

The book cover features a complex, layered collage. At the top, there's a large, dark, irregular shape with the word "LOOK" in white block letters. To its right, the words "HAWK YOU BEEN" are written in red, hand-painted letters. Below these, there are several faces: a young man's face on the left, a woman's face in the center, and a man's face on the right, all rendered in a dark, high-contrast style. The background is a mix of dark reds, blues, and greys, with various graffiti elements and textures. The title "Blood Dreams" is written in a large, stylized, red font with a yellow outline, and "THE NOVEL • PART 1" is written in a smaller, red, sans-serif font below it.

# Blood Dreams

THE NOVEL • PART 1

ANGI SHEARSTONE

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## **A Note from the Author.**

And so it begins!

I began releasing an earlier version of what you now read piece by piece back in Spring, 2015. That version is available in whole at [JukePop.com](http://JukePop.com), for free. This version is newer, revised, and spiffier. Overall, nothing significant has changed in the story. If you read a previous version and want me to disclose where the biggest changes are, I'd be happy to tell.

As of this date, I am resuming my agent search after putting it on pause for the holidays and for my art residency this past February. Any plans for full-fledged, all-out, edited-and-everything self-publishing are on hold until I have exhausted my agent-search efforts.

Warnings: This work contains violence, foul language, drug use, adult situations, and all sorts of things found in an R-rated movie. But it also features action, dark comedy, romance, political intrigue, and more!

While this is a vampire story, most of the violence is in fact not "vampire" violence, neck-biting and gore and such. I mention this because some people have issues with specific types of violence. I may try to do some alternate PG-13 versions of some of the more violent scenes so a few friends can be in the loop. Because for the most part, with the exception of some detailed scenes, the violence is on-par with that of a standard action movie, gun fights, brawls, cars exploding or going into rivers and such.

I consider this work an "revised draft," meaning it's well beyond first draft, but might need some revision were it to be picked up by a publisher. But as far as I'm concerned, it's done, share-able, and in better shape than what's up at JukePop right now. In the unlikely event of a revision, information will be posted at the site and new files available for download – for free if you've already bought one.

Please forgive (and report!) any typos. I've gone over it hundreds of times, and if I move ahead with self-publishing, I will absolutely hire a professional editor.

Part Two is in progress, with chapters being shared at JukePop, if you reach the end here and want more.

Any questions or comments, please let me know! Thanks again!

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Prelude

It looked for all the world like he was fucking things up again.

Jonny had fucked up a great deal throughout his short life. It was one of the few things he was quite good at, and his very few friends liked to remind him, *often*. As if he could forget, with all the scars across his body, mind and friendships to show for it. Paul had gone out on a limb, trusting him to stay put for five minutes. Jonny hadn't lasted sixty seconds before things went all dodgy.

It had fallen on Paul to keep Jonny occupied while the rest of the band got ready for tonight's gig at DeeDee's AntiDisco, their first in America. They'd gone to one of the club's bars for drinks. Jonny told Paul his plans for Ginny later, even showed him the ring he intended to give her. Paul had fussed and gushed and insisted on giving Jonny one of his tacky good luck charms.

Fat lot of good that did.

Now Jonny looked over his shoulder, back at the club where he was supposed to be as the streets of New York spun around his head. He could hardly walk, and some strange woman supported him as they stumbled along to who knows where.

*What the hell was wrong with him? Who the hell was this woman?*

Jonny scrambled to remember the past few days, all the tedious people they'd met in all the tedious interviews and tedious festivities. But the whirling mess between his ears wouldn't let a single clear memory land, so they all flew off again.

She didn't know who he was, he was pretty sure on that. If she did, she would have brought him backstage as a friend, or fed him to the damned protestors as an enemy. She'd done neither. She simply half led, half dragged him further from the club and deeper into fucking things up.

All his words came out in a slurry jumble, but it didn't keep him from talking.

"– w-where--"

"I *told* you. Someplace *safe*. Someplace you can rest, in *peace*."

"– b-but who –"

"A *friend* who's *trying* to *help*! Jeez!"

He squinted at her, but her blurry smile didn't look one bit friendly.

"You musta done some heavy shit to get this messed up. Now c'mon!"

"– no–, i –" He looked over his shoulder again. The club was blocks away. "– i – i have to..." The words caught in his throat as everything burst into another violent swirl.

Jonny pulled away and dropped to the ground. His rough landing ripped yet another hole in his jeans and scraped a patch of skin off his knee. His head reeled, his body heaved, and everything went black.

#

*About time*, Nancy thought.

She'd started to wonder if the punk would ever shut up. He'd stammered and slurred nonstop since she'd slipped something into his drink at DeeDee's. Usually the drug hit harder and faster – and kept things *quiet*. He should stay down for a while now, now that they were almost there. And then soon enough, he'd be awake again, and screaming.

Nancy had no problem carrying the punk, he was tall but skinny as a rail, and she had the benefits from Marion's blood in her system. She followed the shadows into Marion's infamous *web*, that inescapable lair with all its protections and horrors. She hauled the prey into the decaying building, through its foul hallways, and into the room that nobody ever saw their way out of.

Nancy dumped her catch onto the bed and looked around for inspiration. Now she had to figure how to *prepare* for Marion's cruel consumption. She pulled his jacket off – a useless, sleeveless thing – and tossed it on the floor. How would this one taste? Sweet or savory? She took a closer look at his flimsy human form, sprawled out cold.

*Unsavory*, Nancy decided. His rough appearance came straight out of this new punk scene, with spiked blue hair, ears pierced tip to lobe, his last shave sometime yesterday, and clothes so torn they might fall off in a stiff breeze. *Very unsavory*, with the mass of scars around his left eye, and the ones across his left wrist, and all the other ones, too: The more she looked, the more scars she found.

Yeah, nobody would miss this asshole. Nobody who counted.

She pulled off his jacket – a dilapidated denim thing deprived of its sleeves and decorated with offensive sayings – and tossed it to the floor.

She'd singled him out because his blood smelled extra good. That and his funny accent. Out of town, he'd have fewer friends around to miss him, probably just that one *queer* at the bar.

But the thing that really caught Nancy's attention set him apart from all the others – a special vibe. He didn't look like much, but he gave off a sense that he was somehow more alive than most. She couldn't put her finger on it, but it made her believe he had more to lose than your average asshole. By a lot.

Marion loved that flavor the best, they hung on longer through the torture, and delivered an extra kick when they realized they were gonna die. Marion went to great lengths to tease out every last bit of fear and adrenaline from her prey. It was Nancy's favorite part of serving Marion. The bitch might be ugly, but she sure could make a masterpiece out of suffering and pain.

But these days, the vampires of New York thought Marion had gotten out of control, that she was addicted now, to *Fear*. Nancy didn't care about that, most of those chickenshits didn't even kill, but maybe the Fear thing had got boring. Marion used to let Nancy hand out some of the misery, but now Nancy only got to do the capture and the cleanup. Marion hogged all the real fun for herself now.

Nancy didn't need the blood, other than what she got from Marion. She was just a sunshade, human but with some small abilities from the blood of her vampire. But Nancy did like to play with the meals she trapped for Marion, and she didn't get to anymore.

And that kinda sucked.

#

Jonny knew for sure now: He was fucking things up again.

The spinning details only showed themselves in dark slivers and pieces. Inside now... off the streets... lying on his back... same strange blonde... a stinging from his knee... and a buzzing in his head.

The clues stopped as a headache sprang out from behind his left eye, bringing with it a nicotine craving he could feel in his teeth. He closed his eyes tight against the throbbing, he'd need several cigarettes before he'd see the other side of this one.

He could actually feel the pain trace the scar around that eye – a souvenir from a broken bottle that brought a struggle with the police to an abrupt end – in the middle of a riot Jonny'd started, halfway through one of his band's shows. His most stellar fuck-up.

He couldn't afford another fuck-up, not even a small one. He had too many scars across his body, mind, and friendships from all the others.

He took a deep breath and a rotten stink hit him full force.

It set off every alarm in his head and and sat up fast – too fast.

The pain rose up screeching and made the room whirl even faster. He clutched his head and scrunched his eyes shut as his stomach jumped into the swirling mess.

Before he could try for another look, a sharp pain hit his forehead from the outside, complete with a shattering sound.

#

*CRASH!!*

The punk startled Nancy by waking up way sooner than she expected. She grabbed a lamp and hit him in the head, sending him back to la-la land, lickety-split.

What the hell, the drug *should* have lasted longer, especially after it took so long to even work! She didn't worry about him escaping, but she had work to do, setting him up for

the live butchering he'd soon face. The prep work would go faster and easier if he would just stay under.

She cuffed one of his hands to the bed's iron headboard before he pulled anything else weird. *There*. Even if he managed to wake again before she finished, he wouldn't be going anywhere.

She inspected him more closely again, to make sure he was *out* now. Among other things, an old lever-lock style key hung from the necklace he wore, and that struck her as funny. No key would help him now.

A bruise started to form around the fresh gash on his forehead, and Nancy took a closer look at the damage. She didn't care about *him*, but Marion would not be happy with the condition of *Dinner* when she got here – *shit* – any minute now.

Nancy shouldn't have hit him, but *damnit*, she shouldn't have *had* to hit him, *none* of them ever woke up that fast. What else could she do, she had to keep him under control while she got him ready. She'd have to make the most of it now, the longer she waited, the less got done, and the bitchier Marion would be about it.

Nancy could count on the average sucker to stay down for a good hour before stirring. By then she'd have them set up in any one of countless creative displays. Marion had usually arrived by then, too, ready to greet her *Dinner* when it woke up.

Nancy hadn't even decided what to do with this one, now that she'd had to rush and wing it. She might've tried something from the ceiling to make a shower of blood, Marion liked that and hadn't done it in a while.

Nancy had set up bloodsacks for Marion in so many unusual and truly cruel ways, she couldn't remember them all. Something as simple as tying him to the bed was an

embarrassment. But she didn't have time for anything fancy or creative now, it would have to do.

She double-checked the handcuffs, she didn't want any more surprises.

The iron headboard formed a large, complicated spiderweb design, spiders being Marion's mark and sign. Maybe she could use that for a more interesting set up.

Nancy touched the carved spider cameo on the choker around her own neck. He was caught in Marion's web, too, a feast for the spider now.

#

When Jonny came to again, his panic surged even higher and faster than before. He still had no idea where he was, who this woman was, and now one of his hands was cuffed to something. He couldn't afford another fuck-up, not even a small one. He had too many scars across his body, mind, and friendships from all the others.

If he didn't get himself out of this, and quick, it might rival his worst fuck-up ever. A problem of this magnitude could trigger one of his crippling flashbacks, and rapidly at that. If that happened, it would leave him completely at her mercy while his mind got tripped up in old enemies and nightmares.

Nearly anything could set off the horrors, but certain situations all but guaranteed to provoke them, and badly. Handcuffs, and well, restraint of any kind, provided a particular and powerful spark for the mess in his head.

He couldn't tell why they happened, because he didn't know. He couldn't guess or imagine, because why the hell should he want to? He'd endured something so horrible his mind had been trying to evict the memories from his skull for two years now.

He held them at bay most of the time while he was awake, with the help of his friends and music and a steady stream of cigarettes. But the terrible impressions still attacked randomly by day, and ruled ruthlessly over his sleep at night.

When the damned things were gone, they were gone, he had no recollection of whatever knowledge or event they had inflicted upon him. His head skipped around like a heavily damaged record playing through an earthquake. It made for a pretty miserable existence.

And to think he was the lucky one...

He lifted his head and the whiff of filth, mustiness, and decay almost sent his head spinning again. He managed to fight it off for now. The strange blonde was turning towards him, holding another set of handcuffs.

*Fuck.*

#

Nancy had only just pulled out another set of handcuffs when the punk came to his senses – *again*. She was reaching for his other hand when he grabbed her wrist and completely freaked her out.

"Oi! Get the fuck offa me!"

What the fuck was it with this guy? He just wouldn't stay down, and she was out of lamps. The good news was that he'd put up an extra good fight for Marion, if Nancy could just get him locked down. She straddled his chest and tried to force his left hand to the headboard, next to his right.

"Shit! Marion will be here any second!"

"What the fuck d'you think you're doing!"

The punk did every panicked thing he could to fight her, but Nancy was stronger. Thanks to Marion's blood, she'd win no matter how hard he thrashed. He might get in a lucky punch, but even if he did, she'd already chained one of his hands to the bed. He wouldn't get far on that short leash.

"She'll kill me if you're not ready!"

She shoved her knee into his gut, *hard*. The blow forced the air out of him and kept him quiet for a few seconds. This guy had a loud set of lungs, and things had gotten noisy. Nancy didn't worry about anyone listening in, she just didn't want to hear it.

The dark and evil symbols that covered the walls made sure that sound didn't get far, among other things. If those didn't do the trick, more deserted, empty properties surrounded this condemned building. Marion loved to hear them scream, but of course didn't want the world to know. Only piles of abandoned junk and filth might overhear what went down in Marion's lair.

"-let me go!" he wheezed.

"STOP SQUIRMING!"

Nancy raised her hand to back-fist him, but hesitated. She didn't hear the door open, but she did see the lighting on the wall shift.

Marion had arrived.

Nancy's catch took advantage of the distraction and kicked, hard. Nancy and the handcuffs hit the floor with a thud and a clatter.

Marion's long shadow bled across the floor to where Nancy had landed.

*"I see Dinner's not ready yet."*

"Fuck," said Nancy and her captive, in unison.

#

Nancy scrambled to her feet and rushed to Marion.

"He woke up too soon!" she blubbered. She didn't have to see or hear Marion to know she was pissed. Marion made you feel it in the air.

*"He's damaged. First blood has been drawn. Perhaps you pretend to be like me now?!"*

"No! The drug didn't work right, he woke up too damn fast!"

It was true, no matter what Marion thought. Nancy had no idea how this one had resisted so long and then pulled himself out of it so quick.

Marion closed and locked the door behind her. She was in a bad mood again, as usual lately, with the hangovers that came whenever she wasn't jacked up on Fear.

For the first time, Nancy wondered if the other vamps might have a point.

## CHAPTER TWO

Henry

Henry stomped up the stairs to his Bay Village apartment, not giving a damn about what the neighbors might hear, and knowing full well the phone would ring as soon as he got in. Samantha again.

Lather, rinse repeat.

He unlocked the door and slammed it behind him, dropped his keys, turned on the TV, fed the fish, poured a drink, and started peeling off his shoes. Each gesture glided with purpose into the next, the efficient, practiced routine of someone who just wanted to get on to the next thing. Even if that someone felt like shit and that next thing was collapsing in front of the TV.

Nowadays it served to gauge how far he could get before Sam called.

The phone rang at him.

"damnit, didn't even make it to the second fuckin' shoe –"

How the hell could Sam manage to call the minute he walked in, each and every goddamned time? Either she spent half the night calling him – *very* unlikely, she worked her

city just as hard as he worked his – or she was exploiting the uncanny connection they shared. – or their uncanny connection ran even deeper as the years went by.

He dropped a canvas All-Star sneaker next to a scattered pile of records and perched on one foot to untie the other.

The phone rang at him again. He threw the shoe at it.

The shoe missed, ricocheted off a wall and landed on a pinball machine that *plinged!* in protest. *Damn!* he'd thrown wide, but he hadn't really aimed. And a shoe wasn't a baseball or a knife – he did better with those. Henry made a note of where the shoe landed, for when he'd need it tomorrow.

Finding the shoe again could be a problem. Henry had problems finding *anything* specific here.

Henry's apartment served as a monument to clutter, or a number of small monuments, or even a clutter preserve, maybe. An umbrella, a baseball bat, a hockey stick, a wooden bokken practice sword, a shotgun and an assault rifle leaned against the wall behind the door. Work boots, hockey skates, a basketball, a baseball glove and a baseball kept them company on the nearby floor.

A short bookcase housed books, guns, and socks in roughly equal proportions. A dim lamp with a crooked lampshade topped the bookcase alongside a rack of antique Japanese swords. Posters of Patti Smith, the Clash, the Ramones, and Star Wars covered the walls, randomly punctuated by Red Sox banners.

A large Zenith TV set sat on the floor, with a fishbowl on top next to its rabbit-ears antenna. A sock hung out with the fish, half soaked, half out of the tank. Neither the male beta nor the upside-down cat – Sid Fishious and Johnny Flotsam – paid it any attention. A

larger stereo system towered over the TV, fishbowl and sock. A single striped, stuffed chair sat opposite the electronics. The pinball machine stood in the kitchen where others might put a table, with a hockey puck next to the shoe that had recently landed on it.

Books and records, newspapers and magazines, Star Wars action figures and boxes of ammunition, paperwork and weapons, maps and photos, crates, file folders and file boxes, it all had come to rest in unrelated piles around the room. Clothing in various shades of clean and dirty was strewn liberally throughout.

Henry had way more important things to do than to keep this place straight.

The phone continued to ring at him.

Henry dropped his 9mm pistol onto the TV tray next to the phone alongside the beer mug of AB positive he'd just put down, a battered copy of the latest Riff magazine, and two tickets to see the Lost Keys here in Boston. He still hadn't settled who would accompany him to the show since Lila backed out. Rosa had zero interest, it would be a while before she went out with him again, after the shit that went down last time. Maybe he'd just give the spare away. Too bad Rachel wasn't local, she might have fun with the whole thing. But no, she was stuck in New York, who knows when he'd see her next. With two weeks to go, he had time to figure it out.

The phone rang at him relentlessly.

Henry picked up the mug, and took a long pull.

Dear dear Samantha. It's not like he wouldn't have called her a few minutes later, anyway. He couldn't really fault her, checking on him every damned night. Philip clearly pushed her into it.

The too-frequent calls were getting on his nerves. While he wished they would stop, he wished more that there wasn't a damned good reason for them in the first place. He'd been limping along for weeks now, with no idea when he'd be at full capacity again. And so, the calls. It was bad enough feeling like shit, but now the handful of those-in-the-know channeled their concerns through one of the few people he *liked* talking to.

He put the mug back down, now half-empty.

The mug left a damp, red ring on the pages of the magazine, which featured a mug shot of the Lost Keys' lead man as a teenager and an urgent message to "see this band before they self destruct." Henry figured a few days should be soon enough. They'd be at DeeDee's Anti-Disco down in New York next week, along with a bunch of other bands he'd kill to see. But the idea of setting foot in that wretched heap of a city set his teeth on edge now more than ever.

The diplomatic arrangements alone just wouldn't be worth it, even if they meant anything. Nobody trusted Sebastian to keep his word, not anymore, nor Marion to do her job. Not after what happened to Lisabet. And Henry couldn't guarantee he wouldn't throttle Marion over the whole fucking mess.

If only he'd been able to escort Lisabet that night, like they'd planned, she might still be around. Or maybe he'd've been staked and scorched along with her. He didn't take anything for granted. But at least she'd've had a chance with him watching her back.

The phone stubbornly continued its blasted ringing noise, and Henry decided he was ready to answer it.

"Make it quick, Sam," he quipped into the phone, no reason to be happy or polite about it. She expected worse of him anyway. He took another swig.

"How quick do you need it?" growled her deep, rich voice at the other end of the line.

"As quick as you can make it, honey!"

"But I usually slow it down, better for you to understand."

Henry sputtered a bit. Sam didn't banter much, so it always caught him off-guard. At least he could tell this time. Sometimes even he couldn't discern her infrequent deadpan from her usual seriousness.

"And here I thought you talk slow because you're still learning the language after all this time!"

Henry heard an irritated grunt through the phone, it didn't take long to reach the end of her sense of humor. That didn't stop Henry from pushing the boundaries. He'd gained little ground over the decades, but he still had fun trying. She was like an older sister to him, and he razzed her the same way he'd razzed his actual sister, long ago.

Henry and Samantha, his former mentor, fellow Bloodrunner and part time partner, had a decades-long habit of touching base a couple times a week. They had plenty of reasons to – news or information to share, facts to sift out from rumors and gossip, sense to make out of the whispers and clues – just part of the job.

But since the *incident*, she'd called *every* goddamned night, even if they didn't have anything new to discuss. And it was driving Henry *nuts*.

At least they didn't talk about why, and just stuck to the work.

"What have you learned about last week's dust-death?"

Henry cringed, did any vampire still use that term? Dear Samantha.

"Not a whole lot. Some Sal bad ass slithered up from New York. Picked him up in a bar. Coulda been Scylla, that's her *M.O.* Damn, I'd love to pull the trigger on that bitch."

A group of displacements from Dallas had found their way across the country, and ended up setting up camp in the humdrum wasteland between New York and Boston. Then one had gone missing, and missing rarely meant anything but ashed. What a waste, making it this far looking for a new home only to end up as dust on the doorstep of safety. Henry didn't give the group a lot of credit. What sort of vampire would set up in *Texas* to begin with? The city had probably fallen at less than a Sal's sneeze.

"They gotta get some more 'runners down there. Niels can only handle so much, I can't drive down to Hartford every fucking night, and neither can you."

"And yet if we do not support them, their problems become ours all the sooner. You and I each have one foot in the canoe, one foot in the boat."

"What the fuck does that even mean, Sam?" He knew what she meant, he just liked to tease. She had the oddest sayings. A vampire typically tried to assimilate to the local dialect of wherever they'd settled, to give the human world one less unusual thing to notice about them. Sam hadn't bothered much yet. To be fair, her original language was local long before his.

"It means neither of us can stay out of the river much longer, with things as is."

"Yeah, I know, I know. Anyway, I got Wendy working with Niels on it. Iris has the rest of the group staying at the Flamingo for now. Should be safe enough."

Henry picked up the magazine and flipped through. His head moved things around fast enough that he didn't need to devote full attention to this conversation, or much of anything, really.

"I got the final numbers from Philadelphia," Sam said. "Quite grim."

"Of course it's grim. It's always grim. That's just another plate of shit hitting the fan, Philly and all the refugees on their way here. You know New York's next, then we're really against the wall. Why can't any of these fucking incoming be Bloodrunners?"

"Because they kill us first." The words hit him like a gut-punch.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, that was rhetorical, my dear tactless Samantha."

Sam could be so goddamned stiff sometimes. Perhaps if he'd seen the things she'd seen in her longer life, he might understand why. But right now, it was more tedious than he could handle on top of the frequent check-ins.

He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair.

Adding to his distraction was some late night entertainment show on the TV, with a bit on DeeDee's crazy punk love-fest, whatever she was calling it. He'd gladly turn both his ears over to that.

He really might've gone if all that shit hadn't gone down, and if New York wasn't well, fucking New York. Fuckin' Sebastian. Way to absolutely screw up a once not-quite-perfectly visitable city. Now it'd be a long time before any vampire from Boston would visit New York, even if they wanted to.

Henry would be half tempted to sneak in and sneak out again, he had a friend just over the bridge in New Jersey who'd give him a place to stay overday. If only it weren't for his current condition – and this political climate.

He kicked the crate that sat next to his chair. A box of shotgun shells toppled off and spilled its contents on the floor.

"Whether New York stands or falls, their infestation will soon climb like rats over our walls."

