arms around her and hugged her back, his stomach dropping out at high velocity. She pulled back and the tears were running down her cheeks, little rivers of fear.

“I’m scared too,” he said.

They slept that night clinging to each other, trying, at least until they fell asleep, to minimize the space between them as if that could erase the physical gulf between them which was coming in the following week.

Lazarus woke to his phone beeping that he had a new text message. Scarlett groaned and rolled over away from him. Bleary eyed he grabbed his phone. The time was 11:15 a.m., and the message was from a number he did not recognize. He opened the text message and read it. He did not need to know who had sent it.

It said, “Go now to the marsh, and follow Amelia. Learn more about her. Now.”

Glancing over at Scarlett who had gone back to sleep, he pulled the covers off, got dressed in yesterday’s clothes, and left.

The marsh was steaming as the fog burned off from the morning sun. He found a truck parked at the edge and saw Amelia off in the distance, a mere speck of humanity in the totality of nature. The marsh consisted of brown and green, waist high plants, and plenty of muckiness. As

soon as he stepped into the marsh, his tennis shoes started sinking into the mud, making small squishing sounds.

“She’s in the middle of nowhere on a Saturday morning,” he grumbled, “What the hell is she doing here?”

He snuck close and saw that she was wearing thick wading boots, dirty jeans, and a brown pullover. To top it off, she stored her brown hair under a beret cap. Amelia stood in the marsh with a small spiral notebook pad in one hand and a pair of binoculars in the other. Every so often she would snap the binoculars up to her eyes and scan the skies or trees for birds that she saw. Lazarus was impressed with the speed of her snap. He was close enough to hear her mutter to herself as she watched and wrote down the birds she saw.

“A flock of black ducks, spectacular. Twelve.”

Lazarus rolled his eyes. His legs were growing stiff from crouching in the reeds.

“Ohh,” she said not looking in her binoculars, “One poorly dressed idiot hiding in the plants.”

Lazarus tensed, cracking a stick.

“Who can’t stalk worth a damn,” she continued, “Why don’t you come out and introduce yourself.”

Lazarus stood up as red as the windbreaker he was wearing.

“My name’s Amelia,” she said.

He looked at her proffered hand and shook it.

“So, what are you doing out here? Aside from watching me?”

“Uhh.”

“Well spit it out. I haven’t got all day.”

“I was, uh, watching you,” he said.

“Not shit, Sherlock. What do you-”

She stopped, cocked her head, and then snapped her binoculars up to the sky as a miniscule bird flew by.

“Want?” she said, turning back to him.

Lazarus was unsure how to continue.

“Well,” he said as he scratched his arm, “I was hoping I could take you out for coffee.”

There was a silence for a second and then as Lazarus was about to leave, Amelia burst out laughing.

“Just like you took my sister to your room for a beer. The argument she got into with Todd over you. From the way she tells it, nothing even happened.

“Nothing did happen. We both passed out.”

“Well that’s a relief. I knew she wouldn’t cheat on her fiancé, though they broke up.”

“I guess she should have seen that coming,” he said, “He’s gay, right?”

“Yea, so why do you want to take me out for coffee. I work at a coffeehouse.”

“Uh, right,” Lazarus said, “Well then how about a beer.”

“I don’t drink,” she said, “but I always wanted try. Don’t worry I’m 18 and over 21.”

“What?”

“You don’t think your reputation doesn’t precede you?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, “That reputation. I’m a changed man now.”

“Sure, that’s why you’re out stalking girls in the middle of a marsh on a Saturday morning. Who’s responsible for that?”

Lazarus stood still for a second, almost saying Scarlett, then he said, “Me.”

“Hmmpf,” she said, giving him another once over, “Here’s my number, now get out of here. You’re scaring all the birds away with that red blazer.”

He took the paper, “It’s a wind breaker, and I’ll see you around.”

“Well, yeah. I’m giving you another chance.”

She turned away from him and went back to watching birds. Lazarus left, feeling he had nothing else to say, mostly just grateful to get out of there.

Chapter 13 They both began bleeding

Lazarus woke up with a start and reached for Scarlett who was sleeping next to him.

“Amel—Scarlett?”

“Hmm?”

She rolled over and put an arm on top of him. Her hair fell in front of his face, and he inhaled the smell of strawberries. He remembered the first time he had woken up next to her. Lazarus rested his hand on her soft arm and smiled into the darkness.

“Uh, nothing. Go back to sleep,” he said.

Lazarus closed his eyes again and saw the last image of his dream: Pyrle.

The dream had begun as they had in the past couple of days. Pyrle stood in his office facing away from Lazarus, who was standing in the corner of the room in the shadows. He could hear Pyrle speaking but could not understand the words that were coming out of his mouth.

Lazarus realized he could see the words. The words were flowing out of his mouth. He could see them, and they were hanging against the wall. Seeing them did not make it easier to understand them, in fact, it made it worse. They were not in the Latin alphabet but were strange symbols, similar to the tattoos on his arms. Lazarus could hear the words buzzing softly and quivering with what seemed like anticipation.

Pyrle turned around, and his face was distorted. It was not the smooth polished face that Lazarus was used to in class. Instead, it was pulled tight, exposing his teeth, and his hair was not black with silver but all white and stringy. Hanging down in tatters, stringy, and wasted, it looked like greasy moldering spaghetti. As Pyrle spoke, his teeth grew larger until they all developed elongated points.

“Yes,” Pyrle said, now speaking English but looking at his door, “Come in.”