Now she was just keeping him on the line, making chit chat. He knew she wanted him to tell her how he was doing. He wouldn't say until she asked, and she wouldn't ask unless he brought it up. It was as close to professional courtesy as they got in their exchanges.

Henry resisted the urge to point out the frequency of the calls, and his irritation with them. Because then Sam would respond by stating why, and then they'd be talking about it. Catch twenty-two. Still, Philip lurked behind it all, he could be such an asshole. Bad enough he gave the Doctors the go-ahead to stick a chunk of Henry's heart in a fucking jar and made his near-dust experience even worse.

Henry sunk lower into the cushions. He *could* just end the stand-off, cave in and tell her he still felt like shit, about the same as yesterday but a little less shitty than last week. But why spoil their perfect record of not talking about it since it happened? What's it been, three months now? Fuck. Three months. *Fuck*. Yeah, he'd happily stick with the usual over thinking harder on that.

And so, the routine bitching about New York. They always had that, and Henry rarely got tired of it. Maybe's Sebastian's steaming cup of crazy could thwart the unpredictable insanity the Salierant had recruited & grown. But Henry would not bet on it.

"Sebastian may as well let them have the city," he snarled, "all the good he's done. If that fucker has some trick up his sleeve, he better use it soon. And shit, real soon now that Marion's gone full-fledged fear junkie. Sam, promise me you'll just stake me if I ever end up like that."

The line went silent for a moment as Henry realized what he'd just said. *Oops*. Well, if Sam could have her tactless faux pas, then so could he.

"I would stop you long before it came to that, little brother. And do not forget for our tribe to the south has a hidden guardian in Andrew."

"Yeah, sure, but how long's Andrew gonna last? Poor bastard. Shoulda been his city."

"Andrew may yet surprise all of us."

"Yeah, sure. I'll cross my fingers, but I ain't holding my breath. Lissen, I gotta go, I'll let ya know if I hear anything from Niels. See ya."

He couldn't hang up fast enough. He loved Sam and all she'd taught him, and they worked well together. But the conversation had skirted way too close to talking about *it*, and this smothering bullshit would have to end soon.

As soon as the shit stopped aching. As soon as the sharp pains stopped showing up. As soon as he felt like himself again. He poured himself another AB positive and turned up the TV. New York, New York.

It gave him a headache to think about what Sebastian had made of the once-strong city. Of course, Sebastian thought the dump stronger than ever. Fucking idiot. Even with DeeDee & Silas, he didn't have half the sense or leadership they had here in Philip.

Sure, Philip was drier than Samantha covered in sawdust in the desert at noon, but hell, he got things done, and done right. If only he could conjure up more Bloodrunners, Henry would kiss his ass to the end of days.

Henry settled into the remaining night and tried to forget about New York, Sam's calls, the growing number of vampires they had to protect somehow, and the damned ache in his chest.

He cleaned a few guns and soaked up what was left of the night's broadcast.

Henry tried to take it one crisis at a time, one bullet at a time. You had to, in this gig. This job never ended, hunting the fucking hunters, and he would know better than most.

It struck him as odd, sometimes, that he'd opted into eternal life only to put his neck on the line, and likely get killed faster and younger than just about any other vampire.

But there was little more he'd rather do, and someone had to protect their sorry asses. The world would be a bit too quiet without them around. He just wanted everyone spread out a little more, to quit piling up on his turf. The remnants of vampirity would not fit under his shield, or even spread throughout the cities within a few hour's drive, regardless of how meager their numbers now were.

When he'd got the guns clean enough, he re-read half the magazine and snarled to think again on what he'd miss this weekend. Several of his favorite bands, and few more climbing the ranks towards his favorites, all in one spot. All night long for three nights. Fucking DeeDee. Fucking Sebastian. Fucking New York.

Only one of the bands would head up to Boston afterwards, and hell yeah, he had tickets. The Lost Keys were the one punk band that had more than one record out, like it was all they did. Must be nice, doing nothing but music all the time. Each album sounded amazing, all three got more play than any others in his collection. He needed to buy new copies soon, he'd nearly worn the things out.

He didn't mind settling for this one show. Hell, if he had to pick one band out of DeeDee's guests, he'd pick The Lost Keys, hands down. He was too fucking busy these days anyway. His last attempt at down time had bit him in the ass, hard.

Dominic hadn't attracted many bookings lately, thus the dwindling entertainment locally speaking. Henry, while eager to blow off some steam, couldn't fault the man. DeeDee

might show him up for this brief moment in time, but Dominic had way better mojo for putting a fucking good bash together. She just got lucky with her timing.

DeeDee's luck had its limits, too – she'd attracted a swarm of flies with the crazy protests and their brewing shit storm. The thing was headed straight for a showdown between the protestors and the bands and their fans. DeeDee might pretend to enjoy it, but she wouldn't for long, not if someone were to sniff around her club long and deep enough to suss what the private events and hidden rooms were all about.

*Not my fucking problem*, he thought, though he knew full well that whatever happened in New York had a ripple effect to everywhere. Fucking New York.

He tossed the magazine aside and pulled out a file – he wasn't done thinking about work just yet. The file was pretty thin, hardly anything in it to chew on – and it was the one that bothered him the most. Just three names at the top, iffy physical descriptions, and then a long list of dusted vampires chalked up to them. Many of them Bloodrunners. Some of them friends.

He pulled this file out a lot these days, and picked at it like a scab that just wouldn't heal. Just three names. Viper. Thorn. Bricks. There hadn't be a single report or rumor of this New York based team in months. Not even a whisper. Not a single thread of recent intelligence could be connected even remotely to them. That never meant anything good. The fuckers were up to something, something that might very well knock on his door soon – while he was still recovering.

He shoved it aside and let it fall to the floor. Until he could connect something else to it, he was just spinning his gears.

He went to the kitchen to pour one more pint, this one B negative, his favorite. The AB positive was supposed to help the healing, but damn, that shit was thick, too gritty. He stared out the window until his eyes started to droop and the sky showed a tiny hint of growing lighter.

One crisis at a time.

He quaffed the last of his drink, and headed into the bedroom. He stripped off his clothes, climbed into the closet, curled up on the floor around his favorite sword, and fell into the dreamless sleep of the undead.

## CHAPTER THREE

Rachel

Rachel walked through the Village past another wall full of the flyers. A week from now, DeeDee's ill-conceived three-night calamity would begin, for better or for worse.

Punk bands from all over the world, obscure, passionate and raw, they'd find themselves hip-deep in all the mayhem New York has to offer. A sort of Woodstock. For punk. In the middle of the city. At DeeDee's Anti-Disco.

As cuckoo as the whole thing sounded, Rachel did like to keep her ears open for good things among the weeds of trend. With a sigh, she caved in to curiosity and pulled a flyer down for a closer look.

This one was for the Lost Keys, a young band her friend in London had spoke of, obscure even by punk standards. What had Shayna said? *Insanely good, insanely talented, insanely dangerous, and, quite probably, actually insane.*

Rachel smiled, those words described Shayna herself these past few years. Rachel would have known it even at this distance, even if Renaldo hadn't spilled the beans.

Shayna had only recently achieved passing normality, after waking up from a dirt nap three years ago. It could take a while for a vampire to find their bearings after a long sleep, but those three years had worried everyone. Shayna'd been under for a mere thirty-five years, but the world changed faster and faster as the decades rolled on. Overall, those changes provided places a-plenty for an eccentric, out-of-touch vampire to hide, at least from normal humans. But the enemies of vampiredom had outpaced those changes, taking greater and greater strides in making life difficult for the undead.

In the end, Shayna had pulled it together well enough, with assistance from Renaldo and Maxine, his dayling. Rachel couldn't have helped either way, she couldn't do the travel, everyone had their own problems these days. But Rachel was finally about to solve one of her own.

If her plan worked, then maybe soon she could visit her vampire kin where she'd left them in England more than fifty years ago. She'd come to this land in the roaring twenties, attracted to the smokey jazz clubs, sultry and dark and sparkling in the night. She'd sung again, for a while.

But not these days. The musical thread in the pattern of her life came and went, all the way back to her warsongs of the Mino in the Kingdom of Dahoney, when she first let go of mortal life. These days she had nothing to sing about. Not here in Sebastian's New York.

She'd stayed off radar as much as possible, but in the end her past had still caught up to her. Sebastian had found out her secret, the valuable skills she'd left behind when she took her Turning.

And so, Rachel put her plan to leave New York in motion.

Rachel did regret that she would not see this London band in a few nights when they'd perform at DeeDee's. While not a fan of punk, she could identify talent when she heard it, these four had something different. Their distinctive sound was marked by actual talent, driven to the scene by anger at the world and a dedication to affect it, and enhanced by the skills to play way more than three or four chords.

Under different circumstances, in a different time and place, she would have loved to bathe in the insanity. The raw energy, the passion and anger all dazzled her and stirred something wild within her. The punk phenomenon brought some glorious raw passion to a world that desperately needed it.

But now, Rachel needed peace, and for the chaotic event to serve as a distraction.

She preferred to stay far away from DeeDee's club, anyway. She couldn't stand the place, not knowing what – or who – might dwell in those walls, and under those floors. The whole situation made Rachel very uneasy, and she was plenty uneasy already. DeeDee's past schemes had –

"Don't tell me you like that crap, Rae."

Rachel started, brought up her guard just for an instant. Then she realized that it *had* to be Andrew, the only vampire, and therefore the only person in all of New York, who could sneak up on her.

"Andrew! You asshole!"

"Sorry," he said, and pulled at the flyer in her hand. His smirk and his apology worked in direct opposition to each other.

"Bad scene, you know," she said. She didn't talk music with Andrew, he just didn't get it, at least not the modern stuff. "DeeDee's up to somethin' again, and by now, the Sals will be hot on Marion's trail..."

"Yeah, I'll be there, too, to watch Marion's back."

Somehow Rachel knew he'd pull something like that, with his do-good white knight complex, even after all he'd been through. Still, she scoffed at him. "What, you a Bloodrunner now? Let 'em have the crazy bitch. She's nothing but a fear junkie, letting the whole city down! "

"That crazy bitch is a damn good Bloodrunner, and the Sals practically have the city as is. We protect our own, Rachel, no matter what."

"It's Sebastian's mess, honey, not your problem anym –"

"Sebastian's mess is everyone's problem!" Andrew hissed.

Rachel had struck a nerve, she didn't need vampire eyes to see that. Andrew didn't let his guard around many, and Rachel was one of the few. She touched his hand and his expression softened.

"After everything Dorian did for this city ..." His voice drifted off.

Rachel took his arm and they walked toward Washington Square in silence.

They passed a window, and the reflection reminded her what an odd couple they must make to mortal eyes. Not that she or Andrew would care what anyone thought, but you had to keep an eye on your audience at all times, blending in with the everyday world.

In his suit, trench coat and fedora, Andrew looked like something out of a hard-boiled detective novel. Rachel wore an odd dress of her own making tonight, something that might

look at home in both modern discotheques and jazz clubs of decades past. While he had a few inches of height over her, the top of her afro matched the peak of his hat.

Rachel tuned in to the present, enjoying the moment before telling him her news. This would be the last time they walked these streets, for a long while. It might be her last walk with Andrew for a while, too. She would try to convince him to join her, but she didn't give that very good odds.

She'd played this scene in her head a hundred times, but now the words stuck in her throat. How could she tell him she was leaving, that *she* wouldn't have *his* back anymore? Would he try to talk her into staying? Not that he could, she'd made her mind up. Lisabet's death had settled the matter, and Helena's warning had hastened her resolve.

It would be easier if she really thought he might accept her invitation. Well, only, one way to find out. She took a deep breath.

"I am leaving, Andrew. Come north with me."

He turned and pulled away, as if she'd plunged a knife into him. "Not you, too!" If her earlier words had struck a nerve, these stung like hell and left him bleeding. It made her sick to do that to a friend.

Andrew had every right to feel betrayed, Rachel expected it. But leaving made a lot more sense than sticking around here, even if she didn't *have* to now.

"Yeah, me, too. We got enough ground there to make a stand. Marion's going down. This city's done."

"It's all I got left, Rae. Aside from you..."

Rachel stopped walking. She was his last remaining friend here. All of them had fled or been captured by Sebastian in the takeover. A few had escaped over the years, but more

had been caught in the attempt than not, at least those who'd tried without Andrew's and Rachel's help. Now Andrew would be alone without her.

She wouldn't desert him on a whim. There was more to her decision than the obvious, and he'd understand, once she'd told him. She touched his arm and steered him to look at her. His eyes flickered with irritation.

"He knows, Andrew. Helena told me. Sebastian knows where I come from, what I did before I took my Turning."

Andrew didn't say anything at that. His expression took on a softer anguish, and he gave a silent nod.

He understood.

Sebastian would need a new big shot Bloodrunner when Marion finally crashed, and would find a former warrior such as Rachel very appealing. She had to get out of the city before he made his move, before he *summoned* her.

While no sane Keeper would force someone into that line of work, Sebastian was not known for his rationality, and didn't take "no" for an answer. He reserved the right to draft any of his citizens into service of any kind, and knew how to *extract* the performance and work ethic he required – at least out of anyone not hooked on Fear like Marion. Nothing could balance out the toll that habit took.

"He's gonna try to make me a Bloodrunner. Probably only waiting until Marion's situation has played out." They walked a few more paces in silence. "I don't care what I have to do, I won't fight for him."

Rachel would fight, though. She was ready to fight again, somewhere they had ground to stand on, not here, behind enemy lines. She would talk to Iris or Philip about

becoming a Bloodrunner, if she made it far enough. But Andrew didn't need to know that. He had too much to worry about as is.

"I understand, Rae. And you've got my blessing. Hell, now that I know, I'll do what I can to help. I wish I could join you." He turned to look at her. "But this city is all I got left."

"It doesn't have to be like that. Make something new for yourself, someplace else. The world out there could use you."

More than a decade had passed since Sebastian had taken control of the city. Rachel had hoped Andrew would've moved on by now. But the look on his face gave testimony to how much he'd lost. Not even vampires bounced back from tragedies like that. Those wounds still bled.

The memories made Rachel burn in contempt for all that Sebastian had made of the city, for all he'd done to their friends and Dorian's supporters, and at the thought of Andrew staying here. And at how different things might have been.

Back when their world was more sane, Dorian had asked Rachel if she would be New York's third Keeper, alongside Andrew and Jessica. Dorian was one of the last Ancients, thousands of years old, and was planning for New York's next era, way in advance. Rachel had asked for time to consider the offer, and he gave her a decade. Nobody knew about their conversation, not Andrew or Jessica or anyone.

But Rachel never got her decade. Less than a year later, Sals had killed Jessica, Dorian had fled, and Sebastian had moved in.

The vampire world had stood in shock as the news spread: Jessica, Turned of Dorian and destined to lead alongside Andrew, had been killed by the Sals.

More than that, she'd been *captured* and *tortured*, something the bastards just didn't do, unless they had an important vampire and a purpose in mind. They must have known she was Turned of an Ancient. Tied together by blood, Dorian and Andrew had felt everything they did to her, day and night, neither of them able to sever the psychic connection they all shared.

It had taken a heavy toll on Andrew, but it had driven Dorian completely out of his mind.

Rumor had it Dorian had tried to make use of the telepathic link to help her – to provide mental support or find out where they had her – and it had backfired on him. Rachel had tried to get Andrew to talk about that, but he kept the answer hidden from all, along with all his other secrets.

When, after weeks of suffering, the Sals had finally staked and burned Jessica, Dorian had fled the city without a word. Before Andrew could get his bearings, Sebastian and his mob had descended like wolves. They took full advantage of the chaos as if they'd been waiting in the wings, ready to exploit any weakness. They'd rounded up all of Dorian's supporters, and in the end allowed Andrew to go free. They felt the humiliation was more painful than anything else they could have done.

Rachel did understand that Andrew might still need time to get over it. She just didn't get why he had to be *here* while he worked on it.

"Just come with me. You can let this city go."

"*No, I can't.*" His words had a finality she'd never heard from him before. "I'm still loyal to these grounds, regardless of who's at the top."

"The grounds are crumbling under your feet!"

"They're still... my grounds."

"You've done all you can for New York. *Why* won't you leave?" She looked him in the eye, and he looked away.

"It's just not that simple, Rae."

Rachel stopped.

Andrew was a fool, a sentimental, idealistic, and unwavering fool. A fool she loved, and a fool who, she suspected, wasn't telling her the whole story. If so, she would not get the whole truth out of him, not tonight.

Maybe someday, a hundred years from now, when everything had run its course, maybe then he would finally tell her. Provided they hadn't all been staked and scorched by then, or taken by Sebastian's mad regime.

He had made up his mind, as she had made hers. He'd stay, she'd never convince him. And come this weekend, while she slipped away, he would go into the lion's den to watch out for Marion, the monstrous embarrassment that threatened the safety of every vampire she purported to protect. She pictured him as a lone centurion guarding a crumbling empire, or a captain going down with his ship. And it pissed her off.

"I am relieved, though." He stole a sidelong glance at her and smiled a little. "Once you're out, I can stop worrying about what could happen to you here."

Rachel frowned at him. "That still leaves *me* worried about *you*." She looked him in the eye, and he looked away.

"There's no need to. If Sebastian were going to do something else, he would have by now. I'm right where he wants me – Bored to tears and in plain sight. And you and I have done all the work we could do, so..."

They walked in silence for a long while, honoring what they'd known and shared, what they'd been through.

When Sebastian first stormed New York and made his intentions clear, Rachel had helped Andrew try to drive him out.

Dorian's administrators had started to organize all who might help make a stand. But Rachel had assisted in secret, like a few others, in case it all went south. That insight had saved her and the other shadow generals.

Someone betrayed the main group, some minor political player. He informed one of Sebastian's officers, hoping for a position in the new regime in exchange for information. Nobody had seen anything of the turncoat until maybe three years ago. Sebastian had given him a new position, alright, as just another mindless repurposed flunky.

Sebastian chose to let Andrew walk free, to humiliate him more than anything else. Rachel and the other shadow generals would not have known such grace, had their involvement been known.

Once Sebastian had neutralized the previous hierarchy, none had dared oppose him.

Even the Keepers of other cities would not interfere. Everyone had their own problems, as Sals closed in from every direction. Perhaps the other Keepers and Elders had hoped to deal with Sebastian later, when their own cities had stabilized. But vampiredom's standing against the Salierant had only grown worse.

Some more stable cities had seen their population increase tenfold over the past decade. A city could only hide so many vampires before things went to hell. Rachel didn't know for sure, but everyone feared that Boston teetered on exactly that problem. Philip had

done an exceptional job balancing the city's needs thus far, but it couldn't last forever. The tipping point would come sooner or later.

And so Sebastian's claim to New York went unchallenged, the territory submitted to his rule, and those who remained had to consent to his governance, or else.

Nothing like it had ever happened in vampire history, not that anyone could recall. Vampires didn't have rules that covered major conflicts or takeovers. The world was huge, and vampires very few. If two vampires couldn't get along in one city, their peers would just throw both parties out, and force each of them to find a new home. And now the Sals emptied city after city, forced more and more vampires into refugee status.

Rachel looked up. The night had grown old, they'd walked much longer than she'd realized. To the east, the sky let slip the vaguest hint of a lighter color.

She turned to Andrew. Time to say good bye.

She fussed with his tie as if to straighten it, a pointless gesture. He kept the thing perfectly straight, she had to mess it up first just so she could fix it.

"You look like an off-duty cop." She pressed her lips together in a forced smile.

"They'll tear you apart at DeeDee's, if DeeDee doesn't get you first."

He cracked a half smile. "I'll blend in just fine, as security. Or as one of those protesters. What's the name of that cult, again?"

"Just be careful.."

"You, too. Don't get caught. You know what that means."

"What you do is more dangerous than what I'm doing, hon, and you know it."

"Yes."

She joined hands with him, he kissed her cheek. She turned her face up and kissed his lips.

"Good bye, Rachel."

"Good luck, Andrew. You need it around here."

Andrew gave her hand one last squeeze and turned and walked away.

She watched him for a moment, then turned away. Just a few loose ends to tie up tomorrow night, and she would break Sebastian's law and leave this city through the path that would escape Sebastian's notice. She looked back, one last time, as her friend slipped into the shadows.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Viper

Viper loosened his tie as he strode down the hall to the briefing on Marion. He nearly tossed the thing in a trash can as he passed, but thought better of it, he'd probably need it again soon.

The trappings of the real world aggravated him under the best of circumstances, and today ranked solidly among the worst. The real world in this case meant anything that didn't have to do with hunting vampires, something his family had done for generations. His family that had just lost a member.

Viper and his twin sister Lauren had gone to settle the last of their father's affairs, a tedious appointment that had fallen at the same time as the first team meeting for this very important hunt. Bricks had offered to start the meeting for him, but as team lead Viper wanted to get there before they got too far. Eager to get elbows-deep back into work, he had a personal *need* to get there as soon as possible.

Viper's father had just died, or more accurately, had just been found dead. He'd gone missing several weeks ago, trying to extend their information network into Boston. But Boston was a bloodsucker stronghold, and they must've been onto him from the start. His body had finally turned up in a river only last week, clearly dead for a while, his throat cut to the bone. Very likely the work of Henry, Boston's deadliest bloodrunner.

It hadn't surprised Viper, and he didn't feel much loss. He expected it in this line of work, they all did. He channeled anything resembling grief into more energy for the mission. He didn't have any use for the wear and tear on his nerves, so he dismissed it. The upcoming hunt would require razor-sharp focus, and he set his mind towards that over all else.

By now Bricks had probably gone through the latest intelligence with the team. But he'd wait for Viper to get into the details of the hunt for Marion, New York's deadliest bloodrunner.

Marion, like Henry, actively stalked vampire hunters like Viper. Viper had no room for revenge or personal vendetta in his life, but he would welcome the chance to stake Henry when that time came. But he had a lot more to do right in front of him, many more bloodsuckers to kill between now and then. Starting with Marion.

He stifled a yawn. The coffee had better be fresh.

Before they'd signed the final papers on their father's estate, he and Lauren, or *Thorn* as she would be known when she resumed active duty again, had stayed up all day finalizing the details.

Viper would prefer to have her on the strike team for the Marion mission, and Lauren would prefer that, too. But with her just past eight months pregnant, they all had to settle for

her strategic consultations on this one. They'd finally gathered enough on Marion to launch an active hunt, and they had to act while they had the chance. They didn't have time to wait.

With blond shaggy hair and sideburns, Viper didn't look much like someone whose family tree had been killing bloodsuckers for thousands of years. But his distant ancestors ranked among the first vampire hunters, even high among those most successful. He was very good at what he did, like his sister, like their parents before them, all their grandparents, and those before them. At twenty-nine, he himself had already staked more than any other at his age, with more bloodrunners on his kill-list than any other operative would likely ever boast.

But Viper didn't boast. He was part of a team and a mission, and none of this could get done by one person alone. Only when the last vampire had turned to ash could they pat themselves on the back.

"Victor. Walk with me a moment."

Viper turned, knowing it would be Carrios, the leader of their large, global organization. Few people knew or would use Viper's real name in this building, Carrios being one of them, and only with nobody else within earshot. Carrios had a number of secret passages and doors throughout these headquarters, and ambushed high-ranking members for personal chats on a regular basis.

Viper paused to let Carrios catch up, then resumed walking at a slower pace to accommodate the old man. Carrios' crooked frame leaned heavily on a cane as he joined Viper.

Several pairs of fangs adorned the cane's sculpted golden handle, artifacts of bygone hunts of their predecessors, the largest reputedly those of Vlad the Impaler. In his other hand, he carried a styrofoam cup of coffee. He handed it to Viper as he drew near.

Viper and his associates were part of a large, ancient order of vampire hunters called the Salierant, with Carrios at its head. Few members knew where the name had come from and fewer cared, but it was thought to have been mutated, twisted and mispronounced through numerous languages over thousands of years, from ancient Egyptian words meaning "custodians of life." The trivia meant little to Vic. Historical details only mattered when directly relevant to their goal – eradicating vampires from the face of the earth for all time.

"Please pass my regrets along to Lauren that I was unable to attend the service," Carrios said.

"Your responsibilities are more important than appearances, Carrios. My sister and I both know that," Viper replied. The coffee was strong, fresh and black with a hint of sugar. Perfect.

"Your father achieved great things for our cause, and died honorably for it. I have great faith in your ability to pick up where he left off. And in Lauren's as well, when the time comes for her to hunt again."

Lauren would be back in the game soon, but not soon enough as far as anyone was concerned. She and Victor, along with Bricks, her husband, made for an unstoppable force in their pursuit of vampires.

"She and I have worked out most of the plan for Marion, Bricks is going over the files with the core team now."

Carrios paused as they approached the door to the briefing room. Carrios would not go in, he only granted audience to his highest-ranking members. "We destroyed eleven vampires in Philadelphia last night. Among them Adrianna, their last Keeper, and two Bloodrunners. Primarily using the strategies your father developed."

"We'll do the same here, once Marion's out of the picture, and Boston, soon enough."

"Indeed, Victor." Carrios turned to walk away. "Maybe, just maybe, I'll see these vermin finished off in my lifetime."

Viper watched in silence as Carrios turned a corner and disappeared into another secret passage.

Viper took a another swig of coffee, mentally switched from *Victor* back to *Viper*, and opened the door.

Fourteen agents sat around a long table, at its head stood Bricks, so nicknamed for his large, wall-like stature as well as his heavy punch. With a thick mustache & dark curls, Bricks looked somewhat more the part of an ancestors-hunted-vampires-in-ancient-Egypt guy than Viper did, and his family stretched back as far and claimed almost as much success as Viper's.

Viper had to think of him as *Bricks* here, his second-in-command and ex-mentor, and not as *Walter*, his brother-in-law, *Lauren's* husband and father to her imminent child, *Victor's* imminent nephew.

*Viper* walked into the room.

Pictures of Marion lay scattered across the table, mixed in with files and notes and lists. A disbelief hung in the air that they could have missed such a hideous beast for so long.

Marion had a grotesque, misshapen face, her red eyes different sizes and positioned at different heights and angles to either side of a long, blunt, crooked nose. The monster appeared to stand six and a half feet tall. Her build was massive, even masculine. Dark, greasy, matted hair clumped around a face so pale it was nearly blue. She sported a tattoo across her chest, back and shoulders, a spider and web design of some sort – a detail worth

noting. Important bloodsuckers often had a personal sigil, and the spider correlated with earlier leads on Marion.

The pictures showed her hiding in an alley, viciously slaying a young vandal with a green mohawk and a leather jacket, one of these kids from the new punk scene. It had not been a quick, neat kill, which is what enabled them to take the photos in the first place.

She'd taken her time, which was both a good sign and bad.

Vampires that toyed with their prey did so to stimulate the victim's fear and adrenaline, something a vampire could get heavily addicted to. She would take longer with her kills, then, to raise that terror level. Her hunting patterns would get sloppier, and make her easier to track.

But addicted bloodsuckers fed and killed much more often, which made it imperative that Viper and his team act quickly, effectively, and soon. Not just for the public good, but before the city's vampire leadership shut her down and took their own disciplinary measures.

Viper had caught Bricks in the middle of explaining why Marion might have evaded them for so long.

"She could be a shapeshifter, or, more likely, she could have a sunshade doing some of her hunting for her. She's a bloodrunner, she'd have the status."

"Yeah, she's hideous," Viper said from the doorway. "A mug like that woulda got her burned at the stake a few hundred years ago. Unfortunately, that didn't happen, so it's down to us to get the job done here and now, 1977."

Bricks turned as Viper approached the table, ready to turn the meeting over. Their eyes met for a moment in acknowledgement, Viper blinked his gratitude, they'd have time to talk later. He put his coffee down, and pulled a map to the top of the pile on the table.

He didn't waste time getting to the point.

"Ok, you've seen the files," Viper said as he took over the briefing. "There's a punk rally at DeeDee's next week, they're bringing in bands and attracting fans from all over, trying to make something of this toilet of a scene. Marion's apparently a sucker for the crap, so she's sure to be there. She'll likely hunt all around the area, we'll put it under a microscope for several days.

"We expect the primary hunt to go down Saturday night, the finale. But we will be there and ready all three nights, plus on call a few nights on either side. The main crews will cover the club, six inside and three at the front door, two at the back door, and three rotating between the three positions, that's all of us, plus additional surveillance-only and support teams in the surrounding blocks ... "

He looked at the team. They'd each killed at least one bloodrunner, but none like Marion. He had to make sure they understood this hunt. Only he and Bricks could fully appreciate what they faced, and it would likely take the two of them to drive it home.

"But let's talk about her." Viper reached into the pile and put the biggest photo on top. "This mission will test you like no other. This organization has been looking for a concrete lead on this bloodsucker for nearly two centuries. Marion is a powerful, cunning and near invisible beast."

"It's a miracle we even got these pictures," Bricks added, "with her feeding out in the open like that."

Bricks was right on that, but Viper thought they could have got even *more* photos, after she was done feeding. A sunshade might have shown up to clean-up and dispose of the body, in which case they'd have another lead.

But the photographer had been a recruit, and got too excited over what he'd seen. He'd stopped shooting pictures as soon as Marion was done, and then run back to report. Good thing he hadn't been closer, he might've tried shooting more than pictures. Then his blood would've been all over that alley, too, and the film destroyed.

When Viper and his sister were young, their mother had teased that Marion could hear your synapses passing along the decision to shoot her from three hundred yards away, and react before your trigger finger even twitched.

"Too bad they didn't take the ugly bitch out right then and there."

Viper squinted at the speaker. A muscle-bound man in his mid-twenties, buzz-cut. Ripper. *A recruit.*

"It takes a team of the most capable agents to bring down a bloodrunner, and even more for one like Marion. Why do you think there's so many of you here?"

Viper let that sink in a moment and looked to Bricks. Since Lauren had gone on leave, they'd each traveled around to lend their expertise and support to other teams. This would be the first time they'd worked together in months, and the first time ever without Lauren. It felt good to have him here, to punctuate the unique aspects of this hunt. Viper could use something familiar in the wake of losing his father. Carrios probably had that in mind when he assigned them to this mission.

"Think about it," Bricks challenged them. "We got these photos because she took her time with this kill, out in the open, without thinking, without self-awareness. Bloodsuckers don't usually do that, not even the dumb ones. And for a bloodrunner to do that? Something's changed."

"Something big," Viper picked up again. "She's completely off her game, for a very specific reason. She toyed with him to stimulate his fear. Any of you ever dealt with a fear junkie bloodsucker?"

They stared back at him. The thought hadn't occurred to any of them. No surprise, it was a rare thing in the vampire world, it led to recklessness too fast, and they all knew it. "She's on the road to addiction if she's not there already. Because of that, she'll hunt sloppy and kill slow, and that gives us an advantage."

Viper drained the last of his coffee while Bricks filled in some more gaps. "Addicts also feed more often, which means we have to act fast."

"Before she kills anyone else." This time it was Feather who'd asked the question, a young black woman who'd single-handedly tracked and killed the vampire who'd killed her brother. Also a recruit. Viper let Bricks answer this one and refilled his cup with the old and stale coffee from the maker in the corner.

"Yes. But also because the vampire community will want to stop her. She's left a lot of evidence around, making it harder for them to cover for her. We've got to get her before they do."

The room fell silent again. They were starting to get it, even though it had already been spread out before them, in the pictures and the files. No words on paper could get through near as deep as two highly experienced agents telling them the real deal.

"She's important, otherwise they would have shut her down by now. Even addicted, Marion isn't just any vampire, nor just any bloodrunner." Viper paused. He wasn't sure how they would respond to the next thing he had to say, but they all had to know. Bricks filled the silence while Viper worked out the words in his head.

"She's one of the worst bloodrunners, the most unpredictable, in all our history."

Viper exchanged a glance with Bricks. Bricks knew what would come next, but didn't worry much about their reaction. Bricks took everything in stride, and didn't worry about much of anything. Viper took a long look around the table before continuing.

"Not only is she a vicious, bloodthirsty and unstable killer, intelligence indicates she uses sorcery as well."

Two of the recruits scoffed. At least it was only two. How could that shit be any harder to swallow than the existence of vampires? Once you made the leap to knowing some horror stories were in fact real, everything else should come easy. You'd think.

Viper and others like him learned about it starting around the same time as they started learning about vampires. Not many members could wield it, but the occult offered many of their best weapons against vampires.

"We won't get another chance like this. And you won't ever see a hunt quite like this one. So brush up on your knowledge about bloodrunners, fear junkies and witchcraft these next few days. Make sure you know that section of the city like the back of your hand. Marion's a top bloodrunner, she's hunted and killed *our* kind for two hundred years. She will eat you up and shit out your bones if given half a chance."

He flipped another part of the file to the top – photocopied diary entries, the originals from 1802.

The frightened handwriting offered a detailed account of a tall shadowy night-thing, strange symbols appearing carved into trees and buildings throughout the town, followed by horrific events and unthinkable ill-fate. Viper pulled out more copies of similar accounts from different towns and different times, and put them on top next to it. One of them specifically

described a large, red-eyed woman-man-beast. Another detailed how even a musket blast in the gut hadn't stopped her.

A hell of a lot of their work started in the Salierant library.

The team would now pour over the files, deeper than the photos, well beyond the recent kill and modern news. Viper could see it in their eyes now. They got it.

"But she's made a mistake. She's as vulnerable as she is unpredictable right now. If we stay sharp, and don't give her that chance, we get to stop her. We get to stake this bitch."

Viper stopped. They hadn't got to the plan yet, but suddenly, he'd reached the limits of the coffee's effects. He looked at his watch. Two in the afternoon. He'd been going for nearly forty hours straight, and needed some fucking sleep.

There was no good reason to step up to something stronger than caffeine, not now. The team wouldn't get much further today, anyway, not until all of it had a chance to sink in. It was time to call it.

"So take today to chew on all that. I'll meet you back here tomorrow, same time, and we'll talk strategy."

Viper left the room and Bricks followed him, pausing at the door.

"Thanks for getting things started."

"No problem. Great team, once they know what they're up against."

"Listen, Lauren and I fleshed out the plan a bit while you were teaching your class. They weren't ready in there, they've got enough to wrap their heads around. What are you doing tonight?"

"Same as usual, anything she needs me to do."

"She'll probably want your eyes on the plan as soon as you get in the door. *Then* the dishes. Let's plan on finalizing it before tomorrow's meeting?"

"Sure. Just promise me you'll sleep, and *just* sleep, until tomorrow. You look like shit."

"I always look like shit. I can't promise anything these days. But I'll make sure I'm running on more than just coffee."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Willem

Willem glared daggers as Jonny and the rest of the oddball group boarded the plane, a bunch of random pieces from different puzzle sets. Many a time Willem thought himself nuts for betting on these delinquents, but the payoff would very well make the high investment worth it – should it ever come.

They were about to break even, at long last, so the next piece of action might actually taste like pie. If Willem hadn't bet on them, all that talent would have otherwise rotted away in jail or on drugs or even six feet under. In one week, they'd have the show at DeeDee's Anti-Disco behind them, and then he'd know for sure.

But Willem wasn't stupid, he had eggs in many baskets. He might be gambling in a high stakes venture, but this lot weren't his only source of income. His arse was well covered should their arses prove to be irrevocably out of line. Still a likely outcome, after all this time, and he hated them for it.

Willem didn't believe for one second that they'd passed all the sandtraps and landed soundly onto the green. After two years in the clear and now heading for a new land, the band

was overdue, overripe for a major incident. He wondered which one of them would fuck it all up, as they had only just come out of the woods.

If he had to bet, he'd pick Jonny, the most obvious choice, the star of their little show, with his blue hair that the girl did up for him, and all that goddamned frightening talent.

The bastard wrote songs like most people breathed, and played better than anybody anyone had ever heard. When he felt like being more of an asshole about it, usually while blind drunk, he'd pull out a guitar and make fun of the best, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, nobody was immune. He'd take their music and make it a hundred times better, putting them in the shade and making their own efforts sound like a stoned monkey.

But aside from that talent, the boy was virtually useless. He had so much music in his head it didn't leave room for much else, like common sense or personality. If that weren't enough, a mind-boggling instability had forced a lot of cracks in there, like weeds and rot through an abandoned building.

Willem hated him.

Jonny returned Willem's hate with equal fervor and a plateful of resentment to boot. They stood diametrically opposed to each other in nearly all things. Willem shared perhaps one stance in common with Jonny, and that was a contempt for the stupid stage name the others had christened him with.

Currently, Jonny was snogging his girlfriend Ginny and blocking the aisle, their heads a mess of blue and pink-purple hair mashed together. Oblivious to the halt it had put to others' boarding, their hands had ventured into each other's pockets. Willem would bet they'd be shagging in the lavatory by the end of this their very first flight.

The thought made Willem retch. But Ginny helped keep Jonny sane, and, if Jonny hadn't found his way back to them, she could certainly have led the band into a more moderate success. So long as the second love of her life – heroin – had stayed dormant.

Her need for the needle had dissolved when Jonny returned and it became clear that patching him together required everyone's full attention. Her detoxification had surely involved more than that, but the band had spared Willem the details, much to his relief. Between the music and the groping, her mechanical aptitude with cars kept her busy now, she kept things running at her father's auto shop.

Gary and Reg, the rest of the musical part of the band, broke up the snoggy traffic jam and squeezed their way past to their own seats. As Ginny's brother, Reg might be the one person who hated Jonny as much as Willem did.

Reg scowled at the scene the two had made, but then again, Reg always scowled. It's what he did best. He'd had his own drug problems in the past, opting for cocaine more than anything else. Anybody who played guitar in the same band as Jonny needed an artificial boost to their confidence. Reg might fuck things up just by deciding to split on them, once and for all. Even though he had the least amount of talent, he was easily good enough to get snatched up by another band in a heartbeat.

If it turned out to be Gary's turn to fuck things up, the only brawn in this brainless outfit, his misdeed would involve beating the shit out of someone just a hair too far, probably whilst protecting Jonny, and also whilst very drunk. Right now Gary looked rather green, and Willem wondered if they'd all see the ruffian's breakfast again soon.

The lot of them had all stolen, broken into, destroyed, vandalized or set fire to something or someplace at some point, so any combination of offenders or offenses was

possible. Willem didn't doubt for one second that they could discover some inventive new way to wreck this house of cards.

The procession ended with the gay bi-racial couple that made up their meager crew, "Trick" and Paul, obnoxiously queer, but at least they were cheap and didn't try to steal things. Trick had only minor blemishes on his record, and those had happened mostly by being with the others at the wrong time, and all years past. His boyfriend Paul had never done anything wrong, at least that he'd ever got caught for. His drag queen magic act, however, was an affront to human decency and would have been grounds for death by stoning in ages past. The two weren't likely to screw anything up other than each other, and that put them solidly on the shunned side of society along with the rest.

They were the Lost Keys, and Willem, for better or for worse, was their manager.

It all made Willem sick to his stomach, right up until the band started to play and you saw the audience react. He was either in bed with a massive ticking time bomb or on to something really big. If only he could just lock them all up in-between the shows, he might actually sleep at night. At least he didn't have to sit with them back here in coach. He got to sit up front with two guys from the record company, Frankie and Charlie, whom Willem could tolerate a bit more. Only a bit, though.

These degenerates had cost Willem greatly over the years in money, time, opportunity and mental health, and he had made sure they paid back every penny in one form or another. They were nearly even now, finally, even the high interest had been paid off.

Now that all debts were lined up to be settled, Willem suspected that they'd started talking about firing him, moving on to another manager. But there wasn't a sane man in the world who'd have anything to do with them, and sure as hell not with his resources. As much

as they hated him and as much as he threatened to quit, they were stuck together in miserable wedlock until either they or his nerves went to pieces, whichever came first.

They couldn't dance on the razor's edge much longer, they had to fall one way or another. Back into the abyss and eternal anonymity, or forward into fame, fortune and glory. Or at least enough fame and fortune that further fuck-ups could be more readily dealt with.

Everyone who knew them knew it as well, even those who hadn't known them for very long. Like Riff Magazine, who had graced them with the dubious distinction of "the Fab Four of Punk." But like whipped cream and a cherry sitting atop a cowpat sundae, the magazine had put them on the cover and stuffed their dirtiest laundry into the article within.

"The best band you've never heard of," the article read. "See them before they self-destruct," it captioned below Jonny's mug shot, with a list of all of their criminal offenses. The article ended with "I predict New York will eat these kids alive, but they'll put on a mind-blowing show first. Get your asses to DeeDee's if it's the last thing you do, because it might be the last thing *they* do."

Lovely. But in for a penny, in for a pound, he'd known that nearly five years ago, when he first heard them and offered his services to their cause. If people would stick around long enough to hear them, they'd be hooked.

The Lost Keys had landed this gig for a reason, the band had something truly amazing and original. The gig itself was pretty unusual, too. DeeDee's Anti-Disco had invited punk bands from wherever in the world a punk scene had started to seed, for a weekend-long punk showcase or something.

The event was sure to be a nightmare, but it could be the thing that put The Lost Keys on the global map. They needed something to pull them out of the rut London had become,

and the invitation had come perfectly timed, as Jonny's two-year probation and its unusual terms had finally come to a close. They'd nearly suffocated, trapped in a city where everyone knew them well and either loved them or hated them, and never changed their mind to the band's gain.

Once the urchins had all sat down, Willem leaned over to give them all a piece of his mind. He needed to deliver a reminder to the peanut gallery before he headed back to first class. He pulled his eyes off of Jonny and Ginny at the far aisle and leaned over the rest of the group, loudly confidential.

"Don't forget, if Mr. Fuck-Up over there pulls anything on this little tour, the lot of you can hitchhike home." Willem didn't give a rat's arse if Jonny overheard from the next aisle over, he'd said much worse to his face, and often.

"From New York?" Trick smiled under his dreadlocks as he squeezed Paul's hand.  
"That's so sweet!"

"I'm serious. Don't you go thinking that because he's near done payin' me back that I'll get easy on any of you."

"He's got a point," Reg sneered, one of the few things he did aside from scowl. Reg saw Jonny through the same filter that Willem used. Jonny was, after all, shagging Reg's sister, which gave Reg even more reason to hate him than anybody else in the world.

"Just get your arse back to first class, Willem!" Gary barked, irritable and nervous as he made his way through the safety literature. The poor lad was pale as the moon, and Willem was willing to bet that his airsick bag would overflow very very shortly.

"With pleasure."

Willem made his way back to his first class seat, determined to ignore the blokes from the record company, Charlie Patterson and Frankie Weller.

In lieu of conversation, Willem re-read the article in Riff a few times, and downed several tiny bottles of bourbon in the process. He then pretended to sleep the rest of the way, but the prospect of what lie in wait sloshed with uncertainty around his stomach the entire time.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Interlude 1

Jonny strained against the handcuffs while the two figures bickered, he needed to do something while he still had a grip on his surroundings.

He couldn't make out what they were saying, he just wondered who the fuck they were, and how bad has his luck turned this time.

Maybe those protestors really had meant business. But this didn't seem their style, not by a long shot.

Maybe it was a joke, the staff at DeeDee's club had seemed a bit off, extra shady and maybe a little mental, even. Something about them had put him on edge, but really, most strangers put Jonny on edge these days.

Fuck that, it didn't matter. He had to get the bloody hell out of there, the only thing that mattered, he didn't have time to wonder at the fiddly bits.

He stood next to the bed now, and looked around for a weapon or a key, anything within reach that might be of use. He could maybe pick the lock, if he could just get his hands

on something useful. Then maybe he could jump out the window before the two threats turned their attentions on him again.

A lamp lay shattered across the bed, but the remains were too small to make an effective weapon. His jacket and all the handy things in its pockets lay on the floor, out of reach. He thought of the other thing in his pocket and determined to get right the fuck out of there all the faster.

He took a deep breath to keep the lid on his panic.

The handcuffs, the smell, the gloom, it all made for a large deck completely stacked against him. Something big and ugly pressed against the wall between his conscious and subconscious, and it could cripple him any second now. The struggle had brewed up a perfect storm. He had to move fast, if he stood any chance at all.

But the jumbled mess between his ears had other plans, as usual. The shadows began to shift into other things, squashing his shabby hopes for a fast escape. He squinted at the moving forms as his ability to sort out what was and wasn't real slipped away.

Bones? Skulls? Rotting corpses? Spiderwebs? Yes, massive spiderwebs made of chains, or the illusion of such, danced and rattled in the shadowy corners of the room. Strange symbols painted and carved on the walls. Other shadows, voices and figures, parts of another place and time, they all rose up from the gloom and advanced on him.

Then came the pain, rupturing his head, just as he had grown to expect. He scrambled for some hold on reality, but it only slipped all the quicker through his mental grip.

The voices in his head mixed with the voices across the room, and none of it made any sense. They hissed vicious things that he could hardly hear, not remember at all, and yet feared with every fiber of his being.

He clung to the headboard as the hallucination took him.

- - - -

*"He's — not even listening to us —"*

"little piece of shit never listens"

"— like he's not even here..."

"we'll keep you here for as long as it takes"

- - - -

He doubled over in pain, with only the wall and the bed to keep him upright.

The contents of his stomach, not much more than that shite American beer, bubbled up from his belly. He couldn't believe the smell of the room hadn't already pushed it up.

He exhaled and tried to force the room to stop swimming, now leaning heavily on the headboard to which he was chained. He raised his head to look at the two women across the room, trying to ground himself back in this very important, very alarming reality. With great concentration he stood up straight and brought the two figures back into focus. They had just turned their focus to him.

*"How hard did you hit him?"*

"— tried to hurt himself again —"

"— Not THAT hard..."

"we'll just have to see about that"

In the blink of an eye, the newcomer zoomed from across the room to right in his face.

A short, staccato shout burst through his lips.

"A-aah!"

*Fuck.*

His phantom ordeal still had its hooks deep in him, as if the real one wasn't disturbing enough. Cornered between the bed and the wall, he looked up into the half-real, half-imagined face.

*"No," the villain mirage said, "Not that hard at all. There's something else wrong with him."*

He? She? Jonny honestly couldn't tell. The figure was tall, maybe six and a half feet, and looked rather like a large man until you saw the knockers. The voice had had a female tone to it, though. Not feminine, but it purred with a smooth lull that if he had to make a guess, he'd say female. She was hideous regardless, and wouldn't stand much chance as human with the features fate had dealt.