Scarlett walked into the dark empty room. Lazarus wanted to step out of his shadow in the corner but couldn’t move. She was wearing the cotton t-shirt she slept in with the big smiley face on the front and her sleep shorts. Her hair was mussed as if she had just gotten up from bed. There was no expression on her face, no fear, no joy.

“Yes,” Pyrle said, the clothes on his body rotting into strips of old dirty cloth.

He opened his mouth unnaturally wide and a moan issued forth. The moan grew stuttered and clogged as bright red blood poured forth. Out of this gushing torrent, the naked figure of Amelia fell onto the floor with a loud slap. She did not move. Scarlett screamed and joined Amelia on the floor in a state of collapse. Then they both began bleeding from punctures and lacerations and pieces of flesh which appeared without apparent cause on their bodies.

Lazarus started screaming, still unable to move, and Pyrle turned and said, “Now you”.

That’s when Lazarus had woken up. Scarlett shifted again in her sleep, drawing her arm back to her side. Lazarus closed the space between them, and held her tight, worried that she would disappear in the next couple of days in the bowels of a powerful law firm.

Chapter 14 Aroused by the carnal and sanguinary exchange

The next day in Lazarus' mind, his cell phone burned in his pants pocket. He had received a straight to voicemail message from a number he did not recognize until he heard the voice. It was Pyrle. The smooth lilt of the voice belied the threat present in it, which is why he now felt the wind whipping his and Amelia's hair as they walked side by side skirting the river that flowed leisurely alongside them in the marsh. It was surprisingly warm for the middle of November, and they listened to the birds cooing in the brush. Amelia took Lazarus's hand, and he jumped but did not immediately pull away.

"This is so nice," she said, "and romantic, especially for a bird watching girl like me."

"Yeah, I guess it would be."

She was wearing a blue pea coat, a superman shirt, and green corduroys.

"I like it here when the sun goes down right by this tree."

"Yeah, it's pretty," he said, "It's a nice day, too. I think that helps make the dead brush and trees look a little better."

"Yes," she said and stopped so they were rubbing shoulders.

She leaned in turning and moving closer to Lazarus's face. He leaned in trying to conceal the look of panic on his face. Based on his discussions with Scarlett, he knew that as a *mentor* he needed to seduce Amelia and create a bond with her, even though he felt that she was seducing him. Lazarus leaned in further, feeling a pit in his stomach. Then his phone rang. The bright chirping of his phone shattered the silence and quiet breath of the wind. They both stepped back, he pulling out his phone, and she turning away red in the face fixing her hair.

"Hello?" he said, turning his back to Amelia, "Oh hey, Scarlett. Yeah, I can come by in a half hour. I'm out running errands. Yeah, see you soon."

He hung up.

"Who was that?" Amelia asked.

"My study partner," Lazarus said, looking out into the marsh, "She's leaving for break, and we're trying to get all our notes together for this week while we are apart."

"Really?" she said, "I'm not stupid. You're not out running errands, and you hang out with Scarlett all the time."

"It's not like that, I just—" Lazarus stopped.

"I won't be anyone's mistress," Amelia said, "I knew these past couple days were too good to be true. Call me when you're single."

She stalked off, leaving him standing in the middle of the marsh. The sun set in front of her, creating a burning halo of fire around her figure as she walked away. Lazarus' phone rang again.

Before he answered it, he said to himself, "That could have gone better," and then into his phone, "Hey, Scarlett. Yep, I can get some eggs from the store before I come over. I'll be there sooner than I thought."

It was dark by the time he walked back from the marsh to his beat-up car. The engine started, resisting a little in turning over, and then sputtered to life. He was worried because Scarlett's tone was not normal. Lazarus imagined that Pyrle was over there waiting for him to come home. His parting with Amelia was also weighing down on him. He hadn't expected her to catch on so quickly. It didn't help that he was still with Scarlett. Lazarus' gut burned as he knew that Pyrle had done that on purpose in order to break up Scarlett and Lazarus.

After the stop at the store, he went into his apartment, blue plastic shopping bag in hand. Lazarus stopped when he found Scarlett sitting in the living room with a large knife resting on the coffee counter.

“Hey, babe. How’s it going?” she asked.

“What’s with the knife?” he asked, not coming into the room.

“I’ve been doing some thinking. I think that we should try and do something against what Pyrle is doing to us.”

Lazarus put the bag down and sat next to her on the couch, taking her hand. She pulled her hand away from his and picked up the knife. He tensed.

“What is Pyrle doing to us?” he asked.

“Remember how I had Samantha as my mentor.”

“Yes,” said Lazarus, shifting in his seat.

He began to get warm and felt his stomach dropping. Lazarus could see where this conversation was going.

“Well I think Pyrle has done the same to us.”

“What do mean?” Lazarus asked.

“Oh come on,” Scarlett said.

She got up and glided over into his kitchen still holding the knife. She came back with a towel.

“Don’t think I’ve seen you with Amelia and not heard others talking about you and her.”

“Nothing happened,” he said.

“I know,” she said, “I’ve been keeping close tabs on her. She’s a wild one.”

“So then, what’s with the knife?”

She looked down at the knife and placed it with a clink on the unblemished coffee table. The wind whistled outside, and the lights inside flickered from some unseen power surge at a nearby generator. They both looked up at the ceiling light which returned to its steady glow.

“This knife,” she said, “could help keep us together, especially because I have to leave tomorrow for New York.”

Lazarus swallowed.

“You know how we get our blood sucked, “she continued, “and then dream about Pyrle almost every night. Don’t look ashamed or surprised, I know you do. We all do. Anyway, I don’t want to lose you. So I thought we could suck each other’s blood.”

“What?! We would die from a cut artery.”