Her breath reeked, a combination of cesspool and decaying flesh, and his stomach clenched again. The lingering effect of the hallucination gave her glowing red eyes, uneven and bulging in their sockets, along with sharp, jagged fangs lurching behind her lips. He couldn't be sure because he could never remember them, but this seemed a bit over-the-top, even for his top-shelf level of waking nightmares.

He wanted very much to back away, right through the fucking brick wall.

She grabbed his left hand, still free, and stretched him along the wall. He strained against her grip, but she was much too strong.

"Wh – what –"

She pressed him firmly against the wall with her body, and stood so he couldn't see what she was doing.

*Fuck.* What the hell was she doing?

The other set of handcuffs lie ignored on the floor, and there was nothing over there to cuff him to, anyway. Could he dare feel relieved at that? Probably not.

He stared at her back, trying to guess what would come next. She'd just pulled something out of her jacket pocket.

"what're you doing –"

She gave silence and a quick, forceful, jerky motion in response.

A stabbing pain shot through Jonny's wrist and he screamed, long and anguished.

She stepped aside to show him: She'd pinned his wrist to the wall with a fucking stiletto.

His head grew faint, his knees buckled. She grabbed his jaw on his way down, squeezing his face as she forced him to look up at her.

*"Now do I have your full attention?"*

- - - -

#

Jonny shut his eyes tight and shook his head, desperate to clear this nightmare beyond nightmares. But nothing changed at all, no matter what he did. He didn't understand it, this just couldn't be happening.

The shock of the initial pain had cleared, and his enemy's massive form now knelt beside him.

She wrapped an arm around his captive shoulders and yanked his head to the side. She began to trace the many scars along his arms. He cringed but had no retreat, not even an inch from her inspection.

The blur of sights and sounds, he doubted much of it actually existed in the real world. But her touch, all the physical sensations, the damage, that sure as fuck felt real. His arms sure as fuck weren't moving. Even if his perceived restraints were an illusion of some sort, something really fucking painful held him in place.

*"It looks like you've been cut before."* Her voice oozed and rumbled, an oily sludge over sharp gravel.

Jonny didn't have any response for that. He didn't say much at times like this. He tried to keep quiet. Engaging the nightmares only made them worse. So much worse. It was always best to wait them out, wait for Ginny to wake him up, pull him out of it...

Her inspection traveled toward his left wrist, the one she'd impaled, the scars across it partly obscured by fresh blood. He saw she used a long, jagged blade to trace them, not her fingernails as he'd thought and hoped. She pulled and twisted his head further and back until he could only see the stained ceiling and its massive hole that continued through several floors above.

*"No peeking."*

Afraid to shut his eyes, Jonny stared into the darkness above and the darkness stared back down at him. Things started to take shape up there, in the inky black...

Her blade traced its way to the nasty scar to the right side of his throat. He gulped for air and felt the sharp point of the blade at his adam's apple. He shuddered against her grip, and she held him all the tighter.

The shadows above gave a fleeting impression of vultures laughing down at him from a tall and twisted gallows tree, shimmering metallic spiderwebs tangling all its branches. And

then they were gone, returning to pitch black again. How far up did it go? Like looking up into the gates of hell...

*"Yes, cut, and hurt, and burned... all over."*

She slid his shirt up his body and wrapped it over his face like a hood. She renewed her grip on his chin and continued to trace his past injuries along his midriff. He tried again to draw away, but she would have none of that. She wedged her knee between him and the wall, pushing his hips forward, and giving her easy access to his chest and stomach and all the important things beneath the skin.

*"All these scars," she said, "hard to find a fresh spot to start."*

Jonny gritted his teeth. *Start?* he thought. *Start what?* Her hand clenched his jaw harder through the shirt, in case he got up the nerve to ask. The knife point tapped along the length of his sternum, then dragged a lazy, menacing circle around his navel.

She let go of his head and shifted her weight to his front, straddling his legs. She pulled the shirt completely over his head and twisted it around the back of his neck. It kept his torso exposed but allowed him to see again. She inspected around his collar and shoulders for more scars, then clutched his face between her hands.

*"Tell me, did you do any of that yourself?"*

Jonny blinked at her. A few were just the sorts you'd expect to be self-inflicted, but Jonny honestly couldn't say. Most of the marks across his body were a mystery to him, too.

But, staring her in the face, he could hardly think on any of that. *Jesus fucking christ, the glowing red eyes. Her horrible fucking breath.* No nightmare had ever been like this. The blonde must have slipped him a hallucinogenic. That might explain the extra peculiarities

here. Either way, he was in for a bad night. He closed his eyes to her and tested his bonds again.

She grabbed his hair with both hands – hard – and forced him to look into her eyes. He felt her trying to... *pull* something out of him, trying to read something inside, in his nightmares, all the parts that he very much did not want to let out.

*"Huh."* She looked uncertain and puzzled.

She let go and stood up. Words came to his lips and he couldn't stop them from spilling out.

"Wh – what do you –" he swallowed hard. "wh'd-d'you want from me –"

Her knee connected with his nose, and broke it in a sickening, wet crunch.

The pain burst over his face, and her sinister voice ripped its way through it, right into his ear.

*"You'll know it when I take it from you."*

#

Marion truly knew how to make the most out of a victim.

Here in her web, she had everything she needed at her fingertips. Her tools ranged from medieval instruments to brutal slaver's devices to the most fashionable modern day BDSM gear.

Marion had created a miniature version of the Studio that Sebastian, DeeDee, and Silas shared, but sometimes she didn't use a thing, just her own strength and claws and teeth. Every Dinner was different. Each told her how she should prepare them.

Tonight was a relatively simple dish. Nearly all her tools would go unused.

Marion did have a few things set up permanently, so she could enjoy herself no matter what she did to them. They could scream as loud as they wanted, but no one would ever hear. She could torture all night while only half an hour passed through the world outside. She could let them go and hunt them through the halls while they never ever found a way out. Every Dinner was different.

Nancy had ruined some of tonight's foreplay, roughing Dinner up because she couldn't handle a little curveball. You'd think someone who'd run around with Charlie Manson would've blossomed into something more than this silly little cow. Nancy would never make a decent vampire, and someday Marion would have to deal with her.

Yet no matter how dopey and ditzzy, Nancy still did a bang-up job sniffing out and serving up tasty entertainments. Tonight, though it got off on the wrong foot, was no exception. Marion had never had anything like this one.

Marion couldn't exactly read his thoughts, but she got the gist of what was in his head – something severe, emotionally severe. His reactions were way out of line with what she did to him. Her prey had been through some very traumatic thing or things in the past.

Here in her lair, he couldn't believe that any of what he saw was real. He hadn't even realized yet that she wasn't human. He kept explaining away her appearance with his nightmares, some insane hallucinations that he expected and was almost used to, though clearly not happy about.

At first, Marion was jealous. He belonged to her now, but his mind kept wandering, and that pissed her off.

Then she caught a whiff of the fear they brought on – unlike anything she'd smelled before. Whatever buzzed around in his head, that damned him to a level of hell she'd never known a bloodsack to endure. Once she realized that, she just had to tease and test him, until she got a feel for where his worst fears lay. She explored and pushed and pulled his triggers and made it all work in her favor.

Under close inspection, he was covered in scars, all over – short cuts, long slashes, small, round cigarette burns. A mystery – who had worked on him before Marion? Maybe he had a lot of enemies, or maybe he liked to hurt himself. Perhaps a little bit of both. She'd asked him, but the little piece of shit wouldn't answer.

It took some deep exploration before she realized it: Even he didn't know. Her curiosity might never be satisfied.

But no matter. His fears and dreads sang their way through her nose. She'd wandered into some foreign land, full of unknown spices and exotic flavors she'd never dreamed could exist.

Oh, yes, this Dinner was a special score. Her little mystery wrapped in an enigma wrapped around her little finger would deliver a hell of a payoff before she was through.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Dominic

Dominic sat alongside a mound of financial paperwork in a large room in his Beacon Hill brownstone. The room's decor surrounded him with quiet sophistication and refined taste, in perfect balance with his current persona and natural disposition.

Books, antiques, and art surrounded the stately vampire, impeccably presented, arranged, and maintained. The collection spanned hundreds of years and would impress any curator. Masterpieces of both painting and sculpture reached back to the early Renaissance and tapered off around Post-Impressionism. Off to the side, a large television sat within tasteful, carved mahogany shelves, discreetly surrounded by books and quietly thrumming with news of the entertainment world.

Dominic paused in his administrations and sipped from a large wineglass – a bourbonized A Positive. Protesting strands of salt-and-pepper hair had, as usual, fallen out of the ponytail he had pulled them into. He wore a casual smoking jacket, planning for nothing more than a peaceful night in.

He needed the paperwork as much as it needed him tonight, a quiet, mundane distraction from larger concerns. He paid little attention to the television as he signed, sifted and sorted through the reports that Lila had prepared for him.

The television show, predictably, turned to news of New York and DeeDee's upcoming flashy affair. Still days away from their official start, the festivities had already prompted an unseemly uproar for blocks around her club, the Anti-Disco.

The coverage of DeeDee's event had grown wearying, the lesser Keeper of New York was clearly going out of her way to show Dominic up. As if he cared. He actually did have interest in some of the musicians, and had left the set on in the background for that very reason. He didn't know how much longer he could tolerate the accompanying spectacle, though.

His own venues were overdue for some fresh talent and attention. He'd all but lost himself in his art collections and galleries these past several weeks. The quiet contemplation had suited his grief. But any motivation to press on would not stem from competition with DeeDee. In time, he would renew his efforts, resume his function.

Just not yet. Just not tonight.

Dominic and DeeDee were birds of very different feathers. While each had the responsibility of organizing exclusive events for their cities' vampire population, their methods and tastes varied radically. Dominic did consider with intrigue the new punk scene and some of its players, as he had done with every creative movement for over four centuries.

Deep down inside, he did battle a preference for more traditional and finer art forms. But the world would continue to change, and he could do nothing but make the most of it. He

didn't mind, though, and probably enjoyed it more than he would admit to anyone, including himself.

But DeeDee's influence had taken the budding punk scene and artificially pushed it to the top of everyone's radar. She had already injected her own personal take on the movement into the New York scene, tailoring it with her extra decadent ingredients.

Now her event would pull in bands and fans from all over, no doubt an attempt to spread her particular flavor world wide. At the same time she had drawn a dangerous level of attention to her club. Her efforts provided the perfect target for groups like the Catalyst of the Divine Flame to rise against. Her ego could soon get many vampires killed, if the Salierant discovered the truth of her more private events and staff.

Dominic decided to change the channel just as one of his assistants entered the room. Bernard carried an elegantly styled telephone on a tray, and Dominic addressed him before he could say a word.

"I told you, Bernard, no interruptions."

"It's your, er, *counterpart*, in New York," Bernard explained. He knew well the unspoken exceptions to Dominic's commands.

"Hmph." Speak of the devil. The intrusion from DeeDee, while unwelcome, did not surprise him. She must have sensed his desire to change the channel from her insufferable posturing.

The current vampires of New York were primarily of a sordid, unseemly bent. A majority of the world's most ruthless, barbaric, and misguided vampires had banded together under Sebastian and taken New York on the heels of Dorian's disappearance. Many more of the worst had moved in promptly after the dust had settled. As a high-ranking official and one

of Sebastian's two most powerful allies, DeeDee had a less than passing acquaintanceship with civilized behavior.

Dominic gestured to Bernard and reached for the handset. He settled back into the couch with his drink in his other hand. He'd need it.

"Hello, DeeDee."

*"Dominic dear, I hope I'm not interrupting..."*

"Of course you're interrupting. It's what you do."

He did not bother to hide the irritation in his voice. While etiquette and diplomacy dictated he should not refuse the call, he had no obligation to indulge her childish antics, regardless of her political stature. She brought a juvenile needling into all of their interactions, and tonight he felt less tolerant of it than ever.

*"What did I interrupt this time? Another one-person pajama party?"*

"I am not in my pajamas," he sighed again. How tiresome could these taunts get?

*"I hope you'll at least be here for the finale. It's quite the party already, and it's only gonna get better. You know who I have booked, right?"*

"DeeDee, darling, you know I won't be attending, and yes, despite who's going to be there."

*"Why the hell not? Only one of these bands will come anywhere near your city after this. You'll miss everything, why won't you just come?"*

He explained as if speaking to a young, stupid, pigheaded child. "In case you've forgotten, the negligence of your prize Bloodrunner, Marion, cost Lisabet her life and – "

*"Well, you'll have to start shopping for a replacement one of these days."*

"Shop for a replacement? Is that how you see this? Maybe that's why you haven't been able to Turn any new progeny since –"

*"Who cares? Out of all this sweet and juicy talent, I'm gonna find my next Candidate, you know? Turn the best of the best, whoever ends up on top. I thought you might want to take runner-up."*

"Oh, DeeDee, how ridiculous, even you can't be that ignorant."

*"You're right, I do know who's going to end up on top. Even you, under your crusty old rock could take a guess."*

She'd clearly ignored his meaning, but Dominic knew very well who DeeDee meant.

"Are you drinking from addicts again? Even if *you* could Turn someone successfully, any of them are too young."

*"Gotta get 'em young these days, before the world wears them down."*

DeeDee might have some small point there, but the younger the Candidate, the greater the risk of complications, during and after the Turn.

"Is that what you've been trying, all these years? Is that why you've failed so many times?"

*"At least mine last once they've Turned, not like yours!"*

Her words shot through the phone lines and crawled deep under his skin to stab at his most vulnerable injury. He stood and paced as he struck back.

"At least I don't need to secure their loyalty by tyrannizing them for ten years."

*"Hmph. So you don't wanna come play, then?"*

"You're serious? You play an irresponsible and perilous game that endangers us all. The Turning won't even take, and you know it. The Candidate will die, just like the others,

and likely take you along this time. To which, if there weren't so few of us left, I would say good riddance –"

DeeDee's laugh crackled through the handset at him. Dominic set his jaw to contain his fury. Any response would have tickled her, indignation or agreement or something else entirely. What it must be to lead the simple life of those amused as easily as she.

*"Oh, my god, I'm just snoring through this lecture, grandpa! You know, I think I know why your scions never last long, they let themselves get killed just to escape the monotony!"*

Dominic seethed even as his heart broke all over again. DeeDee's final taunt exemplified the worst of her capabilities, carefully constructed to kick him while he was down. Any manners he had clung to stormed out of the room.

He slammed the phone down. He stood for several long moments, leaning heavily on the desk and staring at the phone, his emotional state already worn thin before the call.

He wished he didn't feel so obligated to take her calls. But they were prominent officials of two domains with a severely strained political relationship. Out of all involved in Boston leadership and New York's, the two of them had the best chances at a civil relationship. The silent treatment could only make things worse.

He picked up the phone and slammed it down again for good measure.

As he regained his composure, his focus shifted to the framed photograph sitting near the phone. He picked it up, a portrait of a lovely ballet dancer in a stunning Arabesque pose. Lisabet.

The relationship between New York and Boston, never good between Sebastian and Philip, now skated on thinner ice than ever, with Lisabet's death.

She'd gone into New York for a night, for a performance. Dominic had planned to join her and had even persuaded Henry to accompany them. The cities occasionally arranged cultural exchanges, but most public interactions were purely superficial. It made sense to bring your own security.

That plan had crumbled with Henry's injury, and Dominic himself got pulled into another obligation he couldn't refuse. Lisabet still insisted on going, so he sent her with his own private security detail, and reassurances from Sebastian that once in the city, Marion would escort them all personally.

But the Salierant had killed the whole group. Marion hadn't even showed.

As if that weren't enough, Sebastian still considered his end of the bargain fulfilled, and expected a favor from Dominic in return. Dominic refused, and no civilized vampire would disagree with him. That still didn't stop the tension between the cities from rising several notches.

Dominic had lost scions before. All of them in fact. This time the pain was much worse, Lisabet hadn't had even a hundred years beyond her mortal life. And so extraordinary in her talent.

He had spent much of recent weeks in his pajamas, so to speak. He hadn't yet bothered to arrange new security agents. He'd had the Degas painting of her taken down, but he hadn't the heart to put the more recent photograph away. Bernard and Rosa took care of the household needs, Lila stopped by frequently under the guise of paperwork, and Philip hadn't needed much advice beyond Cheri's. But soon Dominic would have to return to normal life.

Just not tonight. Not yet.

He hadn't tried to attract any new entertainment to the city since Lisabet's death. He couldn't even claim responsibility for the one band DeeDee had mentioned. That had just fallen into his lap.

The band, the Lost Keys, was desperate to make the most out of their cross-Atlantic ticket that DeeDee's had provided. Their manager and record company had called every venue on the eastern seaboard. Dominic hadn't decided if he even wanted to attend. He was familiar with their work, and while quite interested, he doubted he would have the proper frame of mind to appreciate the show. Not for a while. Not even for the best.

DeeDee's words returned to dig at him again. Her folly defied all common sense. Would she really dare to use her garishly public event to audition her next Candidate? The thought was preposterous. But what did he care?

Someday, he would find his own next Candidate, his own new talent to foster and cultivate.

Just not tonight. Not yet.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Willem

There wasn't enough antacid in all the world to help Willem with this bollocks. The genie had officially escaped the bottle.

The article in Riff had shown a sliver of prophecy when it called the Lost Keys the "Fab Four of Punk." The plane had landed and a swarm of screaming Americans had indeed greeted the band.

Only it hadn't been a welcome wagon.

A cult-like religious group called the Catalyst of the Divine Flame had taken to picketing DeeDee's Anti-Disco months ago. Locals had already come to view the club as a 'a blight on the city,' and many were happy to join the outcry as news of the punk event unfolded. As if receiving their orders from on high, the devout congregated in New York intending to shout louder than a wall full of amplifiers for the entire length of the festival.

In preparation, the group had got themselves a large and fresh pile of magazines and records, to better know their declared enemy. Of course, the latest copy of Riff Magazine and

the Lost Keys' three albums had been among the spoils. And thus had Jonny earned a place near the top of the nutters' list before the band had even left London.

Virtually every aspect of the punk scene disgusted these self-righteous bastards. Hell, it offended the average sensibility on a good day. But the Catalyst took on a particular loathing when it came to the Lost Keys, just like everyone else who'd ever met them.

The Lost Keys had turned insolence into an art form. Tempers flared, anger soared, stomachs churned, reaching previously inconceivable heights in the face of their lyrics, their interviews, their very existence. When it came to offending people, the Lost Keys created masterpieces, worked miracles.

Or whatever the opposite of miracles was. Curses, maybe? Close enough.

The band worked *curses* into nearly everything they did and touched. Half of New York, a place they'd never been, seemed ready to agree. A large number of people had lined up to sling hate at them before they'd even stepped off the plane.

The Lost Keys weren't their sole target, the Catalyst held a lunacy-shouting, sign-waving reception for each band as they'd arrived. While none of the bands had quietly slunk away at the confrontation, the Lost Keys had responded with more fervor than the rest.

The faceoff had quickly escalated into a shouting match. The Lost Keys delivered their own scathing rebuke to those that "*used god to plug their ears against reason*" while the crowd clamored all the louder for their banishment or repentance or worse.

The strength of the Lost Keys' unabashed attitude just poured more petrol all over the metaphorical fire. In return, the Catalyst happily stacked more firewood on the bonfire, rightfully confident that they would not be the ones to get burned.

Willem wondered, not for the first time, if the fire might stop being a figure of speech at some point.

At least they would have a large crowd to witness his raggle-taggle pack take flight or burn to the ground in failure. Riff Magazines's backhanded compliments and two-faced assessment of the Lost Keys had inspired fans and foes alike to pilgrimage, either to see the band before they self-destruct, or to help accelerate their destruction. A scant few hadn't yet decided which side they stood on, much like Willem himself.

To help the undecided, the Catalyst had designed a variety of flyers, each one targeting a different band and why respectable persons should avoid them. The one that took aim at the Lost Keys listed the band's many crimes, quoted choice lyrics in and out of context, and compared Jonny's misspent youth to Charles Manson's teenage years.

Lovely.

It went without saying that any fame The Lost Keys might find would get mixed with a fair dose of infamy. Willem had known that for years. He still clung to the belief he could keep it all under control and on the legal side of things. He could fix most anything so long as that held. But legal or no, provoking this religious lot felt like playing piñata with a hornet's nest. They'd start stinging any time now, and once they got going, they would not stop.

And that rattled Willem's confidence as the band's fixit man. While the sounds of people calling for Jonny's head on a platter might be nothing new, the band was on shaky ground here in New York, completely out of their element.

If that weren't enough, Jonny couldn't be bothered to care. The boy couldn't keep any sense in his head to save his life, quite literally Willem feared, not with all the music and the

fantastic mess between his ears. At least the music was still in there. Heaven help them if that ever changed.

To wit, Jonny's response on the subject of the Catalyst summed up the width and breadth of his disposition:

*"What, those arseholes of infinite tedium? Lots of people hate us, who cares,"* he'd said. *"I'm trying to write a fucking song here."*

He'd even said it on camera. That lovely tidbit was destined to grace any coverage of the event, complete with a clean-up bleep. Just when the reporters might have given up.

The sod had been uncooperative and snarky as usual, all afternoon and with every question. It didn't help that the dolt who'd penned the Riff article had got assigned to them in New York, too. He and the rest of the press, motivated by Jonny's reluctance, had made a point to point cameras and microphones at him more than anyone else.

They got rewarded for their efforts when a few of them cornered him, skulking in the shadows of a lounge, piss-drunk, with his feet up on an even drunker Gary. He sat scribbling notes and tinkering with a guitar that had been on display on the wall, signed by Pete Townsend. Other bands had caused more trouble and broken far more things this day whilst socializing at DeeDee's reception, but none of them had touched a beloved rock and roll artifact.

*"High time something good came out of it then, don'tcha think?"* the bastard had asked, when someone had pointed it out. *"The poor thing's lucky to have survived that shite."*

Well, it's not like they would've made friends with The Who otherwise.

With that, Jonny had command of everyone's attention, whether he'd wanted it or not. That's all it took, a guitar. A stage or a few drinks helped, but neither was necessary. Just a guitar. He'd played for them, his usual drunken act of making fun of other guitarists. Willem didn't mind that too much, so long as it kept him from talking more bollocks. But at the end of the session and a few more drinks, Jonny had opened right up to their questions.

Once, Willem had believed that any publicity was good publicity, but he'd started to doubt that shortly after taking on the Lost Keys. Why couldn't these assholes just play the music and talk like normal people?

The questions returned wholeheartedly to the subject of the protestors, and produced particularly quotable quotes out of Jonny.

*"I've read all the same things they have, I just recognize the bible as a work of fiction.*

*"They can go back to the dark ages where they belong, and take their fairy stories with them.*

*"If they would just leave everyone else alone, I probably wouldn't give a fuck. But they don't. They believe they're right. They judge everyone else. Loudly.*

*"No, scratch that, I'd still give a fuck, even if they were quiet about it. Ignorance is ignorance. And ignorance holds the whole world back."*

Willem couldn't wait to see that shit in print, or the Catalyst's reaction. He might finally get the coronary he prayed for to take him away from all of this.