“No, we wouldn’t cut the artery, but the skin so that we bleed. Hence, the towel.”

“Why don’t we just stop him?” he asked.

“I don’t think I can or want to. He is the answer to our success as a lawyer. I could never hurt him.”

Lazarus wilted a little inside. He figured that his attraction to Pyrle was not as strong because he had only given his life blood once.

“You’re crazy you know,” he said, taking off his shirt.

“You’re just as crazy for letting me cut you up.”

She pulled off her shirt too and straddled him on the couch. The scent of strawberries wafted over him. Scarlett leaned into kiss him, her lips caressing his for an instant. Her left hand traced up his bare skin on his stomach to his chest to his neck. She raised goose bumps. With his eyes closed he did not see her raise the blade in her right hand. Scarlett leaned back and then with a short swift stroke opened up a shallow cut on his neck. Lazarus winced. The blood

welled up in the cut almost immediately. With a sigh, Scarlett leaned in and put her mouth on the wound. He could hear her sucking the blood into her mouth. Unlike with Pyrle, this hurt. Every time she touched the wound with her lips and tongue, a stinging pain lanced his neck. After a minute she sat back and pressed the towel on the cut.

“That felt wonderful,” she said with a smile.

Lazarus looked up at her, “Really?”

Scarlett began to grind against him, “I’m actually kind of turned on by it.”

Lazarus looked at her again, “Really?”

“My turn,” she said, looking into his eyes and handing him the knife.

With little pretext, he put the knife up to her neck on the left side and made a small incision. She made a small gasp of pain. Lazarus hesitated to bring his mouth to the wound. In that span of time, enough blood worked itself out of the wound and made a small rivulet down past her collarbone.

“Babe, get that. It’s too precious to waste.”

Lazarus grimaced and licked up the blood. He felt Scarlett shiver. Then he put his mouth on the wound and began to work blood from it. Every time his lips touched the wound, she would jump but did not make any sound. When he felt that he had gone an equivalent amount of time as she had, he stopped and blotted the wound.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Kind of sick,” he replied.

“That’ll pass. It always does the first time.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Lazarus was able to ignore the metallic taste in her mouth as they kissed. He was also aroused by this carnal and sanguinary exchange.

“I guess I won’t worry about it then,” he said into her ear, as he leaned in to kiss the other side of her neck.

Chapter 15 “It wasn’t my choice.”

Lazarus woke up with a start and automatically reached for Scarlett next to him. All he got was empty space as she had left for New York the day before.

“Ohh, what a dream.”

Pyrle had been visiting him in his dreams again, though now that he had shared blood with Scarlett; she was appearing as well, often competing for space and time in his dreamscape. He could never remember much of what he had been in these dreams, but they always involved Pyrle towering over him. The feelings of fear and arousal created a weird mix of emotion that he had to deal with in the young hours of the night. This often made it hard to get back to sleep.

Later that morning hunched over coffee and dry toast with jam on a dirty plate, he realized that with Scarlett out of town, he could reconcile with Amelia and set everything straight. He could not get Amelia out of his thoughts. Lazarus was not sure why she was so prevalent in his thoughts as he had only talked to her a couple of times. He felt that it had something to do with his dreams.

Lazarus decided to confront Amelia and was about to leave when the apartment’s phone rang. He picked it up and heard heavy but suppressed breathing on the other end.

“Hello?” he said.

There was more heavy breathing, and then he said, "Hello?"
The voice spoke back, "Laz, it's me. Do you have my journal?"

"Harry? Is this you?"

"Yea, do you have my journal?"

Lazarus leaned against the wall and sank to the ground twirling the phone cord in his hands.

"Harry, it's so good to hear from you? Where are-"

"Laz, do you have my journal?"

"What? No, I never had it. Oh wait, the book you left here?"

"Yeah."

"What of it."

Lazarus heard Harry grunt and heard glass crunching on the other line.

"Dude, it's kind of important. Do you have it, or did you read it?"

"Uh, no. Where are you calling from?"

"That's not important," Harry said, "Can you get it?"

Lazarus got up and started to pace back and forth, trying not to trip on the phone cord.

"No man. I don't have it. It's in Scarlett's car, which is currently in New York."

"Oh shit."

The inflection in Harry's voice gave Lazarus the chills. He looked out through the window in the living room and saw dry November leaves blowing about in the wind beating against the windows and falling to the ground.

"Harry?" he asked, "What is going on?"

Harry had descended into fast mad sounding uttered syllables.

"Harry!"

"Sorry, man. I have to go. Benjamin is going to kill me."

"What?"

The line went dead. Lazarus was shaking a little bit from the strange encounter on the phone, and immediately dialed star 69. He got the number and dialed. It rang seven times before Lazarus decided to hang up. Lazarus did not know what else to do. He could not call the police and could not call Scarlett, so he decided to go out and see Amelia and finish what he had started. Lazarus walked out of his apartment, shutting the door with a purpose.

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"Hey," he said walking into her room, "You here?"

"Yea, come on in. Just getting out of the shower."

Lazarus came in and sat on the purple love seat in the bright living room. The room smelled like flowers.

She came in and sat down next to him tense like deer about to flee, "Are you single?"

There's something I need to tell you," he said.

"What" she asked, "You're pregnant?"

Lazarus grabbed her hands," No, I'm serious. Pay attention."

She withdrew her hands and crossed her arms, "Sorry, when I'm nervous I joke. Okay, I'm listening."

"Well, you're not going to believe this," he started.

"Come on, now," Amelia said kicking him lightly in the shin, "You can't tell me to be serious and then start off saying something like that."

She flounced away to the kitchen and got a drink. When she got back Lazarus continued.

“You know Pyrle, right? One of my professors. He’s a demi-vampire. Hey! Don’t start laughing. His class is really a grooming process for the lawyers at the Truste, Loade, and Surn, who I guess, but don’t know for sure work for vampires or are vampires themselves. Every student of his is required to find another and recruit them. I know we were from the same town, but I didn’t choose you. Pyrle did.”

“So all this,” she said, looking pale.

“Let me finish. It wasn’t my choice to pick anyone. I was—am in love with Scarlett. You know, but I was compelled to do this. Trust me when I say this, it wasn’t my choice.”

“But why me?” Amelia asked, pulling away from him.

“I don’t know,” Lazarus replied, “My guess is because it would destroy the link between me and Scarlett. It was getting too strong and threatening her allegiance to Pyrle and his master.”

She was quiet for a minute. Quiet and drawn into herself in a way he had not noticed before. Amelia seemed to become smaller, wrapping herself around a single point in her body. Lazarus was about to say something when she shook herself and reappeared as her normal self.

“Well,” she said, “Let’s try and break the cycle.”

“What?” Lazarus said, surprised.

“What do you want me to do? Go all fainty and have you rescue me or Scarlett or whatever? I’m a practical girl. Let’s kill the fucker.”

“What? Murder a professor? Are you crazy?”

Amelia stood up and put her hands on her hips emphasizing her curves by accident, “Listen to me, he won’t be expecting it, and if his is evil we will be doing some good.”

Chapter 16 “Hey, that’s two.”

It smelled of strawberries and woman. It was his first time, and Lazarus was entering virgin territory. Walking around the studio apartment, he marveled at how clean it was; there were not even dust mites floating in the air. The morning sun, filtering in through the bare windows, rested on the bed in the back left corner of the room opposite the kitchen. He had never slept there.

Scarlett had given him the keys to her apartment in case he had ever needed them, but for some unspoken reason, they had never gone to her apartment for anything. What he admired the most about this place was the rose petal pattern on the ceiling. To him, it seemed that someone had tried to throw petals all over the floor, bed, kitchen table, and furniture but that gravity had stopped working and they had gone to rest on the ceiling.

Lazarus smiled. This was his woman. He glanced over at the door, nervous that Scarlett would catch him in the act of infiltrating her domain, even though she was not due back for another day. He wanted to get any last information about Pyrle before Amelia and he paid a visit to his house. Lazarus’s stomach hurt for doing this, but Amelia had convinced him there was no other way.

He padded over to the dresser and picked up the photo of the two of them. It was not a particularly flattering one as they were covered in mud. He guessed she kept it because of the smiles. Lazarus had tripped after a particularly rainy day and fallen into a large mud pit next to the sidewalk. She had been laughing at him until he had pulled her into the mud as well. Lazarus snorted and put the photo down.

As he did, the photo in the loose frame shifted revealing the corner of another picture behind it. Lazarus turned the frame over, undid the plastic clasps, and removed the back. Two pictures fell onto the floor. One was the one he had just seen, but the other was of two girls. The date said the picture was taken four years ago. It was Scarlett; he recognized her figure but not the other girl. He guessed it must be Samantha, Scarlett's sponsor. Someone else had taken the photo of them and had captured a warm fall day on the campus. Lazarus recognized the Cuppaccino store where Amelia worked. The two girls were walking away from the camera holding hands. Unseen wind blew their hair to the left and three leaves had been forever captured in flight in the bottom lower left. Shafts of light pierced through the branches of the trees and landed on the sidewalk. Lazarus looked up at the light on Scarlett's bed. He suddenly felt sick. With shaking hands, he put the photo of Scarlett and him back. Closing the door, he left the apartment almost the same as he found it, minus one picture.

In the darkening twilight, Amelia and Lazarus sat in the cab of her truck on the city limits of Masonville, the small town near Falhorn. It wasn't quite the one horse town, but it was close. Pyrlé's house was on the outskirts of town; it was a rancher. They were waiting until nightfall so that they could sneak a peek into the windows, and according to Amelia, have a look around inside.

"Let's go," she said, "It's dark enough."

Lazarus looked outside and without a word he got out of the truck, his mind still on earlier today.

"Okay. Now don't make too much noise or set off any motion detectors. Otherwise the neighbors will be out looking for wild animals."

He nodded.

They snuck across the lawn and went up to the side window. The house stood on the end of the block with one house on its left, woods on the other two sides, and an abandoned house across the street. Covered by the woods, they peered into what turned out to be the living room window. It looked like something out of a magazine. There was a spotless coffee table, smooth leather sofa, and lots of books crammed neatly on floor to ceiling shelves.

"Guy likes to read," Amelia whispered.

For lack of anything better to say, Lazarus whispered back, "He's really smart."

"Let's go check out the next room, and then look for a back door," she said.

The next window exposed the kitchen which definitely occupied. There were pans and dishes stacked in the sink, crumbs and food on the counter. The table was the most interesting. It was a beaten up looking thing with an empty glass and a bowl with a spoon in it. In the dark, they could see the top of the table was discolored. Without lights, they could not see what caused the stains, but Lazarus automatically jumped to blood.

Seeing this, he said, "Let's get inside."

He back away from the edge of the house and ran around the corner of the house disregarding Amelia's whispered exhortation to stop. A motion sensor went off tripping a floodlight around back. It lit up the backyard like daylight, and Lazarus froze as if a deer in the headlights. Amelia came and got him, pulling him back to the car. She dropped him off at his apartment without a word.

"We'll try again?" he said.