As for the *fucking* song Jonny was trying to write, Willem only needed a few words to know it was inspired directly by the cultist protestors themselves.

The Catalyst of the Divine Flame had taken their first shot, and the Lost Keys had shot back. Not knowing or caring what the Catalyst might plan for another round, Jonny armed himself with his most formidable weapon – music.

*"They get to shout their bollocks, and we'll shout ours when the time comes. And we'll have microphones and a wall of amps."*

Yes, Jonny was preparing a few creative grenades to lob into the fracas, oblivious that the pyre he would strengthen was built at his own feet, especially for him.

God, this fire thing had better stay a metaphor. If only because if the time ever came to actually set Jonny alight, Willem had dibs on striking the first match.

## CHAPTER NINE

Victor

Victor rubbed his eyes and stared at the map again. With only a few days to go before mission launch, large chunks of the plan needed serious reworking.

The mission now had to accommodate a different and smaller team, as well as an increasingly unpredictable environment.

Victor sat back and looked at the mass of photos, maps and blueprints in front of them, cold pizza and empty coffee cups littering the spaces in between. Lauren scrutinized the blueprints for DeeDee's club through her reading glasses, reclining on the couch with her swollen feet up on the arm. Victor rubbed his eyes again. Walter was taking too damned long with the coffee.

No sooner had Vic finished the thought when Walter walked in with a tray of coffee and tea. Walter set it down and took another slice of the cold pizza.

They'd had everything all set, but then Carrios had pulled the two most experienced agents to lead high-priority missions in Baltimore and Cleveland. He'd then pulled three more

to man those assignments. He had allocated three others to Viper's team in return, but they were hardly replacements.

Each had staked at least two vampires, each had participated in a bloodrunner hunt at some point. But a great white shark such as Marion, with her skill and her current appetites, she'd challenge them like no other vampire. He'd have to make it work, nobody else had the combined deep knowledge of New York and prior bloodrunner experience to qualify for this mission. Nobody nearby and available, at least.

It spoke to their success, to have resources and membership as vast as theirs stretched so thin. The world would have three less bloodrunners within a week, and Viper could happily live with that. Still, his certainty of a successful mission had taken a hit in the face of leading the not-so-tried or tested.

*"I've seen you take down worse with less."* Carrios' confidence had abated neither Viper's concerns nor his aggravation. *"We have other needs. Marion is not the only bloodrunner in our sights right now."*

*Just the most dangerous,* he'd thought, but kept it to himself.

Yes, he'd staked and scorched worse bloodsuckers with less planning, tighter resources, and fewer agents. Several times. But he'd had far more talent, with Thorn on the team. During her months of leave, neither Viper nor Bricks had had a bloodsucker so lethal and unpredictable as Marion on their docket. Viper thanked his lucky stars that Carrios had at least left him with Bricks, his right hand, and given them several more secondary "eyes" – spotting and tracking support only.

A strike team of eight or nine sized up well against a bloodrunner, assuming you were in a position to back the bloodsucker into a corner. By all rights, that's what this mission

should have looked like – sighting Marion, a few following her and a few others cutting her off. But on account of Marion's reputation and the nature of the event, they'd planned for a larger team. With the setup of the surrounding streets, the confusion of the crowd, they needed more eyes high and more feet on the ground than usual. But the strike team had now shrunk in the face of greater needs.

As if they didn't have enough holes to plug, a steady stream of protestors had joined that loony Catalyst cult in picketing DeeDee's. A number of them now mobbed around the block day and night, with tension in the air increasing every day as punk fans grouped to tell them all to go to hell. Sure, things were peaceful now, if a bit loud. But it didn't take a genius to see that some confrontation would go down once the music started to play.

But the hunt had to go on. Lauren, Walter, and Carrios all agreed with him on that. They had to act before other bloodsuckers could get Marion under control, and with the event around DeeDee's, they'd never have a better time to strike. It was just bad timing that they had several other critical missions in motion at the same time. While frustrating to this hunt, it was exhilarating in the bigger picture, an excellent sign that they'd made so much progress on so many fronts, in so many cities.

"The protest will work in your favor," Lauren started, taking her glasses off and resting them on her enlarged belly. "Lots of places to hide in the chaos, Marion will stand out much more than you will. Just make sure the whole team stays sharp and unseen."

"That's key." Victor agreed. "If Marion knows we're there, she might flip. If she's as strung out on fear as we think, she could do something very stupid, right there in the crowd."

Walter squinted at the map of the area. "Should we stay out of the club, then, with that many people around?" It was a valid concern. The Salierant existed to protect humanity by killing vampires. Preservation of civilian lives took priority over any bloodsucker hit. "We're more flexible outside, too. If we set up a perimeter, a safe distance from the crowd –"

Lauren shook her head. "No, you definitely need people inside, there's a much better chance of spotting her in an enclosed space. Outside she could get halfway up a building before anyone sees her. And with a face like that," she picked up a picture to make her point, "she'll sneak in through a back door... She might even have her own way of getting in."

"Hmph, yeah, that sounds about right." Walter looked at her, then to the map, then up at Victor. "So, we're in, then?" Victor nodded. "Have we gathered anything new on the place? Any evidence it might be a bloodsucker joint?"

"Nothing concrete yet, just its unnaturally clean history." Victor dumped several spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee as he spoke. Walter couldn't make decent coffee to save his life, and Victor needed the extra lift. "The 'quiet' of the area up to this point could simply be a side-effect of all the nearby churches." He drew their attention to a few areas on the map. "Mighty uncomfortable place for a bloodsucker to be."

Lauren tossed the picture back onto the table and sipped some tea. Victor reached for the blueprint and spread it across the top of the clutter. Lauren had marked it and made several notes, his fingers traced through them one by one.

"So we have to have a crew running inside, but we still need the entrances covered, to keep her in sight when she leaves."

"I marked in green," Lauren explained, "the spots where there might be a hidden entrance, too. Put the core team at the red marks," she pointed to spots on the blueprint, and

to others on the map, "and surveillance support at the blue ones. Circles street level, like night maintenance near manholes. The triangles, put them up high in a window. That should cover all the angles."

Victor took a close look at it all, but he knew he didn't need to check her work. She'd really nailed most of it. He might actually get some sleep today.

"What would we do without you?" Walter grabbed one of her feet and massaged it.

"We'd get there, eventually, it would just take a lot more coffee." Victor slumped back and took another gulp, the caffeine and sugar sloshing around his stomach and doing little else. It took more and more to get by these days.

"I have all day to think about this shit right now. It's the least I can do." Lauren sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "Trust me, I'd rather be gearing up with the rest of you. I'm more than ready to unload this package into the world."

It didn't surprise Victor to hear his twin talk that way. He could only guess how she felt, at the mercy of her unborn vampire hunter, and all the physical changes that came with it. She took the job seriously, and Marion was an important sting, a powerful bloodrunner in a very important, vampire infested city.

If the Salierant could gain more ground here, weaken New York just a bit more, they'd be in good position to plow right up through New England. They'd scorched several lesser vampires in New York lately, including a ballet dancer they thought had fled to Boston years ago. They'd nailed her entourage, too, in retrospect she might have been Turned of an Elder or Keeper – a very good score. They owed some of that success to Marion's decline.

Beyond that, the city wasn't in good shape, and Sebastian was a poor Keeper. From what they could gather, he ruled the city too tightly, which only let control slip more easily

through his fingers. Marion's talents could only compensate for so much, and much less in her current state. If they could tag her, they'd soon nail the rest of the city's bloodrunners as they tried to fill the vacuum.

Victor, Lauren and Walter specialized in bloodrunners, hunting them as Viper, Thorn, and Bricks. Every bloodrunner in every city had heard of them, and lived in fear of the day when the three might show up in their neighborhood. Because by then, it'd be too late.

Vic and Walt had spent the past few months lending expertise to other teams, to great success. But it was clear to everyone the three worked their best all together. Lauren would be back in the game soon, but not soon enough as far as anyone was concerned. Working without her was like playing blackjack with no aces or royalty in the deck. You could get to twenty-one, it just took more time, more cards, and a lot more risk.

Lauren sat up with some difficulty. "So let's take another look at the final team, figure out who goes where."

Walter flipped through the roster and the agents' files. "With that buzzcut, Ripper looks like he belongs inside, and he's sharp and strong. Blaze and Whirlwind will do better blending in outside with the protestors and bystanders."

"Feather's fast, quiet and sneaky, keep her outside, and Ace as well," Lauren put her tea down. "He and Scorch can make rounds between the primary zones. No, no, wait, have Feather make the rounds with Ace, keep Scorch near the side door, she's got better field command skills."

Walt flipped another page over. "Let's get Bullet inside, she and you could pass for... what, talent scouts, record company?"

Victor nodded, "Yeah, and you can be our security. That leaves Daemon at the other door. That's as good as this'll get. Unless we get some more last-minute changes."

"You sure you don't want me to run the front door?"

"I'm sure." Victor kept his eyes on his own copies of the files, he knew where this would go. "I want you inside with me, Daemon and Scorch can handle the doors."

Vic felt Walter and Lauren exchange glances. Walter stood irritably and paced the length of the living room.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Vic. It's just another mission, I'm just another agent."

"We've been through this," Lauren sat up and looked pointedly at Victor. "No special treatment. If I could stay out of bed more than an hour at a time I'd insist on going myself."

Victor sat straight up. He couldn't handle this shit tonight, he had to end this fast.

"Daemon's better at on-the-spot judgement, and fast changes in strategy. I need him outside, he and Scorch balance each other out. You – you're better at sifting and storming through crowds, we need that inside in the closed-in space. It's as simple as that."

"Bullshit." Exactly what Victor expected Walt to say. It wasn't quite that simple, but it wasn't untrue, either.

"Just trust me on this one. My mind's made up. And it's too fucking late to argue."

Victor looked at Walter first, then Lauren, then back to Walter. They knew each other well enough to let it go. He hated pulling rank, and almost never did. Technically he only had seniority by about a hair. An awkward silence hung for a moment then slunk into a dark corner. It would pounce again if it got another opening. Walter grunted and started cleaning up the mess and leftovers.

Viper knew this would come up, and had thought long and hard about it. In any other situation, Victor would and could keep his decisions strictly professional. He had his whole life. But this was his sister's husband, his *pregnant* sister's husband. She had enough life-changing bullshit lately.

Lauren had been close to their father, and had taken his death really hard. She didn't let it show, just threw herself into the work all the harder. But Victor knew better.

They'd lost their mother when they were teenagers, she had specialized in bloodrunners as well. They knew what this life was all about. They were vampire hunters. They hunted vampires. They didn't get to retire and grow old. They didn't get to be great parents, either, even if they were still around to parent.

Victor was not prepared to make those odds even worse.

Honestly, the deciding factor had come at the heels of all the team's change-ups. His confidence in the mission had waned with the new team, and his gut told him he'd need Bricks at his side for it. But he didn't dare share that trepidation with them. Not this late in the game.

Victor rubbed his forehead above his eyes. The caffeine hadn't arrived in time to intercept the headache. He slumped back and stared at the ceiling.

"When's the last time you got some sleep?" Walt asked, standing over him.

"When's the last time *you* got some sleep?" Victor squinted up at him. "We got two days. We need to focus on nailing this plan down." He yawned.

Lauren tossed her glasses onto the table.

"I'll leave the nailing to you boys for now, I can't hold out any longer. Leave your homework on the table, I'll check it when I get up." Walter crossed the room to help her stand

and kissed her gently on the cheek. She touched Victor's shoulder and said, "You're an asshole, Vic."

"Thanks, sis," he chuckled as she left the room. He had that coming.

"You really gonna stick me inside with you, then." Walter went back to the mess.

"You make it sound like it's scrubbing toilets. C'mon, we've got a really unusual hunt, neither of us can take anything for granted." He thought about helping Walt with the cleanup, but his head throbbed again and sent the idea into retreat. "Two goddamned days. Home goddamned stretch. I need you working with me. This crew's got a lot of recruits in it and –"

"What's that got to do with anything, Vic?"

"Look, I know on paper, they've all got the chops. But that crew, in that meeting, they didn't have a drop of chemistry. Carrios has tossed some oddball recruits at me before, but never like this." Victor tossed the file on top of the pile, and felt Walt give him the hairy eyeball again, another conversation he'd braced himself for. "Not for a bloodrunner, the fucking scourge of New York."

"They've all passed the tests." Walt picked up Victor's nearly empty coffee cup. "You done with this?" Vic nodded. "They're all one of us," Walt continued as he tidied things up.

"They know how to take orders and follow a plan."

"Do they? How many have *you* worked with, personally?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Yeah, I do, and it's not nearly enough."

"An unusual path to this life doesn't justify questioning an agent's capabilities. It's just not a good excuse anymore."

Victor had no response to that. Or did have one, but wasn't sure he was ready to bring it up. His headache had grown, and brought the nausea along with it. Walter's fucking coffee. Dishes and mugs clattered as Walter dumped them into the sink.

"Carrios knows what he's doing when he puts a someone in a specific somewhere. Or hadn't you noticed how far we've got lately? We might see the endgame in our lifetime! Fuck, even Carrios might!"

Victor kept silent. Walt wasn't wrong, but he didn't know everything Victor knew, with his access. There was a lot more to it than that. But Walter wouldn't let it rest.

"You've always trusted his judgement."

"Yeah, and my father always trusted his judgement."

And there it was. He'd lobbed the bomb right into the middle of it. He hadn't meant to, but fuck, he was tired, and Walter kept pushing, and now that Lauren had retreated for the night, he didn't have to guard the secret so tightly... He had planned on bringing it up, but had also planned on, well, planning on when first.

Walter stopped and stared. Victor sighed and slumped forward in the chair. Walter stopped what he was doing and sat back down.

Nobody knew Vic had pulled the files. He wanted to know everything about the mission that had got his father killed. The report didn't spell out a lot of details, but it wasn't hard to put pieces together, not for Vic.

As Vic suspected, one of the recruits was out there with his father. *Chopper* had turned up dead weeks before his father's body had been found, but likely killed the same night. Another agent had reported both missing in action at the same time. The recruit wasn't

even supposed to be there. He'd followed them, against orders, and blown their cover before they'd unpacked their bags.

"He was up in Boston, they were supposed to set up a front, and three more were supposed to head up when that was safe and secure. They'd been up there two days, Walt. Two fucking days, and then they got nailed." He slammed his fist into the table in irritation. "How the fuck could they get made so goddamn quick?"

"You know the answer there, too."

"Yeah, *part* of the answer. *Henry*. Motherfucking bloodsucker must have some sixth sense." All these years, and really only the priest had lasted more than a few weeks in Boston - the one city they just couldn't gain any ground. "But that's only part of it." Victor leaned forward, elbows on knees and watched Walt pour some scotch out into a couple of glasses on the now empty table. "No vodka?"

"We're out, sorry. Haven't restocked the bar since I'm the only one drinking."

Victor took the glass. "Chopper was one of the recruits he'd flagged for reevaluation. The guy followed them north – against orders. My father was making sure he left town the night they both got killed." He took a pull at the scotch and stifled a wince – too much burn on the way down. He preferred vodka by a lot. "We've had a lot of luck so far, Walt. And most of them have more sense than that. But I'm afraid it's a house of cards that's about to come down all around us."

"You got better instincts than anyone I've ever known. But I'll be damned if you're not being paranoid here." Walt paused and took a drink, clearly enjoying the scotch more than Victor had.

Was he paranoid? Victor didn't have anything against Carrios' extreme recruiting practices. They'd served the organization well, as Walt had just pointed out, over the past three decades.

The origins of the Salierant traced back to the earliest of known vampires, and an ages-old rumor still held that they knew more about vampires than the vampires did themselves. Top officials and inner circle members were all distant but direct descendants of those first vampire hunters, and raised to hunt vampires from childhood.

They'd had to take in others from time to time, otherwise they'd be more inbred than a royal family or the rural deep south. But the influx had grown to more than they could handle and train properly, and it had started to show.

More and more lone civilians had stumbled upon evidence of bloodsuckers, probably owing to modern technology, and had then gone hunting themselves. Fiction and legends held enough of the truth about stakes and sunlight, and many amateurs actually succeeded against the odds. Which is when the Salierant would step in.

Beyond individual recruits, the Salierant had created, aligned with, taken over, and enveloped scores of organizations, secret brotherhoods, portions of the Inquisition, Templars, Masonics, you name it. Over the ages, anybody who knew anything about vampires either joined with them or were eradicated.

They had to keep a tight lid on all knowledge of vampires, lest that knowledge leak and create panic. All kinds of hell could break loose in the human population, inspiring both amateur hunters and bloodsucker wannabes. Few humans had what it took to survive Turning, but still enough would seek it. But really it was the public hysteria that they feared

most. And what would a government do to protect itself from vampires? What might they try in order to harness the secret to vampire powers?

On occasion, controlling the information required severe intervention. The lost colony of Roanoke had clearly and irrefutably witnessed vampire activity, apparently deliberately on the part of some conspiring vampires. Slow and lousy communications between settlements had worked in their favor to keep the world ignorant of that and similar situations.

But these days a mere phone call and some eight millimeter footage could bring the whole damnable mess to light. The Salierant had contingency plans in place should that ever happen. They made a point to stay a few steps ahead of the game, at all times in all places.

They had every reason to trust Carrios' judgement - the old man knew exactly where to put which agents and when. Or at least he had.

Lately, the "join us or else" recruitment pitch had shifted to "join us, we'll make so much more of you." Those who didn't join still met with some end or other, but the offer was too cool for anyone to refuse now. In days past a recruit might think of it a sign from God, a calling. But these days, it was more the temptation of glory and honor...

New recruits had grown to be nearly forty percent of the organization in the past decade. Viper couldn't deny that it had given them a hell of an edge, but it still made him nervous. There was still a fundamental difference.

Hunters like him, his sister Lauren, Walter, Daemon, and Bullet had learned to hunt together when other kids still played with matchbox cars or dolls, cowboys and Indians, or hopscotch and cat's cradle. The recruits all wanted to be a Van Helsing or something. But you didn't hunt vampires that way – not for long at least. Even with good hunting habits, Victor

and his peers stood little chance of getting to Carrios' age. They would likely die doing this, as his parents had, and not by trying to be superstars.

No one could say for sure, but as their numbers had tripled, vampire population had decreased by at least half, possibly even two thirds. Whole cities had been swept clean, purged and sanctified, *consecrated*, making it near impossible for vampires to move in again. And vampires could not thrive for long outside of the cities. For one they couldn't stand the boredom. But truly they could not hide their needs and quirks without masses of people all around.

Carrios moved the recruits about like diverse pawns, confident they wouldn't put any of the top pieces - lifelong agents - off their game. The Salierant had needed some fresh ingenuity and unpredictability to their strategies. Now they had more than they bargained for, and some of the top pieces had come down as a result of it. Well, one. His father. It seemed. No, it didn't seem. Vic was never wrong with things like this, and the report all but spelled it out.

Fuck. He'd tried to get over it, he'd been trying really hard. They *all* needed more training. More experience as part of a team. They all wanted glory, to be the ones holding the stake on every mission. Sure, every agent carried a stake, but recruits foamed at the mouth at the thought of driving the stake in. And each bloodsucker only had one heart to stake, no matter how evil.

His father, the Jackal, had subscribed to an elite purist point of view, he believed only descendants of the original Salierant should have access to all this knowledge, weaponry, and organization. Victor had disagreed with his father and took Carrios' side to a point, and that point had been reached.

"You sure you're up for this?"

Victor leaned back into the cushions. "Yeah, gimme a day's sleep and the team Carrios originally promised, and we'll nail that bitch so fast she'll never see it coming."

Walter took a long pause before he replied.

"We will nail that bitch, with the team we have. First, we both need that sleep."

Victor sat back up and thought for a second. No, all the coffee in the world wouldn't get any more out of him tonight. "Yeah. Yeah, we do. I'm done."

"The guest room's ready."

"Thanks, but I'll get out of your way, gimme a buzz when you're ready to dive back into it.

"I'll call a cab—"

"Nah, I can drive." As exhausted as Victor was, he knew he was far from sleep. And what he needed to sleep, he had back at his place. "I've got three cups of coffee in me since dinner, and hardly touched that paint thinner." Vic headed for the door and Walt followed.

"That paint thinner's eighty years old."

"I know, I'm the one who bought it for you on the occasion of you knocking up my sister."

"Hah! I should do that more often, then."

"Only if you schedule it around bloodrunner hunts, ok? I'll buy you all the paint thinner in the world."

Walt smirked at him, his brother in all but blood.

"Sounds like a deal."

Victor closed the door behind him and stepped out into the morning sun.

## CHAPTER TEN

Rachel

Rachel didn't know how Andrew had found the path. She didn't even know if he had created it, found it, or had known it all along. Andrew had a lot of secrets as the Turned and a designated heir of Dorian.

"*It's best if you don't know,*" is what he'd said, with that smirk, when she'd asked. *Bastard.* If she ever got a chance to accept Dorian's offer, she might do so just so she could kick Andrew's gallant ass from time to time.

The important part was that Andrew knew, had told Rachel, and that the two of them had used it over the years to sneak a few dozen vampires out of the city. And Sebastian had no idea how any of them had left until it was too late.

While Sebastian held more power over New York than any other vampire, he had not earned full rights over Dorian's former *domain*. Only time and focused energy could fulfill that in entirety. The traces of Dorian's Influence would take a long time to fade, as Dorian had not abdicated, nor had New York's inhabitants chosen Sebastian over Dorian. Andrew could not surrender the city, as it wasn't his to give.

And so Andrew knew of hidden things all around the city, such as the path that Sebastian could not yet know or find. Sebastian certainly suspected it existed, but even after twelve years of searching and deepening his Influence, Andrew and Rachel had kept the route secure.

Sebastian tried to compensate for his shallow rule by wielding an ever-tightening grip over New York's vampires. With that, the blind spots in his power had actually grown and widened. Sals had slithered into the cracks as Sebastian established a full-fledged despotic nightmare. Some might joke about being more afraid of Sebastian than the Sals, if it weren't so goddamned terrifying.

Everyone knew Sebastian – and his secondary Keepers DeeDee and Silas – had overstepped the bounds of protocol and convention. His followers came across as too loyal, his enemies were vanished too long and vanquished too thoroughly. It didn't take a genius to see he'd abused his powers of Influence and Imprint. But none dared challenge or even oversee his rulings and judgements.

Only Helena might give Sebastian pause. Unfortunately, she traveled constantly, chronicling vampiredom's history, and rarely visited a city more than once a year or for more than a few days.

Despite its deficiencies, Sebastian's rule took root just deep enough that he exerted the right to administer any punishment – short of execution – that he deemed necessary.

When the shit had first hit the fan, Rachel had opted to stay in New York, refusing to leave the place she'd made her home – the city she might have co-ruled one day. She stood

alongside Andrew and did all she could to defend against the invasion. But as their plans for defense failed, it became impossible to get out.