She looked at him and drove off. Lazarus sighed and went into the apartment. After showering he climbed into bed, holding the picture of Scarlett and Samantha to his chest as he fell asleep.

The door to his bedroom opened sometime later and Scarlett walked in back from her trip. She dropped off her bag and changed into her pajamas, her shadowing dancing on the bed. Scarlett climbed under the covers and cuddled up next to Lazarus. She snaked her arm over his chest and stopped when she felt the picture. Pulling it out of his loose grasp, she simply stared. Then she put the photo on the nightstand in front of Lazarus's sleeping form. Scarlett put her arm back under the covers and pressed even closer to him. After giving him a light peck on the back of the head, she closed her eyes.

Lazarus woke up with an unfamiliar presence in the bed. He had gone to bed alone and now had an arm on his stomach. Then he smelled the light scent of strawberries. His heart bounced, and he rolled to face Scarlett. In the morning light, her face was relaxed and unworried. Picture forgotten, he stared at her until she woke a little bit later.

"Hey," he said.

She smiled and croaked out a 'hey' in return.

"Glad to have you back." he said, "Unharmed?"

She nodded.

In a quick motion she had wrapped her arms around him and hugged him so tight Lazarus could not breathe for a second. She let go, and they studied each other as if meeting for the first time. Then they both spoke at once.

"There's something I need to tell you."

"I have to get something off my chest."

"One word," Lazarus said, "Apartment."

"Samantha," she said.

Lazarus started and sat upright, "Harry's journal."

She shoved him playfully, "Hey, that's two."

Chapter 17 "I'm sorry about going to your place uninvited."

Lazarus jumped out of bed, "Hold on one second, babe. I know we have an important conversation coming. Just give me two minutes."

"Uhh, okay," Jessica said and pulled the covers up around her waist.

He dashed out of the room half dressed and into the cold rain of the last days of November. It was a dreary morning, with any hope of nice weather crushed by the presence of overbearing grey stratus clouds. The rain raised gooseflesh all over his exposed torso.

Using Scarlett's keys that he had grabbed on the way out, he fumbled with door locks, muttering, "Come on. Come on."

Lazarus opened the door and when a quick visual scan did not reveal the journal, he started a more rigorous search. There was nothing in the glove box, except an owner's manual and some old looking pens. Under the passenger seat were a crushed of box of tissues and a pink umbrella. The space under the driver's seat was empty.

"Damn, I know I left it in the car."

He slumped back to the apartment, where Scarlett was waiting with a towel.

"What were you looking for?" she asked, as she guided him back inside to the living room sofa.

"It was Harry's journal. Remember when you found it in your car. It was a beat up looking thing, Harry left after I dropped him off at the airport."

"Oh yeah, that thing. I put it in the glove compartment."

Lazarus pulled down the comforter resting on the top of the sofa and wrapped it around Scarlett and himself.

“Well,” he said, “it’s gone now.”

She stroked his head, “Was it important?”

“Yeah, Harry called asking about it. He sounded scared, and I’ve never heard him be scared before. Harry asked about the journal and mentioned a guy named Benjamin.”

Scarlett paled, but Lazarus was too busy looking at his hands.

“After that,” he continued, “there was a crash and the line went dead. I tried to call it back, but it didn’t work.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” she said, “From what you have told me about him, he always is okay and manages to pop in and out of your life at unexpected times.”

“Yea, I guess so.”

Underneath the covers, Scarlett stretched her legs out crossing them at the ankles and laid them across Lazarus’s lap.

“Remember how we were going to have that important conversation this morning before you ran out into the rain? I think we should still have it.”

Lazarus stared at her. He started to wring his hands.

“I’ll save you the trouble of going first,” she said, “I forgive you for going into my apartment without asking me. I really shouldn’t need to, since I gave you a key. It was also kind of absurd that we had never gone there before. I mean, let’s see. How do I put this?”

He watched and waited. Scarlett uncrossed and crossed her legs again, making the covers squirm like snakes.

“Okay. We never went to my place because it reminded me too much of Samantha. Every time I went in there, I would see her on the sofa or the bed or in the kitchen. It was a relationship which I had never experienced before. When she left, she didn’t even say good-bye, and then I met you. It was only a year later, when Pyle suggested that I start early and find a “mentee,” so when I found you, I was not in a good place emotionally.”

“You never showed it,” Lazarus said.

“I know. You have no idea how hard that was. Plus, you weren’t the easiest person to get along with.”

Lazarus blushed.

“But I started sleeping better at night,” Scarlett continued, “And started even to like you. Now that we’ve been together for a while, those feelings I have for you are as strong, if not stronger, than what I had with Samantha. It’s like a patch was put over my heart. It is healed, but I will always feel the outline of the patch. Does that make sense?”

Lazarus nodded, “I’m sorry about going to your place uninvited.”

“It’s okay,” she said, “It was good to finally get everything off my chest for once.”

“Yeah. Do you want breakfast? I’ll make you some eggs, after I get out of the shower. I need to warm up.”

“Sure,” she said.

Lazarus got up and disappeared into the bedroom. She then heard the water running. Lazarus’s phone beeped on the kitchen table, and Scarlett got up to get a glass of orange juice. She looked down at the phone as she passed and stopped. It said there was a new text message from Amelia. Looking over to the bedroom, she picked up the phone and read the message. It said, “Let’s do it tonight. 11 a.m. My place.”

“I’m glad I got everything off my chest,” she said to herself, “Well almost, and I guess you didn’t either. I wish I had told you about the offer Pyrle made to start at the firm a semester early. Perhaps it’s best I didn’t.”

She closed the phone and poured herself a glass of orange juice.

Chapter 18 It seemed to stretch on for an eternity

It was 10 p.m. and Scarlett and Lazarus had just finished watching “IT.” Scarlett unlatched herself from Lazarus. She smiled when he untangled himself from her.

“Holy crap. That was a scary movie,” Lazarus said.

“Yep. I don’t think I can take a shower with my eyes closed for a while.”

Lazarus shuddered, and he said, “It’s the worst when monsters come out of the night and chase people. I’m glad they don’t exist, except for Pyrle, of course.”

“Pyrle’s not a monster,” Scarlett said.

He turned and looked at her, putting the wine glass down.

“What? Yes he is. He sucks the blood of students and then sends them off to Truste, Loade, and Surn to do God knows what.”

“We suck blood too, you know.”

Lazarus rubbed his cheeks, “Oh. Yeah. Well he’s still a monster.”

She shook her head, and kissed him taking his face in both her hands.

“Babe,” she said, “There’s something I have to tell you. Pyrle offered me a chance to start early at the law firm. He told me it has never been offered or approved by the high ups for someone who hasn’t finished law school. I think this could be my big break—”

“Or the loss of your life,” Lazarus interrupted.

“Hey. I need you to be supportive of me. I was there for you at every single part of this relationship. From the ugly beginning to this beautiful end—middle, I mean.”

“End?” Lazarus asked, “I really hope you don’t mean that. Besides, I don’t see Pyrle lasting much longer.”

He got up and started cleaning up the untouched dinner and wine glasses set out before the movie. The crumbs on the coffee table made a smiley face. When he walked back in from the kitchen, Scarlett had bundled up and was getting ready to leave.

“Why do you say that?” she asked, “What’s going to happen to him?”

“Nothing that I know of. He just leads a destructive and evil life. Something sooner or later is going to get him. Where are you going? Aren’t you going to spend the night?”

She shook her head, “I have to finish unpacking and get ready for classes. I’ll call you for breakfast? I would love some more eggs.”

He came over, and they shared an awkward kiss. Lazarus sighed.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I do support you. I just think Pyrle is bad news, and who knows? I’m gonna end up at the same law firm. Maybe I’ll drop out and come with you.”

“Thanks,” she said, “Call you tomorrow. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

Lazarus closed the door behind her, and went back to the couch. He reached for his book, but his hand stopped as he saw her phone lying on the cover. Then his phone rang, playing the Imperial March from Star Wars.

“Yea?”

“Hey it’s me,” Amelia said, “You ready?”

“I am.”

“Come over and we’ll go over to his house. Wear black.”

Amelia cut off the phone. Lazarus sighed again. He just wanted it over and for everything to go back to normal with Scarlett. He was scared of what was coming down the pipe because he did not know what was going to come out the end. Lazarus was pretty sure it was going to involve blood, and he did not want it to be his.

A half hour later pulled up at Amelia’s apartment. She let him in, dressed in all black.

“Are you ready to do this?” she asked.

“I guess. Do you have any liquor?”

“It’s in the truck, for our celebration.”

“Celebration of what?” he asked.

She shook her head and closed the door. They walked to the truck, and Lazarus admired the way the moonlight shone on the hood of her vehicle. It seemed to make it shimmer as if it were a pane of glass. The doors creaked open, and small but visible dust mites shot into the air as they climbed into the seats. Lazarus looked around, aside from the cracked windshield and sun rotted seats, there was a black duffel bag behind the passenger seat and something that did not reflect the moonlight. It was long, cylindrical, and a dull black. He reached behind the seat and touched it; it was cold, like ice water.

“Is that a-?”

“A gun? Yes. A shotgun, in fact. My father bought it for me when I was twelve and taught me how to shoot.”

“You’re related to Jessica right? The girliest girl I knew in college?”

“Sadly, we are.” Amelia said, “Although she grew up with just living with my mom. I guess I should have said my step-dad taught me how to shoot. He was a gun nut. He and Jessica didn’t get along, so even for being only two years apart, we had radically different lives.”

Lazarus quickly opened the door, and vomited the little bit of dinner he had ingested earlier while with Scarlett.

“This just got real for me,” he said, wiping his mouth, “I can’t do this.”

“Mmm. Smells like lasagna. Man up. You won’t have to do anything except help me get in the house. Don’t you hate this guy? For what he did to you and Scarlett? For what he made you do to me?”

“I hate him but not enough to kill him. You’re crazy by the way.”

“Well, too bad.”

She pulled away from the house, and Lazarus felt like he had stepped through the looking glass. In the distance, another car started its engine. The small blue Jetta followed Amelia’s truck as it cruised towards the outskirts of the town. Lazarus felt every bump as they went over the rough roads.

“I don’t understand how you can be like this,” he said to Amelia.

She replied without taking her eyes off the road, “You hardly even know me.”

“Well, I know that, but I got the impression that you were a sweet bird-loving girl who kept to herself.”

They rounded a curve and swerved to avoid an oncoming police car. Lazarus swallowed, but Amelia just grinned.

“That part is true,” Amelia replied, taking her eyes off the road for a second, “But can’t a girl have multiple interests.”

“Scarlett did say you had a wild side.”

Lazarus sensed he had struck a nerve, although it had been unintentional. Amelia's knuckles went white on the steering wheel, and the truck picked up speed. The bumps got rougher.

"Woah, woah," Lazarus said, "Slow down. I don't want you to get upset."

"It's too late for that. Can't you see that I am upset? I am barely holding it together."

"What do you mean?" he asked, "You seemed perfectly normal until a few days ago."