Sebastian stationed sentinels around the city's boundaries, and infused each with a piece of his own power, his sensitivity and awareness of the territory. And thus he built a vampire version of the Berlin wall. Rachel might have tried to leave herself, then, if Andrew hadn't been so determined to stay.

He needed at least one dedicated friend. She couldn't leave him alone in this mess.

Good thing, too. None who tried to escape during that time made it through, and Sebastian made quite the example of everyone he'd captured in the process. The bastard truly enjoyed and celebrated public humiliations.

Those who broke any of Sebastian's petty rules suffered degradations at weekly rallies, monthly devotions, and yearly celebrations in Sebastian's honor. Permission to come or go, stay or leave, sit or stand, was granted solely at Sebastian's whim. Just skipping a rally could land a vampire a humiliating spot at the next one.

Rachel cringed to think of what Sebastian had done to his unseen prisoners of war, or what he might do if he should ever catch Andrew in the act.

But she couldn't let that be her problem anymore. Helena had warned her. Sebastian would make his move soon, and conscript her to be his Bloodrunner.

How Sebastian had figured out Rachel's past didn't matter. He had asked Helena to confirm it, and whatever Helena might think of Sebastian, she remained neutral in the exchange of information. But she also wasn't an asshole, and so she had informed Rachel shortly thereafter. Sebastian would have no idea that Rachel already knew his plans for her, not until she was gone.

Rachel paused. She'd been walking the city for hours now. Observing all the active sentinels. Putting in an appearance, as if everything was normal. And then she'd taken to the shadows, where even vampires had a hard time detecting her. She'd walked those shadows to this place, the beginning of the path.

Taking her leave of this city would cause some discomfort, but that had nothing to do with Sebastian. Vampires developed a sort of bond with wherever they set up their *haunt*, after a period of time. Travel and moving had become abhorrent and even painful to some vampires. As if those displaced from fallen cities needed another factor working against them. Long ago, it hadn't been so severe, but back then vampires rarely stayed in one place long enough to take root. Back then, secluded villages and solitary travelers could provide sustenance on a journey. But these days, with law enforcement and cameras and modern communication, you had to take a lot more care.

Helena never stayed in one place for more than a few days, maintaining a life much like that of ages past, and so was immune to this effect. A citizen of the world.

The pain wouldn't be enough to prevent a vampire from leaving, and they had ways to lessen the effect, given time to prepare. Rachel wondered if that were part of Andrew's problem. Was he afraid of how it would feel, with his long history with the city? No, Andrew wasn't chicken, he wouldn't back down from that. It had to be something else, something deeper. And she had to stop thinking about it. She was leaving, it was time to let him go.

*I have to leave. I will not fight for Sebastian.*

But she would fight.

She took one last look at the skyline behind her, then took her first steps down the pathway out of New York.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jonny

The stifling gloom inside DeeDee's club had driven Jonny out. He made an excuse for the loo and got himself turned the wrong way down a hallway. Once he'd stumbled upon the side door, well, he just had to sneak out of it. Once he was outside, of course, it locked behind him with a pleasant and final click. *Shite*.

Jonny looked around the long and narrow alley, walled by the building next door, some tall stockade fencing to the back, and all covered in more of the lovely "Perish in Flames" graffiti. Seriously, who the hell spray paints cult-level religious threats all over the place? The alley was empty except for some metal bins overflowing with rubbish, and a dusty grey and white tomcat gnawing on some of the overflow.

Jonny poked his head out the front of the alley's entrance, and saw that it dumped out a few windows down from DeeDee's main doors. A toxic, volatile mix churned in the street, protestors, people trying to get their hands on tickets, rampant press and law enforcement. Oh, and Reg, too, near the door. Probably looking for Jonny.

Jonny ducked back in before Reg or anyone else could see him.

He pulled out his last pack of cigarettes from home and sparked up. Might as well enjoy himself before submitting to another round of journalistic bloodymindedness.

He leaned against a wall, and let the nicotine work its magic. He'd have to go out front to find his way back inside eventually, but no reason to rush. Just two or three or maybe seven smokes and he'd be ready to deal with it again.

In the meantime, he thought of a few clever responses to the graffiti. If he had a paint can, he'd give them some graffiti worth reading. Ah, well. He'd just have to turn them into song lyrics.

The cat wandered close, sniffing to see if Jonny had anything better to eat than what the rubbish offered. Jonny presented his empty hand, and the cat turned away, brushing against Jonny's legs in the process. He bent down and patted it on the head.

The cat chirped a "*mrat!*" at Jonny and huffed. The cat deemed Jonny's attention acceptable, but not nearly as welcome as food.

Jonny thought briefly of Petey, his cat, and wondered how the animal might be getting on with his sister Katy whilst he was away. Katy had passed the cat's judgment well enough, but beyond that, the cat hated everyone except for Jonny. Petey took particular issue with Ginny. Ginny tolerated it well, mostly because Petey had come into their life at a distinctly rough time.

The cat rubbed his hand and strutted off towards another corner of the alley, its tail curving lightly back and forth.

Jonny straightened up and there they were, three of the protestors. What were they called? The Cranks of the Delusional Flock? Arseholes of Infinite Tedium, either way. These had a more serious look to them than the rest of the flock, not like sheep at all. Each held a

long wooden stick that, in the hands of other protestors, might have featured a sign on one end. These sticks displayed a complete lack of signage, which broadcast a very different and very clear message.

*Fuck.*

It wouldn't be the first time he got the shit kicked out of him the day before a show, and probably not the last.

He shouldn't be surprised, the Lost Keys' reputation preceded their arrival in this country, with Jonny's own personal infamy leading the way. They'd hoped for a small grace period before New York and the rest of the world knew them the way London did.

But DeeDee's event had drawn the crazies like flies to shit, then stuck them there with the club's extra strange syrup. The article in *Riff* had just primed the lunacy a bit.

The halfwits would start burning records any day now, Jonny figured. Certainly after they heard more of what The Lost Keys had to say.

Any number of the band's songs could have rankled their feathers, but somehow they'd latched on to "Smoking Dope with the Pope" to make their point. It was an easy target, so easy to mock as pretty much their dumbest song.

As the lead, Jonny took – and invited – most of the heat for all their offenses, but he repeatedly made it very clear the responsibility for the stupid lyrics of that stupid song lay entirely on Reg and Gary's stupid drunk shoulders.

Jonny would be a much happier person if only he'd been there to smother the song in its sleep, before it could reach anybody's ears. But Ginny, Reg and Gary had written and played it whilst he was off getting his brains scrubbed out, and the wretched thing had regrettably become popular with their core fans. Every time Jonny suggested they take it off

the playlist, or revise it into something less embarrassing, or burn it in effigy, Reg reminded him of the years of bullshit they'd all tolerated on Jonny's behalf.

Reg would be chuffed to bits to know that fucking song might cause Jonny to make the acquaintance of a few signless signs.

Jonny took one last drag off the cigarette and dropped it to the alley floor. He pulled another one out and lit it before he even finished stubbing out the old one.

Only one of sods stood taller than he, but they all held a lot more weight, a lot more muscle. Skinnier and weaker than nearly everyone he knew, Jonny had to learn to fight clever and creative and sometimes a bit dirty. But the alley offered nothing along the lines of a weapon or defense for him, not even a shard of glass.

A bin lid might have served if the bins weren't at the opposite end of the alley, near the front. Near to *them*. Didn't matter much anyway, he was all but useless in a fight these days. One on one, he might stay in the game for a few swings, but still not long. Outnumbered or cornered, it was a race to see what would get to him first, the physical defeat or the mental departure.

As if on cue, shadows of memories flickered, projecting themselves onto the walls of the alley, some distant incident with a similarly armed group. He took a deep breath and braced against it, knowing it wouldn't help a bit. His head enjoyed nothing more than interfering with his ability to keep his head.

"We want a word with you."

The cat hissed at them and scurried off through a hole much too small for Jonny to follow.

"Sorry, mate, just like him," Jonny gestured towards the cat's exit, "I got things to do, and a better place to be."

He walked towards the group, if anything was going to happen, better that it happen at the front of the alley, where someone else might see or, with some crazy luck, intervene. Towards the back anything could go, with only the hopes that someone else might happen through the one-way door to interrupt. And on the off-hand chance that they truly only wanted to talk, he'd simply walk past them.

Jonny headed towards the side with the most trash cans, towards the only advantage he might claim for himself.

"Hey, hey, not so fast, *mate*."

The man stepped directly into Jonny's path, and Jonny sidestepped him to the left, keeping his back to the nearest wall. One of the other men circled to Jonny's right.

"It'll only take a minute."

Jonny kept moving, talking as he did so. "Must be very important, if it takes three of you to come tell me." He knew full well they'd do as they pleased, but he had to say *something*. Keep them talking, keep them distracted. Keep them focused on his words and not his actions.

His instincts could still occasionally serve him well, his body remembered a time when he'd been fearless. Long before his mind had got completely bollocksed to the point where his own shadow could give him a start. A few more steps and the bins would be in reach, they hadn't expected him to just start walking and keep moving. They didn't want to get rough, not yet. Not until they'd spoke their piece.

The third man swung his signpost into a bin with a loud *clang!* Obviously intended to scare, the racket just made Jonny smirk and the other two glare. Noise could easily attract the attention they didn't want, and put a premature end to their private conversation.

Jonny clenched the cigarette between his teeth and kept moving. The shit in his head unnerved him way more than the shits in front of him. Fucking morons.

The noisemaker's mistake prodded him into action while they were still alone.

"You're on a path straight to hell, " he said, angling to intercept Jonny's path.

"Already been there and back." Keep talking. Keep walking. The first man closed in behind him.

"You think it's funny, all those you're dragging down with you? We're going to shut you up."

"Ah, yes. The colony that rose up for religious liberty and freedom of speech, among other things, right? *Brilliant.*"

Jonny had a way with words, and a way of not considering their impact until too late. Talk may have delayed the group at first, but now the banter just fanned the flames of the impending assault.

If Jonny had one advantage it was speed. He weaved around the third man, knocked a rubbish bin over behind him, and grabbed another's lid for good measure. He pivoted, ready to wield it like a shield between himself and the three. The overturned bin had forced one man further back, the one who might've still cut Jonny off. They all shifted their grip on their weapons, but Jonny was out of the alley now, where the crowd out front, and, with any luck, Reg could see him.

For a moment, everyone just stared at each other. The men hesitated, and Jonny wasn't ready to turn his back and leg it just yet. Resolve returned to the noisemaker's face, and he –

"Jon! Where the fuck you been," Jonny heard Reg call. Other sounds drew closer and Reg rounded the corner. Grips on sticks loosened, and the trio shrank back a hair, uncertain who else might round the corner.

Reg looked equally relieved and perturbed at the same time. "We're all looking for you everywhere," he scolded through his near ever-present scowl.

"Took the wrong door, that's all. Got myself locked out. Started chatting with some fans." Jonny wondered just how long had he been gone. Well, he had wandered the place for a bit before finding himself here, long enough for them to start missing him.

Jonny stubbed the cigarette out on the side of the rubbish bin, and tossed the butt inside. He dropped the lid on top with a *clang!*

The door that had betrayed Jonny now opened and ejected Frankie. As Frankie peered at the scene, Jonny's would-be attackers turned, their makeshift weapons suddenly just debris on the floor of the alley.

"What's this?" Frankie called.

"Just a few blokes looking for an autograph. Got a pen?"

Jonny could see Reg didn't believe a word of it, and neither did Frankie. Frankie stepped out and let the door close behind him the very same way Jonny had.

"C'mon, they want more pictures or something. Sooner we do this, the sooner we can all get a drink." Frankie eyeballed the odd trio warily as he went on. "G'day, gentlemen, we'll be heading back in now..."

"Not through that door, we won't." Jonny pulled out another cigarette as Frankie grabbed the doorknob only to find it locked, just as Jonny had. He lit up again as Frankie knocked on the door.

"Shit."

"You could've warned him," Reg gave Jonny a not-quite-friendly shove. Jonny shrugged.

Frankie sighed and headed toward the street. "C'mon, you."

As they rounded the corner out of the alley, Jonny let himself smile back at the thugs. "Have a lovely day, lads. Hope to see you at the show tonight!"

That had gone much better than he ever could've expected. Maybe his luck had finally started to change. They made their way toward the front door, skirting the edges of the scene.

They got about halfway there, with Reg and Frankie trying to block the crowd's view of Jonny. But police and security noticed them first, and angled to intercept – recognizing them from their unsubtle entrance not long ago. Ironically, that very interception drew the crowd's attention to them. An unfortunate and unintended consequence that Jonny didn't mind much.

The first cop shouted into Frankie's face. "Just what in hell do you think you're doing?"

Jonny's stomach turned a little and made him grateful he had Frankie's face between him and them. He'd had his fill of encounters with police, and none of them good.

"All bands have to use the back door and stay away from the main entrance!" In the face of the growing disturbance and a strong recommendation from the police, the club had instituted a "no bands through the front door" policy for the weekend.

"The side door locked behind us!" Poor Frankie, he was a good man, he didn't deserve this.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Jonny peered out from behind Frankie to notice the crowd that had started to notice him.

"You think I'd bring them this way if I had an option?"

The cop shook his head in exasperation. "Let's just keep moving, get you inside..."

The crowd had ignored Reg as he'd crossed the line on his way out, with his average guy looks and "just ignore me" style. It's not that Reg was hard to look at, it was more like your eyes just slid off of him in search of something more interesting.

Jonny, however, attracted attention with or without the bright blue spiky hair that Ginny had created for him. No matter what he did or how he looked, he unwittingly cast an air of mystery and intrigue, of complications and stories, in spades.

The jeers and cheers grew to a low roar as sight of him spread throughout the crowd.

"Just like home, eh?" Jonny muttered at Reg.

Reg rolled his eyes, but Jonny couldn't let go of his smirk. He fed off crowd energy just as he fed into it, whether they liked him or not.

The cheers and jeers shifted into words and chants.

"Go home, heretic!"

"The worst blasphemer of them all!"

The crowd pressed against the barricades set up by the police. They'd made a point to keep the most volatile elements apart from each other. Someone threw a bottle, it shattered

off a light post a few feet in front of them. The cops turned and menaced. The crowd shrank back, but only a little.

"We pray for you! We pray for your soul."

"We won't let you corrupt our society!"

Jonny wasn't sure if it was the bottle or the words that got up his nose. The notion of praying or the notion of having a soul, or the notion that *he* was the one corrupting the sham of society.

Whatever it was, he whirled to face them and the noise died down, fast. He ignored the sounds of warning from Frankie and Reg behind him.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Reg muttered.

"Fr' fuck's sake it's not *me* you should be angry at!" Jonny spat. His voice rang out, he knew how to use it. He knew how to get and keep a crowd's attention. "It's those church leaders, politicians, they're the poison of the world! It's that book of fanciful stories you cling to that hardly has a lick of truth to it! Stop wasting your time on prayers and learn to think for yourselves!"

They screamed all the louder at that, those that agreed and those that didn't, everyone on all sides. Jonny felt hands pull him into a jumble between Frankie and Reg as the three were hustled through the doors before Jonny could say anything else.

"You just can't ever let things go, can you?" Frankie asked.

"If I could, do you think I'd still do the things I can do? The things that got us here?" Jonny had dropped his cigarette in the fuss, he pulled out another and lit it in irritation.

Jonny continued to make enemies throughout the afternoon. He pissed off photographers when he refused to look at the camera, and reporters with every question he

declined to answer. He wished he had a twin or a stunt double who could do this shit for him, so he could sit quietly with a guitar and do what he did best: the music. He kicked over a speaker for spewing Steely Dan at him. Once the press had given up, he went on to piss off the entirety of the club's staff as he picked apart every detail of the sound system and stubbed out cigarettes on the insanely disturbing sculptures.

They could hate him all they wanted, he didn't give a fuck anymore. He was here to do one thing: to fucking play the fucking music like they'd never fucking heard before.

Tomorrow night.

Then and only then, could they pass judgement.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Interlude 2

Jonny hovered at the edge between reality and distorted memories, at a complete loss to grasp just what was happening to him. He was in a bad place, whether it was in his head or in reality, he couldn't guess. Nor could he guess how much time had passed. His own blood oozed down the back of his throat, as well as down his face, past his lips and from his chin. Really it trickled along just about everywhere he could feel anything.

Jonny tried hard to make sense of the contradicting sights and sounds, and wasn't having any luck of it. Any ability to sort the stuff in his head from reality had fucked off and left him half mad, half chained to a bed and half nailed to a wall.

The room wouldn't stay still long enough for him to make sense of it, it convulsed in a parade of prison bars, bones, spiderweb chains, dentist-like exam chairs, padded walls, broken windows, skulls, and lab equipment. Only the rotting smell remained constant.

His imagination still put glowing red eyes and crazy sharpened teeth on his all-too-real captor, but she stayed separate somehow from the other shades, the ones that lurched and yelled and struck at him without physical effect. She spoke, sometimes, but he couldn't

understand a word anymore. It all got mixed up in the taunts and jeers from the shifting shadows.

The wounds felt real, all of them, slices, scratches, bruises and blood trickles. Once inflicted, they stayed and bled and got worse. A network of shallow, bleeding cuts and scrapes crossed much of his exposed skin now, his arms, his torso, his face. Her placement had caused an awful lot of pain, but without any critical damage so far. She had a purpose.

Jonny still clung to the desperate hope that it was all just a much-crazier-than-usual nightmare, and that Ginny would wake him up any second now.

But if not, well, he still *had* to survive. He *had* to. For Ginny.

His heart skipped a beat, imagining her getting ready for the show, while he was here, letting her down, letting all his friends down again. And the ring he had for her was here, still in his pocket he hoped, he could see his jacket on the floor, far enough away that it didn't have any blood on it.

His tormentor scraped the hunting blade along his abdomen and he gasped. Just another surface wound, but it stung like fuck.

It wasn't supposed to go like this. Everything was supposed to be alright now, starting tonight. The start of a new era for him, and his friends, their music, their whole lives. They were supposed to change their fucking fate here. He was supposed to ask Ginny to marry him. This was where he made it all worth it, all the times they waited for him, all the things he'd fucked up, all the times they'd stuck by him with less than a thread of hope.

But his shit luck was a fucking black hole, nothing could escape its pull. A spasm of frustration jerked through his body.

Nobody heard his shouts. This ugly savage could do whatever she wanted, with impunity, while the other one watched. The blonde in the red dress, the one who brought him into this, kept giggling and cheering her on.

Jonny just couldn't understand why. Not that there had to be a reason, other than the obvious: He was himself and these were the things that happened to him, this particular thing aiming to top all the previous things.

Echoes of previous things came and went as they pleased, paying tribute to his current defeat. Coppers with billy clubs, doctors with needles and clipboards, iron bars of jail cells with no doors, towering cinderblock walls, they all danced a distorted dance of triumph around the mess he was in. All of them roamed this stinking filthy hole, mocking him and piling memories of despair into an ever-growing heap. He coughed and spat blood at shadows only he could see.

His captor, the real threat, paused for a moment and stepped back, as if admiring her work and contemplating what to do next. She turned and disappeared into the shadows, out of view.

Several minutes passed, and neither woman bothered with him. He couldn't see or hear either of them. Had they left him alone?

With the relief from the blade, the cramps in his muscles now demanded attention. Jonny decided to get his feet back under him. His arms ached and his wrists were both screaming, one hand still strung up from the headboard above him, the cuffs biting deep, the other still stretched to the side, nailed to the wall with a stiletto – *How the fuck had she driven it into the brick?* He pressed his back against the wall and pushed himself up with his legs,

taking some of the strain off his hands. He couldn't do much, but even this little bit of movement helped.

Probably not the wisest thing he could do, but he never made a good prisoner. That was part of his problem. He felt compelled to explore the limits of any situation, regardless of the consequences. He didn't connect actions with likely negative outcomes very well. He lived in the moment much of the time, unable to ponder cause and effect until it was too late.

If he could get just a little more relief, maybe he could think just for a moment. He could almost stand up, though hunched over, at the limits of his skewered hand. The pain rose up and made him dizzy again, his cuffed hand gripped the bedpost to steady him. He sucked air through clenched teeth against the agony and his head sank to his chest.

One thing at a time. He panted. He had to get out of this. He forced a deep breath and lifted his head again.

He didn't know if the angry shadow that stormed at him was real or imagined, but reflex made him kick at it regardless.

Bad idea. Jonny knew it instantly, but it's not like he'd planned on it, it was just instinct, reaction. The hulking creature of a woman caught his foot and lifted it up. He lost his balance, and slid clumsily to the floor again. A new round of pain shot up from his wrists through his arms.

His eyes met hers and he stared at her, helpless. Her eyes glowed brighter, drilling through his eyes and into his skull. He winced, but could not look away. She still held his leg.

With no change in her expression and no effort at all, she twisted with one hand and applied pressure with the other, right above his knee.

A sickening *crack!* split the air, followed by a pitiful howl of pain.

She let go of his leg and he retched long, drawn out, dry heaves. He teetered on the edge of unconsciousness, stars bursting in front of everything he could see. How fucking long could he go without blacking out? He wished for just a few seconds, where he wouldn't have to feel anything, just a moment.

Jonny closed his eyes in wishful misery as a group of prison guards melted up from the floor wielding nightsticks. Inside his eyelids he saw the closest one swing at him but didn't feel any impact. Hallucination. Still he flinched and tried to cower as the other illusions morphed into doctors, one jabbing at him with a ten-inch needle. He gasped and clenched his teeth and moaned.

After a time his groans faded to a labored breathing. His throat was raw, his lips cracked and dry with thirst. He'd kill for a bottle of whiskey right about now. And a pack of cigarettes. He had those, in his jacket pocket. At some point, while looking for something, she'd kicked the jacket closer to him, but it didn't make any difference now, he couldn't fish them out with no hands and just the one good leg.

All he tasted was blood.

Jonny stared at the stains on the floor, unsure how many of them were his blood, some seemed dry, much older. The more he stared, the more they all shifted and moved with the rest of the shadows.

The harpy's red eyes appeared next to him again, tunneling into him. She placed a large jar of something white on the floor, positioning it where his weary gaze had fallen. She reached in and ran her fingers through it, something crystalline ... *sugar?* ... *no, salt.*

She jammed a fistful into his mouth to confirm his suspicion, and all his imagined shadows fled without a trace.

Jonny gagged and coughed and spewed as she rubbed handful after handful into the wounds she'd inflicted, one by one. His body convulsed and writhed, her grin widened beyond the boundaries of her face and threatened to swallow him whole. He cried out as if stung by a thousand bees.

When she'd finished abusing his countless wounds, she drew up close and sat still, as if basking in his pain. After a time, his thrashing and flailing gave way to a quiet quiver.

She stood up and turned away. Then, as if thinking better of it, she turned back and kicked him in the ribs.

With a sharp *crack!*, mercy finally put in an appearance, and let him pass out into blackness.

#

Dinner twitched as he fought off both delusions and reality, trapped as he was tossed back and forth between the two extremes. Marion had worked both sides hard for hours now, using his nightmares to her advantage and then pulling him back into the cruel reality she held him in.

The whole thing generated even more raw fear than she herself – a massive, bloodthirsty, and very experienced torturer – had ever handled before.