Amelia glared daggers at him, and then looked back at the road.

"Why do you think I watch birds all the time? It's to stay away from people," she said without giving him time to answer, "I had a bad experience with a boyfriend in high school who cheated on me, and when I confronted him about it, he put me in the hospital. You're lucky I am not taking this out on you. I know that Pyrle did it. I believe you, so that's why we're riding to his house."

Lazarus gulped.

"Are you happy with that explanation?" she asked.

"I didn't realize," he said.

"No, you didn't, but it doesn't matter because we're here."

The truck had come to a stop at the end of Pyrle's street. It was a short street with only four houses on either side, but to Lazarus it seemed to stretch on like an eternity.

"Do I have a choice?" he asked.

"No and neither does your girlfriend. Get out of the car."

Chapter 19 "Pyrle? Where are you?!"

The street was dark. There were no streetlights nor were the windows in any of the three houses lit up. A delicate moonlight cast a glow on the houses making them seem benign in their quietude. In Lazarus's mind, Pyrle's house was not peaceful despite its attempt at quaintness. The abandoned Victorian house with its rotting shingles and dilapidated wrap-around porch seemed imposing. The moonlight reflected the broken glass on the balcony windows on the third floor. Pyrle's next door neighbors' driveway was empty.

"Let's do this," Amelia said, "Grab the sack."

Lazarus did and asked, "What's the duffel for anyway?"

Outside the truck, she came around to his side, carrying the shotgun low at the waist, and she whispered to him, "It's for his heart when I carve it out. I brought some stakes and a wooden box filled with garlic. I want this bastard dead."

Lazarus dry heaved.

"Hey," Amelia said, "Do that quietly. Come on."

They crept towards Pyrle's house, past his empty neighbor's driveway and immaculate lawn. The two approached Pyrle's car and crept to the front door. The porch light was off. Then headlights appeared down the road. Lazarus looked back as the car parked next to Amelia's truck. He could not make out the model of the car despite the moonlight.

"Ignore it," Amelia said.

"Do we knock?" he asked.

"Fuck you," she said, and turned the knob.

It was unlocked and they walked in to the apparently empty house. They stood in the uncluttered hall looking into the living room they had seen earlier and to their right a neat bedroom. The hardwood floors reflected their faces. Farther back to the right, there was a

closed door with the light shining from behind the plain door. Amelia nodded to the door, and she padded over to it with Lazarus following close behind.

Amelia tested the knob, and it turned. She threw open the door and fired the gun into the room. The blast lit up the room in an artificial glare, throwing the crammed bookshelves and crowded desk. Bits of books went flying across the room, and the noise reverberated throughout the house.

“Where did he go?” she asked, “There are no windows in this room, and his cigarette is still burning in the ashtray.”

“You are so crazy,” Lazarus said, clutching the bulky duffel to his chest.

“Out of my way,” she said.

Amelia stepped out into the hall just as the motion detector in the back yard set off the flood light.

“Aha!” she yelled and went charging towards the back door.

She went flying headfirst as she raced towards the door. Between the two walls which created a small hallway to the back door, Pyrle had tied a string at ankle level. Amelia tumbled into the pane of glass of the back door. It was shatterproof, so all that Amelia did was grunt and collapse on the ground. Lazarus rushed over to her, but she pushed him away. Hauling herself with the foul smelling gun, Amelia pushed open the door and ran after Pyrle, and Lazarus followed.

The two of them turned the corner of the house and were now in between Pyrle and his neighbor’s house. Pyrle’s dark figure was in the middle street, heading towards the forest behind the Victorian house.

“Drop dead, you conniving bastard!” she yelled and fired again.

The night lit up again like a violent flash of a photograph. As the sound traveled into the woods, Pyrle collapsed. He pulled himself up, gripping the lower left section of his back, but he still kept running.

Amelia took off after him, and Lazarus followed after a moment’s hesitation. Amelia ran with the spirit of a blind rage, and Lazarus struggled to keep up, the black duffel banging against his thigh. Pyrle changed direction and instead of heading to the woods, he bolted up the stairs of the Victorian house. Amelia was already across the street when Lazarus noticed another figure running down the road. He moved to intercept it, and stopped in shock when he saw that it was Scarlett. The flashlight she was carrying blinded him, temporarily robbing of his night vision.

He grabbed her by the shoulders and asked, “What are you doing here?!”

She shrugged him off and pushed him on the chest, “What do you mean what am I doing here? You are running around with some crazy girl who likes to shoot professors. I am coming to save you!”

Lazarus hugged her and said, “Thanks.”

Let’s get out of here,” Scarlett said, “I’ll call the police.”

Then they heard an enraged scream and another burst from the shotgun. It was muffled from inside the house even with one of the windows shattering on the first floor.

“We can’t,” he said, “I’ve got to stop her. This is all my fault.”

“I’ll come with you.”

They took off for the house. Up the rickety stairs, they burst through the screen door which dangled on one hinge. There was no solid wooden door present. The two stood and gaped in the hallway of the large house. The hallway opened up into an immense two story ceiling. There was a double staircase leading up to the second floor, and to the left and the right were

hallways which opened up into rooms haunted by irregular and boxy draped pieces of furniture. Lazarus turned around. The wall behind them hosted a huge picture of a dapper looking man wearing a pinstripe suit and a monocle; however, the picture was overwhelmed by rips, a thick layer of dust, and an empty bird nest.

“Who is that man?” Lazarus asked, “And why did he build a house out here?”

Scarlett replied, “Pyrle is the caretaker of the house. Truste, Loade, and Surn had it built many years ago and purposefully let it decay, to keep people out.”