And he *fought so hard*, clinging to life and hope against all reason, most meatbags would have given up and gone numb long ago. He'd only blacked out once, to her amazement, when she'd fractured his ribs, and he'd come to again very quickly.

His strength tasted like nothing she'd ever ever had, as she broke it off piece by piece. She savored it as she ran her tongue over the gash her nails had torn underneath his right eye,

the wound still crusted with the salt she'd scrubbed into him. He cringed and strained against his bonds in defenseless objection, and choked back a whimper.

Marion sniffed the air around him. He was almost there. She gave the wound one last lick and sat back to admire her work.

She'd impaled his hand, reopened all his scars, cut new wounds into his skin, broken his nose and leg and ribs, and bruised his body all over. Still he feared something more than he feared her. She didn't care anymore. The why didn't matter, just the end product. She would get to consume it all, very very soon.

Marion stood and pulled the stiletto out, freeing his hand from the wall. She dropped it on the floor next to her hunting knife, just out of his reach. She drew back and flopped into a smelly old chair to watch. The room was a sauna with his fear as steam. She relaxed and soaked it in as she sank into the bloodstained cushions.

There was an art to ripping a life away when someone had clung to it so strong and so long. The point where pain and fear reached perfection. She had to let the moment come in its own time.

He was a stew. She'd added all the spices and mixed it all up, and now she had to let him simmer, for just bit longer.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ginny

The nerve-wracking interviews and public relations may have driven everyone a hair short of completely mad, but Ginny could gladly live with one of its side effects: mind-blowing sex.

The morning had started off irregular, in that for the first time in forever, Jonny hadn't waked her with his damned nightmares. She'd actually slept through the whole night. She'd rolled over to the vaguest hint of light through the drapes and Jonny staring at the ceiling. A notepad on the table next to the bed offered an explanation: He'd been working on songs, and probably hadn't slept at all.

"Fucking jetlag," he'd said, but she knew better. The jitters had had their way with him all night long.

And now it was Ginny's turn to have her way. She gladly reaped the benefits of distracting him from the added pressures. Jonny routinely delivered a good fuck whenever called upon, but his enthusiasm and faculties came into sharp focus when he had excess

tension to release. No restless night could stop her love from giving her just the amazing fuck she craved.

It kinda frightened Ginny, how little sleep he could survive and function on. Admittedly, outside of their horizontal activities she used very broad interpretations of survive and function. You had to, around Jonny.

Ginny hadn't yet gone beyond her normal worry, but Jonny had been extra wound up since they'd left London. She could easily chalk it up to the adventure, so many ridiculously new things in such a ridiculously short time. These past two years they hadn't even been able to leave the city. When that had ended with the oddball terms of Jonny's probation, life had thrown a pie of possibilities in their face before they could even look around.

The whole band couldn't help but be wary as they stepped out into a new world. Every new thing that would bring joy to most people's lives had a very good chance of spinning Jonny off in the wrong direction again. They pressed forward through near constant high stakes.

Aside from all the chaos he actively invited or created, Jonny served as a lightning rod for misfortunes completely not of his own doing. He knew it, too, and it didn't rest well with him. On the insides he was held together with rubber-bands, cellophane tape and school glue, ready to fly apart with a stiff breeze or distant rumble. He wasn't well wired to handle the unexpected. Not anymore.

But at least it didn't interfere with Ginny getting laid. She'd grabbed him with great enthusiasm that morning, and sleep or no, he'd responded in kind. His morning wood typically rose long before she did. They'd rolled around in sweaty carnal joy until the room smelled of sex.

Ginny now rested her head on Jonny's chest and twirled the key he wore as a necklace in her fingers. She'd given it to him in a combination of fondness and desperation. He constantly lost his key to their tiny flat above her father's auto repair shop, and often had to break in through a window. The ongoing phenomenon was partly responsible for the name of the band.

"What would I do without you?" she asked him, teasing as she jabbed her tongue into his navel.

"Hmmm. You'd lead the band to glory, the stuff of legend, that's what." He combed his fingers through her hair. "With me, you just do it faster."

"Sounds worth it to me," she mused as he kissed her fingers. "The cunnilingus goes a long way, too."

"Shall I get back to work, then?"

She laughed. "We should get something to eat first. And more rubbers, this box is near spent." Every inch of her had ached for him, and every inch had been satisfied. She sighed as Jonny lit cigarettes for the two of them. "Plus, our dear friends will come knocking down the door at some point today."

"Maybe they'll fetch some takeaway, if we ask real nice."

"I wouldn't count on it."

"No? Me, either."

Ginny nestled further into Jonny's body, pressed in as close as she could get. She wouldn't get another chance at this level of skin-on-skin until after the show tonight. She closed her eyes, and just loved the smell of him. "I could spend my whole life doing this," she mused.

Jonny took a deep drag on his cigarette before responding.

"Maybe we should plan on it."

Ginny blinked a few times, then wrinkled her eyebrows in confusion. What the fuck had he just said? She lifted her face just slightly from his body.

"Coming from you, that could pass for a marriage proposal."

"So what if it is," he said. No hesitation.

What. The. Fuck.

Ginny pushed herself up and turned away, a bucket full of ice-cold reality bringing her back to her senses. Jonny sat up, too, she could feel him staring at her back.

It wasn't that she didn't feel that way about him, she honestly did. They were all but soul-mates if one could believe in such bollocks. They *fit* together, they completed each other, they'd each been strong where the other had been most weak.

Still, the two of them had so much left to sort out. They lived in constant fear that he might spontaneously combust or melt away in the rain or something equally insane and involuntary.

"Jonathon, you've still got that mess in your head and screaming nightmares every bloody night. It's not that I don't want to, but ... you should be *whole* first. Or at least in fewer pieces."

She turned over her shoulder to look back at him, but he'd looked down. She knew the words stung, but for fuck's sake, they couldn't just ignore the obvious away.

He stammered a bit as he answered, It took a toll on him, talking about the bleeding herd of elephants in the room.

"I – I thought I could just leave all that, leave it forgotten. But it keeps boiling up, won't stay gone. T-two years and it's not much better, is it?"

He drew his knees up to his chest and folded his arms around them, staring at the foot of the bed.

*He looks so small*, she thought. She felt her heart in her throat, she'd seen that scene so many times before. Familiar view, common ground, always all around them.

She took a drag on her cigarette. She didn't have any words she hadn't said a thousand times before, or any new ones worth saying.

At least they could talk around it these days, and not shout so much. To be fair, she'd done most of the shouting then, and he'd mostly just run off like a wet, sulking cat. Truth be told, things were better, even much better than those first few weeks, in the wake of his release from Wyckham. She'd almost lost him then, just when she'd thought she'd found him again. They'd really had to pull him back from the brink. The two years since had tempered the worst of the worst.

"It's not that I don't want to fix it, Gin." Ash built up at the end of his cigarette, his head sunk into his arms. "After all this time, I still don't know where to start, or even how. S'like an on-off switch. It's either on and killing me or off and gone."

Ginny wondered, often, if she'd drawn the line between compassion and standards in the right place. At times like this it was a thick line, impossibly wide. They sat in the same bed, miles apart.

She reached for him and tried to turn his face to her, gently. He kept his head down, though, turning away just enough to keep his eyes glued to the sheets in front of him. Wet. Sulking. Cat. She kissed him on the forehead and leaned her head on his.

"How about fixin' the part that stops you from telling me you love me?" He flinched at that, she'd struck a nerve. She squeezed his hand and retreated. "Then maybe we can talk about the rest of our lives."

She got up and headed for the bathroom. She hoped the sight of her naked arse could take the sting away.

She splashed cold water on her face and rinsed the taste of last night's booze and this morning's semen out of her mouth. She stared in the mirror and, for the millionth time, wished she knew how to drive away whatever haunted him. She blinked a tear away.

It's not that Ginny was that sentimental, but she hadn't heard those words since the first time he'd spoke them.

He'd blurted them out the day they had finally acted on that thing between them, something she'd known about long before he did. That was three years ago, the afternoon before the night of the riot. The night he got sent away and didn't come back until a year later, in pieces.

She knew he felt the feelings, but somehow they'd taken the words from him, along with a lot of other things. She wanted to hear them again, just as some token milestone, some proof he might someday really get better, and not just a little bit.

She heard his voice as he got out of bed, "Ginny, please, I –," but he didn't get to finish.

She heard the rest of the band barge in, and the rest of a fracas as it unfolded. From the howling and giggling sounds, Paul and Trick had caught sight of Jonny starkers. For two boys silly in love with each other they both obsessed over her own boyfriend a bit much. Familiar sounds of Jonny shouting a them to get out mingled with Reg's and Gary's voices.

Reg blamed the intrusion on "the poofs" and Gary demanded they stop wasting time and escape into the city before Willem showed up.

Ginny smiled and turned on the shower. Happiness indeed lay with Jonny and the whole sorry lot of them, for as long as it didn't fall apart. They just needed things a bit more solid before the happily ever after could start.

#

Ginny swore.

With a mere two hours to go before the show, Ginny feared she might very well throttle Jonny if he didn't stop getting up her nose.

Ginny swore again.

Her profanity got lost in the cloud of noise and bustle of bands, roadies, and press that filled the maze-like backstage of DeeDee's Anti-Disco. She had found a relatively quiet spot on some forgotten stairs that led to a locked door to who-knows where. She could find out, but she had bigger fish to fry than picking a lock just for the sake of curiosity.

She searched for the best words to say to Jonny, but she could only think of more profanity. It wasn't personal, she would gladly throttle anyone within reach right now. Jonny just lingered too near the hornet's nest that was Ginny trying to fix her bass.

The night had her man more wound up than ever, but her poor bass had survived the flight worse than Gary. Because injury was never complete without some insult, some random twat had dropped the thing in transport to the club here. Several times, by the looks of it.

They hated to let anybody but Trick or Paul handle their stuff for this exact reason. Their two-man crew was now preoccupied with other tasks, and that left Ginny scrambling to

get the thing stage-ready with scrounged parts and a pocket knife. Gary, at least, had bounced back quick once the plane had landed.

Jonny's nerves always needed some sort of diversion at times like these, he couldn't help but get in the way. His excess energy grabbed at every distraction as he noticed it – nibbling on her ear, insulting passersby under his breath, trying to get her to work on a new song with him...

And that had Ginny near out of her mind.

Jonny's nerves weren't nerves in the traditional sense, not like hers, caused by worry and anxiety and fear. Jonny was completely at home on stage, more than anywhere else in the world. That was the problem. His pre-show excited jitters reached levels on par with downing four pots of tea in the space of an hour. That sort of energy simply could not be managed or dispersed properly anywhere but on stage. He knew they'd play amazingly, and he just couldn't wait to get there.

She didn't really want him to go away, but she needed him to let her alone. If she had time, she'd gladly pull him into a closet and fuck his brains out real quick. But the way things looked, she'd punch someone in the dick before the night was over, and she didn't want Jonny on the receiving end of that. She and Jonny had a private post-show routine that required all his parts in tip-top shape.

And yet she dared not let him out of her sight just now, let alone send him off to get a drink by himself.

Ginny swore yet again. Her bass' technical needs and Jonny's agitation kept canceling each other out, she couldn't keep her attention on either. She had no idea what he was saying, nor what she needed next to get the instrument in shape.

She spotted a water fountain on the wall. She stood up, fists clenched. She turned the knob and let the water run for a moment. Then she stuck her face and head into the water for several seconds. She straightened up and let the water drip down along her shoulders and chest. She closed her eyes and took a deep, deep breath.

*"FUCK!"*

A few bustling roadies gave her a quick glance and hurried on their way. If somebody or something didn't come along soon to distract Jonny, there was no telling what she'd do.

She spotted an unsupervised cooler and pulled a few beers out of it.

She couldn't take him anymore, not until her bass was fixed. She needed help. Paul or Trick had to be nearby. Jonny'd be safe for a moment, the only other exit was up those stairs and that was locked. And he was nowhere near as good with locks as she was, she'd be back soon enough should his interest drift up that way.

"Just stay here. I'll be right back."

No sooner had she said it, than Paul appeared, clipboard in hand.

Her knight in snazzy armor, probably looking for her and Jonny. Paul had some uncanny sixth sense that usually brought him wherever he was most needed. Either that or he'd heard her shout. Regardless, thank the stars for small miracles, the stars in this case gleaming as sequins on the trim of Paul's vest.

"Paul!" Ginny called, possibly her first non-expletive word since she saw what had happened to her instrument.

"Hey Gin, you fix that thing yet?"

"With *him* around?"

"Oh. Oh, dear," Paul said as he turned and took in the sight of Ginny, her bass, and Jonny, who'd taken up defacing a poster of some local band. Paul also had an uncanny ability to understand a situation with hardly a glance.

"Yes," Ginny confirmed, with a deep, relieved sigh. She might actually get some peace, and now.

"Ok." Paul took a close look at his clipboard, out of habit and sheer love of doing so. "Trick will just have to manage the rest. Our dear Jonny takes top priority, doesn't he? Unless you'd rather I battled the instrument for you whilst you two find a closet big enough for a bonk?"

"The bass needs me specifically, I'm afraid, and *all* of my attention."

Only partly true. More accurately, the near-conversation about marriage had rattled her, and she feared Jonny might bring it up again. She was not ready to take that on, not until they had this show in their rearview mirror.

Jonny was a creature of the moment on a regular day, on days like this that moment became impossibly thin. His nerves before shows generally made him, if left unattended, do unmindful, impulsive things like steal a car on the worst end of it. At best he would generally attract just the wrong sort of attention and get his nose broke. Whether it be at the hands of grudge-holding rival bands and peers they'd pissed off, obsessed fans, or law enforcement determined to pull him back into the system again, Jonny just wasn't safe if left alone like this.

Their current location of New York had canceled out some of those factors, but then replaced them with even more unpredictable ones. Jonny had made some passionate new

enemies in his confrontations with the protestors, and he certainly hadn't made any friends in the interviews.

His behavior around the reporters and photographers might not warrant violence, but they would have little incentive to lift a finger, shed a tear, or otherwise give a fuck should anything go wrong for him. Ginny and the rest of the band weren't much better with people, but at least they knew how to fake it sometimes, and to shut up and keep to themselves the rest of the time. Usually.

Even beyond all that, some local bands and fans resented that DeeDee's had overlooked many of them in favor of bands from distant countries. Most local punks were welcoming and friendly enough to their distant kindred spirits, particularly the few that had got an invite to the event. But rumblings from the fringes had added some extra spice to the stew that brewed around DeeDee's.

While none of these themselves added up to anything directly threatening, Jonny still had a gift for finding himself in the middle of incidents, if not directly causing them. This knack had created a large part of their uphill battle since they started as a band, and so keeping an eye on him took precedent over everything else.

Now, with Paul here, Ginny would not have to worry about any of that. They could all rely on Paul.

She relaxed a little and sat back down next to her ailing instrument. Jonny stopped what he was doing and flopped down next to her, preparing to run a new round of song lyrics past her, and hardly noticing Paul.

"See?" Paul stared back at her in amusement.

"Well, let me get him out of your hair, then."

Ginny turned to Jonny and leveled her eyes at him. "Jonathon. Why don't you and Paul go for a beer while I get this sorted?"

She pulled him into a kiss before he could respond. She pushed the kiss deep, all the way down to his knees, then whispered, "Just relax, luv. You've got a *long, hard* night ahead of you, and I'm not talkin' about the show."

Jonny gave her a short kiss in return and leaned back, grinning.

Ginny savored his foolish grin and then let him go. She imagined the two of them banging in the nearest lavatory as soon as the show was over, then turned back to her technical problems. She loved the bastard so much, if only they could clean up some of the wreckage in his head.

"You boys have fun and stay out of trouble, right?"

"I'm on it!"

And with that, Paul unceremoniously dragged Jonny off out of Ginny's sight.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### Viper

Viper watched Bricks, Ripper and Bullet spread out among the crowd, now for the third night.

Their luck had to change, they'd lost yet another agent from the team, as Shade twisted his ankle last night. He'd tripped just navigating through the crowd, not pursuing anything unnatural.

Marion hadn't showed yet, inside or out. Two nights had passed without anything unusual. It didn't surprise Viper too much, hunting vampires had a lot in common with fishing. Sometimes you just had to sit and wait a really long time.

DeeDee's event spanned three nights, and was far from over. But he'd hoped for at least a hint of Marion by now.

Viper wondered if she might know they were on to her, could she be taking extra precautions? No, more likely she'd spent the past few days sleeping off a fear hangover. Either way, he'd still bet the farm that she would not completely miss this event. That is, if the bloodsucker higher ups hadn't put an end to her wayward habits already.

But the Salierant intelligence network would have heard something that significant, no way could they miss that. Reportedly Sebastian liked to make a spectacle out of those who'd disobeyed or disappointed him. No, the bitch still roamed free, and she would show. She just lay in wait for the best part, something really worth crawling out of her hole for.

DeeDee had hyped up this last night much more than the previous two, and the hordes of fans and protestors alike had multiplied even further. The tensions between the camps had oddly lulled a bit, but now bubbled high again on this third and final night. Tonight marked everyone's last chance to leave a dent on DeeDee's event. If it boiled over, Marion wouldn't miss it for the world.

That atmosphere had Viper and several other team members on high alert. As Thorn had pointed out, chaos makes a great cover. But they still needed to see and hear above the din. Otherwise, their operation would stop dead in the water.

It already felt like they were missing a few oars, without Thorn on a mission like this.

When the three of them – Thorn, Bricks and Viper himself – worked together, they had a rapport unmatched by any current team. They worked in perfect harmony, and never missed a thing. Without her here, Viper couldn't help but worry they might miss something critical.

What's worse, he knew the same had occurred to Bricks.

Viper shook the thought off, they didn't have time or energy to wallow in that bullshit. They were here. Hunting Marion. With a top-notch crew. Almost.

They'd all done their jobs, maintained their positions, and well. But as they'd all met before sunset earlier today, Viper had sensed a restlessness in the team. Not all of them, just in two of the recruits. And that sort of energy could spread to the others if not put soundly

back on course. Viper had put an end to it, reminding everyone of their training, their discipline, and the need for focus.

The uneventful hunt had given him plenty of time to assess the club's oddities. They'd have to dig further, but DeeDee's AntiDisco indeed held an unusual vibe that went well beyond the tortured statues and mixed industrial, gothic and dungeon-like decor. He hadn't spotted any actual bloodsuckers, but the place definitely vibrated with unnatural energy. The odd mix of anachronistic decor could hardly contain it, unlike anything he'd ever felt. And he'd felt some of the weirdest shit the world would never know of.

Here, concrete and iron mixed with marble and gold leaf. Grated metal stairs led to ornately baroque balconies misplaced in time. Ever shifting spotlights mingled with neon and candelabras. Some darker scent lurked under that stink of booze, sweat, and vomit that no club could fully scrub from its floors.

The columns and statues kicked it over the edge. The sculptor had clearly mastered capturing pain and hopelessness.

Faces set in stone screamed and wailed in silence, some of them in recesses and further imprisoned behind iron bars. Limbs protruded from walls, floor, ceiling and columns as if bodies inside had scrambled desperately to get out as the cement had hardened. Shackles and chains hung unnecessarily from sculpted wrists and ankles. All of it creepily life-size.

But that didn't explain the energy. The decor was just the icing, not the cake itself. It was the *vibe* of the place. A sort of harmonics in the twisted decor. An evil within.

If DeeDee's didn't harbor vampires directly, they needed an exterminator really damned fast.

Something about this hunt put him on edge more than anything had in a long time. Much like the recruits' restlessness, except Viper knew how to contain it. He'd long ago mastered how to keep that hidden, especially on a hunt. While he could have led this mission alone, he was grateful for Brick's presence, he made it that much easier to stay anchored.

He told himself it was just aftershocks of losing his father. And Debra breaking things off. And Thorn's absence on a mission of this magnitude. Hell, he still hadn't shaken the jetlag from his trip to China. Nagging reminders of change and mortality.

Viper looked across the crowd. They'd set up a spot in the back to regroup periodically, at a bar raised up above the agitated audience. Everyone back here wanted to avoid the thick of it, a perfect place for their talent scout cover. And more, an excellent view.

He glanced at his watch. 7:45PM. The sun had gone down half an hour ago. Most bloodsuckers didn't wake up immediately, so prime vamp time was about to start.

That bitch had better show.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Paul

"C'mon, you lunatic!"

Paul led Jonny along the edges of the crowd to one of the club's four bars. Located in the back and up some stairs, this one provided the best refuge from both the crowd and the noise of the current band. Paul thought they sounded quite good, but he'd seen Jonny wince the second he got an earful. Life with ears like that must dampen a hell of a lot of joy.

Paul sat Jonny down on a barstool and ordered two beers. Jonny lit a fresh cigarette.

"And for fuck's sake, nothing that looks like piss!" Jonny added to the bartender as Paul took a look around.

The patrons back here had sought a respite from the chaos; roadies on break, talent scouts, a couple of bored girlfriends, some cameras and press, a few suits. Tourists from other walks of life. The bar provided a small island of shelter to those who wanted a view with as few bruises as possible. Spectators, not participants, milled around here with less intensity, plus a few too injured or too drunk to fully participate.

Not one of them paid Paul or Jonny any mind. Jonny had several details that made him identifiable, like the scar, or his tattoo, or his jacket. But at a quick glance in a darkened hall, he came across as just another one of the crowd. With other things holding everyone's attention, they could enjoy a few peaceful drinks above the sea of insanity.

The bartender produced two pints of what Paul would call a slightly dark urine sample, and Paul paid with money he'd liberated from Willem.

Paul had started a clandestine affair with Willem's billfold shortly after Paul had linked up with the misfit group. Just because Paul had never got caught didn't make him any less crooked than the rest of them.

Willem pinched pennies and counted beans in the face of all the band's needs. He didn't put money in anybody's hand willingly, and only to a select few. He would only dole the band's allowance out to Gary or Paul, and had no idea of the mistake he'd made in trusting Paul.

As far as anyone knew, Paul was the glittery angel of the group, a little too tacky, a little too camp to pull anything subtle or sneaky. Paul's carefully constructed appearance had earned him a lot of free rein, and he took great advantage of his reputation. Nobody kept an eye on him. Careful planning, expert timing, highly skilled misdirection and a slew of secrets made it all the easier.

Paul didn't do it for his own benefit, though, he squirreled it away for the whole band. For pete's sake, sometimes they could hardly even eat. Paul had no qualms about scraping extra out of Willem.

Over nearly three years he'd built a nice little stash to cover some freefall, for that time when things would completely fall apart with Willem. It wasn't a lot, and wouldn't last

long, but it would give them a small cushion in the face of the inevitable. And that inevitable was nearly upon them.

None of them knew or even suspected his little ruse. This secret was as unknown as Jonny's crimes were well-known. And Paul had more secrets hidden away behind it.

Paul forced down a swig of beer and made a face. As Jonny did the same, Paul launched into one of his distinctive delve and dish sessions. He had to get to the bottom of Jonny's *mystery du jour* before it became a problem. The hellfire in Ginny's eyes had sent chills down Paul's spine, he couldn't fathom how even Jonny could miss the thin ice he'd been on. This extra jumpy, extra oblivious behavior could easily spell bad news around the corner.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Jonathon!" Paul tried another pull at the beer and thought better of it. "You're battier than usual, even for a show."