He looked at her, “How do you know these things?”

She smiled and said, “Need to know.”

Any further conversation was cut off by another boom.

“It came from the third floor,” Lazarus said.

Reaching the third floor, they heard heavy breathing and walked towards it. In the room off the hallway, they saw Pyrle crouching behind a drape covered sofa. He resembled an animal, hair a mess and wild eyes. He growled at them, revealing unnaturally sharp but did not move.

“Pyrle? Where are you?!” Amelia yelled from another room.

They heard her footsteps approaching closer, and Lazarus and Scarlett froze in fear, unwilling to move towards either Pyrle or Amelia.

Chapter 20 “I dreamed of you,” he said.

Amelia walked into the room and stared unblinking into Scarlett’s flashlight. Her eyes reflected fire in the glow of its beam.

She pointed the gun at Lazarus and Scarlett, who stood off to the side and said, “I need you to leave now. You are in my way.”

Scarlett grabbed Lazarus’s hand. In the darkness, he heard the boards behind and left of him shift as Pyrle moved his body weight. There was another growl.

“I have to kill that man, that monster, that pig,” Amelia said, “before anybody else gets hurt.”

Lazarus replied, “No one has died so far and no one has to. We can send him to jail. That way you won’t have to go to jail either.”

Amelia huffed and cocked the gun, “Yeah? On what proof? He’s a lawyer and from what you told me, Lazarus, he is supported by lawyers who are willing to do anything because of their depraved state of being.”

A whisper behind them, “Lazarus. You should not have spoken.”

Lazarus shifted from foot to foot. Scarlett took a step forward in front of Lazarus.

“You can’t do this Amelia. We’re trained to prosecute by the law. There’s no room for vigilantes.”

“Shut up, witch. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve got Lazarus brainwashed and are brainwashed yourself.”

Then the night lit up, and there was the sound of thunder, followed by a wet slap on the floor. The flashlight’s beam spun madly as it fell to the ground. Scarlett charged Amelia and pushed her through the room and into the glass doors of the balcony, using the gun to push against her chest. The two of them crashed through the glass and onto the floor. The boards shrieked in protest. Scarlett pushed herself up, one hand on Amelia’s chest and the other digging into the broken glass next to her. Amelia laid still but moaning, a trickle of blood emerging as a

black shiny stream in the moonlight from under her back. Scarlett kicked the gun through the railings beams, and it clattered through them to land on the ground below.

The wind blew Scarlett's hair into her eyes. She pushed it out and then rain back inside into the now pitch black room. Scarlett squatted down and pulled the limp form of Lazarus into her arms.

She whispered, "Baby. Why did you do that? Why did you jump in front of the gun? You don't even like Pyrle. I was supposed to protect him. We are all supposed to protect each other at the firm."

Lazarus did not respond but lay falling away from her. She buried her head in his bloody chest inhaling the coppery scent of blood and Lazarus's own particular scent of Old Spice and dry autumn leaves.

Scarlett pulled her head up, half of her face smeared with blood, "Pyrle, where are you? I know you are here. I can feel it."

"Quite," he said, from within the darkness.

"Save him," she cried, "He saved you."

"No."

Scarlett's head whipped around, trying to find the source of his voice, "Pyrle!"

"You save him."

It was a whisper, but it was right behind her. The boards had not shifted when he had moved. The wind now kicked up, making the sheets on the furniture dance to invisible music.

"Give him your blood."

"What?" she asked.

"Give him your blood as Surn gave you his."

"And turn him into this?" she asked, putting a hand on her chest but still not turning around, "He would hate that."

"You won't. It's the only way to save him. Now, I must feed."

Scarlett did not hear him leave the room until something shifted on the broken glass and the wood groaned on the balcony. A piece of glass landed next to Scarlett in the room, just barely catching the moonlight. She laid Lazarus down, ignoring the muffled cries coming in from the balcony and straddled him. Leaning down on his wet chest, the blood immediately began to soak into her clothes. It was still warm against her skin. Without taking her eyes off Lazarus's face, she groped around for the piece of glass and brought it up to her neck.

"Baby," she said, "I love you. You have to drink."

He did not respond, so she opened his mouth. She put her neck as close to his mouth as possible and used the glass to open up her carotid artery. Using the control she learned from Surn, she allowed the blood to flow in a steady but controlled stream into his mouth. At first it began to pool, but then his throat started working and swallowing. Scarlett stopped it after about a pint of blood, so as not to kill him, and a clot formed over her wound, scabbing up. He began breathing more steadily, and she felt his stomach moving against hers. Slow up and down.

Scarlett tried to push herself off of him, but she was unable. Giving the blood had made her weak. She kissed him on the lips. Scarlett rested on top of him.

As her breathing slowed to a resting pace and just before she fell asleep, she whispered, "Pyrle will leave us alone now."

The seven-thirty sunbeams pierced through the remaining bits of broken glass and came to rest on the still figures of Scarlett and Lazarus. They were caked in blood, dust, and dirt. Around them lay perforated sheets on the furniture and the broken glass from the balcony doors.

The light revealed the utter decrepitude of the interior of the house, cracked walls and peeling paint as well as rotted floors and disintegrating furniture. It was a house left to die on its own.

Lazarus stirred and woke Scarlett. She sat up on top of him and smiled. Unbuttoning his shirt, Scarlett felt the newly healed skin on the right side of his chest, where the bullet had removed a large chunk of his bone and flesh. He glanced down at it, a look of confusion on his face.

“I got a promotion,” she said, “Need to know.”

“I dreamed of you,” he croaked.

“I know.”

END