Jonny grinned a roguish, scheming grin through the thin veil of cigarette smoke. The odd, wicked sight alone threw Paul's insides into a state of alarm. Jonny didn't smile often, the constant battle with his inner demons got in the way too much. So when he did smile, it usually spelled trouble.

"Paul, do us a favor. After the show, fuck the hell off and take the rest with you. I need some extra private time with Gin-Gin."

"What, you got something special planned?" Paul liberated one of Jonny's cigarettes and lit up himself. He didn't indulge often, but he needed something in the face of the beer's faded flavor. "Other than the usual rumpy pumpy in the first closet you can find?"

"Yeah, I do, and I don't need any interruptions. Got it?" Jonny feigned a stern expression but quickly broke into a grin again. "Can you keep a secret?"

Paul's alarm sank deeper, weighed down by another gulp of beer. Jonny leaned conspiratorially and reached into his jacket pocket, cigarette clenched between his teeth. Paul steeled himself, trying hard to give Jon the benefit of the doubt, not an easy task with what the man had done with it in the past.

Paul didn't know what to expect, really. What would have been normal, or at least predictable out of Jonny? Stolen car keys? A bagful of drugs? A gun? Bus tickets and a plan to leave Willem here in New York, at the most conservative. But Jonny's hand held none of these as he pulled the mystery from his pocket.

It took a moment for Paul to comprehend what he saw. He'd have expected magic beans or a pirate's treasure map or a flurry of fairies long before seeing the object Jonny displayed before him: A ring box.

Jonny opened the box and put it on the bar for Paul to see. Paul goggled.

*Fuck.* Jewelry theft? At least it was something original, and Jonny hadn't got caught in the act ... Still. *Fuck.*

"You, oh my god, Jon. Where... when... where did you steal that –"

"Christ, Paul, I wouldn't steal something like this! This is for *her!* I owe her that much."

Paul and his skepticism sat back and squinted at the thing. The ring didn't look like much. The slim band of silver – Ginny was allergic to gold – was shaped into that Irish design, hands grasping a heart, with a tiny chip of something sparkly embedded in the right side of the heart.

No, the thing would sit among the cheapest offerings in any situation other than a carnival contest.

But Jonny didn't have a spare coin even for a gumball machine, Willem saw to that. Indentured servitude described their relationship rather spot-on. Everything Jonny wore came second or third hand, everything he owned had been salvaged from junkyards or thrift shops, including his two guitars.

In a scene where people intentionally ripped their clothes for shock value, Jonny didn't have to bother.

"Who paid for it then."

"I did!"

"How?"

The group, subject to only slightly less stringent terms with Willem, didn't have much more than Jonny had. None of them could have lent him the money, and hell would freeze over a dozen times before Willem himself fronted the cash. And then nobody else liked Jonny enough to help him out or give him a chance.

"Lots of little things. Odds and ends. Stuff Willy would've shat himself over, of course."

Jonny started in on another cigarette. He looked extremely pleased with himself for pulling off whatever he'd pulled off. It made the nagging squelchy feeling in the pit of Paul's stomach take a few more turns. Paul knew personally how tricky it was to put one over on Willem, having gone to great pains to do so time and again. Whatever Jonny'd done, it couldn't end well, not if history had any indication.

"Yeah? Like what?"

Paul, usually bubbly and enthusiastic in any situation, had let his cross-examination grow harsh. Jonny's joy finally faltered in the face of it.

"You think I'm a complete idiot? I can do *some* things right. It may not come easy, but..."

"*What did you do, Jon?!*" The sooner Paul knew, the sooner he could work on setting whatever Jon had done back to rights.

"I wrote some songs for some other bands," Jonny said, his voice defensive now. "Helped some of them out in the studio. Busked in places where nobody would recognize me." He took another swig of beer and winced. "I do have *some* talents beyond the criminal."

Paul couldn't argue against that.

But Willem would have seen the actions as crimes against their agreement. And yes, he would have shat himself, probably ten times over. As far as Willem was concerned, Jonny owed him his life, his soul, his first born, and every single piece of creativity he could cough up, everything down to his nail clippings and the hair on his balls, until the terms of their contract were up.

While many wondered how anyone could work with The Lost Keys, many more wondered how the band had ended up with a louse like Willem in control.

To put it simply, the band had dug themselves into a deep ditch, with Jonny near buried alive. Willem had the connections and resources to stop the ground from swallowing them whole. And he'd lorded it over them every waking minute since, as if the wanker had merely saved them so he could torture them all himself.

If Willem had got wise to any of Jonny's scheme, he would have exacted a high penalty for such a breach. Jonny's stunt could have set the band back years in their plot to rid themselves of Willem.

Jonny, the fucking *lunatic*.

"Shit, Jonny, what were you thinking?"

"How about carving out a little something for my life? Something to show for my work. For her, and for me."

"If Willem had found out –"

"But he didn't, did he, Paul? And now we're here and we're near done with him."

"Hm." Paul wasn't against taking risks, but stood steadfastly against Jonny going off and taking them alone. The deck Jonny played with had too many cards missing. And the band had more than enough risk lurking in their near future.

Paul did wonder at his own hypocrisy here, as he'd been robbing Willem much more directly for quite some time now. But Paul had a lot of tricks up his sleeve, he'd mastered the art of getting the better of Willem. Jonny had nothing of that sort at his disposal, not on his own.

"Thought you'd be happy for me."

"I am. I'm just... worried. You miss a lot of important details."

Jonny flinched and turned away, his pale face gone red at the humiliation. Paul wished he'd chose better words.

Paul didn't need to remind Jonny of his past failings or current incapacabilities, nor the impact they'd had. Jonny knew how much he owed them all.

Paul did not think him an idiot, Jonny could be quite clever in many things, but his inconsistency kept them all on guard. It would take years of peace before Jonny's good deeds would weigh more than his many mistakes.

Still, it was shitty of Paul to have said it like that. Jonny was right, he hadn't got caught, he hadn't missed any detail, at least not from where Paul was standing. It would have

fallen apart by now if Jonny'd overlooked something. Willem didn't wait to call them on the carpet for any blunder – especially when it involved money.

"Hey, sorry. Cheers, Jon. And congratulations. Let's get something better on the table, eh?" He ordered a whiskey for Jon and a gin and tonic for himself, and prayed it would be a better experience than the beer. "How long you been at it? These whole two years?"

"Pretty much. It took time."

"How'd you pull off the street performing? Everyone knows you, particularly the authorities."

"Got myself a ratty wide-brimmed hat and some oddball clothes, nobody looks a vagrant in the face. And then I played right hand, hardly anyone's seen me do that."

Paul cringed, but not over the risk or the ridiculous vision. Jonny's ambidexterity spilled over into playing guitar, and out of all the oddities Paul had ever encountered, nothing creeped him out more. At least Jonny's answers had felt plausible, so he dropped the interrogation and moved on into regular gossip.

"Well, then, what about this studio stuff, c'mon, spill it. And here we were thinking you were just taking out the trash and scrubbing floors, eh?"

Jonny's probation had required he maintain some sort of job, a near impossible demand, nearly everyone else on the dole. Plus nobody trusted Jonny, not even those who still liked him. He was bad news, no matter what he could do.

So Willem called in a favor and arranged for Jonny to sweep the floors at the recording studio. Nobody else would take him, and the studio was one of the few places where Jonny almost fit in, record shops and music stores being the others. Every last penny went straight to Willem, though.

"Yeah, a lot more. Turns out Artie hates Willem as much as we do. He's not fond of me, either, but he'd rather make a play against Willem than make me miserable. So he let me sit in on things, taught me the equipment, the mixers and all. He just warned me to grab a broom should Willem show up unexpected."

Paul puzzled it over. It made a ton of sense, once he thought about it. Artie wasn't stupid. He'd've recognized Jonny's abilities right off the bat, and would know better than to let that talent go to waste.

"I picked it up real easy, and started doing the job sometimes. He paid me for it, too, a little. Soon I was around all the time, and helping some bands straighten out tricky bits of music. Once everyone was used to that, it was real easy to slip a few songs to some of them."

"And they took right to it, of course."

"Sure, I did it pretty fucking cheap. And pretty fucking well, I might add."

That didn't surprise Paul, either. Jonny worked on a few songs every week, and everyone who knew him suspected they didn't all deserve the dustbin, even if Jonny didn't deem them worthy of the Lost Key's attention.

Other bands may not like him very much, but nobody could deny the asshole knew how to put a good song together. Nobody could help but respect his music and his ear for making it better. Most anyone would jump at the chance to pass off one of his works as their own, or get his two cents on something in progress.

"So, these songs for other bands. Who'd you sell them to?"

"Sorry, all sworn to secrecy until the end of time. And I'm done telling you secrets."

"Anything I've heard?"

"I'll never tell." Jonny didn't have to, with the immodest smirk that forced its way across his face. God help him if he ever took up poker.

"You mean you write a song and you get a fiver, while they get to be on Top of the Pops or something?"

"I got their confidentiality, too. But yeah, something like that. "

"Well, they would want you quiet on your end, too. Even more so, wouldn't they?"

Something about this now irked Paul more than he expected. Setting risk aside, Paul now imagined all the people who'd queued up to take advantage of Jonny. The most talented musician they would ever hear, and who lived rent-free in a tiny flat with his girlfriend over her father's garage, handing out songs for a pittance. And he'd let them, because he wanted a trinket for his girlfriend and what else could he do?

"With Willem on my back, everyone had the upper hand. Everyone knows how deep he got his hooks in us and had a sense of what he'd do if he found out."

"Yeah, but it'd still be a hell of a scandal for any band to face!"

"Any of them could easily have shined a light on my scheme without revealing a single song deal or detail." Jonny didn't look like he'd been happy in that position. "I obviously made a point of avoiding those who hated us outright, they don't need any more ammunition. Either way, no matter what I said, who would believe me, in a case of my word against anyone else's?"

"When it comes to the quality of music, Jon, I don't think anybody would argue against your expertise."

"Oh, sure, some might side with me in their hearts, but what about, ah... officially. Where it would count?" He looked up and looked Paul in the eye. "I don't regret a thing, Paul. Those songs belonged with those what I sold them to."

"Well, a few more songs and this little glitter might've been visible, like." Lucky for Jon, Ginny wasn't a material girl.

Jonny snapped the ring box closed in mock irritation and pocketed it.

"Anything less than a disco ball is invisible to you!"

Paul smiled and ordered another round while Jonny sparked up again.

"Gonna ask her tonight, after the show. Hence the 'piss off' to the lot of you."

"Before or after hide-the-weasel? Or *during*?"

"Paul – "

Paul felt much better about the whole thing, but his stomach still wouldn't settle. What else might Jonny have tried? Success or no, he wished Jonny had sought a collaborator in this. Messing with Willem was tricky high-stakes business.

Sure, Paul'd had his own scheme going, too, but that was entirely different. He didn't stand to lose nearly as much as Jonny did, plus he used a few extra cheats to ensure he'd succeed.

The key was making Willem believe that he hadn't paid them out yet, or that he'd had less money to start with, so he wouldn't notice any missing.

Not so easy against a bean-counting penny-pincher. But Paul really knew how to make people believe all sorts of things.

It wasn't simply that Paul knew how to not get caught, or that nobody kept an eye on him.

Paul had *magic* on his side. Not just the parlor tricks and sleight of hand and hypnotism he used in his show. Paul had gone beyond that. He'd begun to learn magic, *real*, *actual magic*. His uncle had started him on it.

Uncle George had taught Paul a few simple things when he was younger, coin tricks, card tricks, illusions and such. Paul would eventually use these in his performances as Peggy Prestigia or Madame Magpie NoseAll. And then one day, Uncle George had given Paul a glimpse of *more*. A book with a few basic incantations, charms for luck, influences on people and things. Paul didn't take the thing seriously at first. But his uncle had quizzed him on it the next time he'd visited. After that, Paul had delved into the book in great earnest.

Uncle George didn't visit often, and he'd visited less and less as Paul got into his teenage years. Paul liked to think his uncle had worked with MI5 or something, because he'd never talk about his work, or where he'd been.

But when he did visit, he'd give Paul a new book each time, each a bit odder than the last. He'd given Paul a few charms and talismans as well. They'd review the previous books every time he visited. None of it got all that dark or heavy, but each went a bit further than the prior one.

Paul didn't understand why. It seemed important to his uncle, as if a purpose lay behind it all. Paul had finally determined to ask, but his uncle had died before he got the chance. Oddly, he'd died in the same train accident that had taken Jonny's parents, though Paul hadn't met Jonny or any of the band at that point. But that was when Paul got to see just how serious his uncle had been about his books.

Uncle George, the one family member who didn't care about Paul's *lifestyle*, had left Paul the rest of his small and very unusual book collection.

These books – more magic books, spell books – they scared Paul a bit. Actual deep and creepy high-level occult stuff. Without his uncle's guidance, he didn't quite know what to make of them. They spent a lot of pages discussing blood, like all the magic in the world was in that plus a bit of will power. Lots of pages were torn, blackened out, or missing. The incantations made no reference to gods or demons, they didn't call upon any named power. The books were completely secular in their supernatural recipes. It was all about will and intent, focus and energy ... and blood.

He'd read them all repeatedly, several times each, trying to glean everything within them. He kept all the books hidden, even from Trick. His friends didn't believe in much outside of the visible and obvious, and Jonny had a particularly strong stance against things mystical. That stuff didn't hold much water with Paul, either, or any of them. But his uncle's books hinted that the world had something hidden away, that there was more to it than meets the eye. Paul had seen some of it work, he'd actually worked some of it into his act.

He'd even tried a few things to help his friends, some *mojo* to balance out their bad luck and not so good habits. He'd used his own blood though, for the few spells that required it. It felt wrong any other way. The instructions said either could be used and to different effect, but weren't clear on what the differences actually were. Paul figured it'd be best to keep to his own ingredients.

Those hadn't worked as well as Paul had hoped. Jonny may as well have an invisible shield repelling even the thought of things that might help him. Paul'd hate to see what their luck would have been without his paranormal efforts. But they had made it through the past two years. As far as Paul was concerned, that was evidence enough.

None of the band had any idea. Not even his darling Trick.

And now, he had to see what he could do to help Jonny with his plans for the night. Good grief, Jonny and Ginny married. Paul tried to imagine it. They all knew Jonny and Ginny were meant for each other, but this strutted into stark raving crazy. Too many changes, way too fast, inviting the fickle fingers of fate to flip them off yet again.

Jonny would need all the luck he could get. Direct intervention, maybe. And Paul had just the thing.

"Why don't you let me help plan something a bit more... romantic?" Paul leaned in dramatically and put his hand on Jonny's knee.

"Thank you, no." He picked Paul's hand up and put it back on the bar with a sigh, a weary action performed a hundred times before. "It mighta been done already if you lot hadn't barged in this morning."

"Alright, fine. At least let me give you something for luck." Paul reached into his pocket and pulled out a charm he'd made for Jonny a while ago, and hadn't had the nerve or occasion to give it to him. He'd been carrying it for months, just waiting for a moment like this.

He'd used a few of Jonny's discarded guitar picks to construct it, and added a handful of beads and charms between them. He pressed the thing into Jonny's hand. "Here."

"Er..." Jonny stared at the dangly thing as it jingled at him, adorned with things he'd discarded. He gave Paul a sidelong glance. "Bits of plastic, wood, and tin won't have any effect on Ginny's answer, I don't care what bollocks you or your stage presence did to them."

While the band did not know Paul's designs behind the trinkets, they did know he made the things. Paul wore them often, sometimes several at a time, prominently as bracelets,

necklaces, brooches and keychains. They credited it as he'd led them to, as part of his on-stage persona trickling over into his daily life.

Paul sniffed indignantly, feigning offense. "You need all the help you can get, whether you believe or not!"

He then beamed hopefully at Jonny and hoped for the best. He'd used more tasteful baubles than typical, so Jonny might not reject the thing on sight. Paul noted that Jonny hadn't handed the thing back yet. While Jonny might reject the supernatural, he still worried at his near legendary bad luck.

When Jonny appeared to make the decision with a sigh, Paul's heart fluttered a little.

"If it'll make you feel better, Paul, I'll hang on to it. I'm not wearing it on my wrist though. It'll just get in my way."

"Great! Here, just add it to your necklace with the key, let me help."

Jonny sucked down the last of his cigarette as Paul fidgeted and merged the two pieces into one chain. Satisfied, he handed it back to Jonny.

"Uh, thanks," Jonny said as he pulled the thing back over his head.

"If it truly doesn't work and she turns you down, you know you always have a place between me and Trick!"

"Don't you even think about it!" Jonny tossed back the last of the whiskey.

Paul finally relaxed. Jonny's answers had eased his concerns, Jonny had accepted his little gift. They could enjoy a few drinks before the Keys would take the stage by storm. He still felt a bit queasy, he wished he'd skipped the beer from the start. Maybe a good piss would get it out of him.

"I'm off to the bog, can you handle just sitting here for a moment?"

"Well, I sure as fuck aren't coming with you!"

Jonny followed the whiskey with the last of the beer, in a fast gulp to taste as little as possible. Paul put some money on the bar and said, "Another whiskey for my friend, and do us a favor, don't let him go anywhere?" He followed it with a generous tip.

The bartender grunted.

"Jeez, Paul, what can happen just sitting on a fucking barstool!"

"Just stay put, ok?"

Paul gave the bar area another glance. None of them looked like protestors, none of the had paid them any attention, let alone recognized them. Nobody eyed them as if they recognized Jonny. They'd been completely ignored. Even the blonde on the other side of Jonny had hardly acknowledged them, intent on the current band. The gents was right nearby, he'd only be a minute.

What could possibly happen?

#

Paul returned, someone else sat on Jonny's barstool, and an entirely different bartender stood serving. At first Paul thought he got mixed up in the crowd and ended up at one of the club's other bars. But no, no way he could make that mistake. Fuck, the gents was hardly forty feet away. Was Jonny taking the piss?

Paul scanned the nearby crowd for any sign, but couldn't see him anywhere. After a few long moments of this, it finally hit him, right in the gut: He'd lost track of Jonny. At best, Jonny had gone back to pester Ginny some more. At worst...

Paul did not want to think about the worst.

He forced himself through the crowd as fast as he could go, gripping his "all access" badge to get backstage again. He knew Ginny would bite his head off either way, but he had to check there first. Jonny couldn't have gone anywhere else. He'd better not have.

When Paul peeked around the corner and saw Ginny sitting on the stairs alone, he might have pissed himself if he hadn't just drained.

Jonny was nowhere in sight. Ginny still swore at her bass, but quieter and less frequently now. For a moment Paul thought he might just sneak away and dive back into his search, but she caught a glimpse of him before he could make a move.

"Paul?"

*Shit.*

Paul took a deep breath and stepped, alone, into Ginny's view. Every muscle in her body tensed before his eyes.

"*Paul. Why are you here? Who's with Jonny?*" The strain in her voice could've scraped paint.

Paul had no good way of answering those questions. In mere moments Ginny's anger would outrank his exasperation by a lot. Maybe he could buy some time, just a moment that he could use to think. One more moment where Jonny might suddenly miraculously reappear and save Paul from this fate – and show them he was ok. Paul feared for Jonny's well-being far more than his own.

"Ok, so, ah – don't panic."

*Don't panic? Had he really just said that? To Ginny? Christ. With any luck she'd kill him quick.*

As people often do when asked not to panic, Ginny panicked. Paul tried to brace himself for what would come next, but knew it wouldn't help one bit.

"What do you mean, don't panic?!" she yelled. "Paul, *where the fuck is Jonny!*"

"I went for a piss! When I got back to the bar, he was gone! It wasn't even five minutes!"

"Are you fucking joking? You *know* the kind of shit that happens to him!"

"Yes! I know!" Paul smacked his own forehead.

Any stranger might have thought they were overreacting, but any stranger simply didn't know their history. Jonny's life, luck, and character had created a whirlwind of probability, built up to a point where it was a surprise he could get out of bed without getting struck by lightning.

Paul could almost cry with the absurdity of it all.

"Five bloody minutes! I even tipped the barkeep to make sure he stayed put!"

Paul lost his cool. The nerves he'd felt at the bar, when he'd thought Jonny had done something insanely dangerous, now returned with reinforcements. The reasonable explanations that had dispelled those earlier concerns were off with Jonny, wherever he'd gone.

Ginny stood up. If god existed and had angels to distribute his wrath on earth, they might take lessons from Ginny on how to look properly terrifying. She might rip the whole building apart, foundation to roof.

Paul held his ground, though. Whatever she might dish out, he deserved it. He stood alone in the face of Ginny's anger, ready to take his lumps. But he braced for a blast of fury that never came.

Instead, a tense silence settled between them. Ginny stared at Paul – at him, into him, through him, with anger cooking behind her eyes. With any luck, she was counting to ten or something, rather than imagining all the horrible things she could do to him for losing Jonny.

Through the icy pause, Paul's mind replayed every disastrous incident that had started out like this. Maybe Ginny was running through all the same damned things, distracting her from planning Paul's demise.

Paul might be willing to plan his own demise, if he knew it would fix this. How could he have fucked up so badly? He was supposed to be the most sensible, reliable one of them all. And he'd just completely cocked it up with this one mistake at the worst possible time.

Jonny had disappeared, on his watch.

Ginny let out an angry sigh, and her expression softened ever so slightly. Paul couldn't believe his eyes as she... *deflated* in front of him.

"Here we go again." She set her bass aside and turned to Paul, arms crossed. "Well, let's get everyone on it. This thing'll have to do as is..."

The sound of her voice is probably what did it. That *defeat*. That *resignation*. Something clicked inside Paul's head, all the things he hid under the surface and deep down inside. He knew how to find Jonny, he'd done it once before. And he wouldn't need to bother the band about it.

"No."

"What do you mean, *no*?" Ginny hadn't expected that. Paul kept going.

"I got this. He can't have gone far." He said it, and meant it. "You do what you need to do. This is my fuck-up, my problem."

Ginny wasn't having any of it. "Leave your pride out of it, Paul. It doesn't matter how it happened, we just have to *find* him." Still, that *weariness* in her voice. "And we need all hands on deck for that."

*No, I don't*, thought Paul. But he had to tell her something so she'd let him go do what he needed to do.

"Fine, I'll get the rest of the band to help, but you have to finish with that, ok?"

Ginny hesitated.

"What's the use of finding him if you can't play a note when you get up there?"

She narrowed her eyes at him, hackles raised again. "I don't need to tell you what's at stake, Paul. Get them and all of you go find him."

Paul nodded, turned and left. He had no intention of telling the band, he didn't need to. He already had what he needed to find Jonny.

Like the charms, he had little things to help – or help *find* – any of them, if needed.

He'd kept a few of Jonny's guitar picks, the ones he'd gathered for the charm. And he had another one from Reg. An earring of Ginny's. A broken bit of shoelace off of Gary's shoe. A button from Trick's shirt. Even a hanky from Willem, acquired with a different purpose in mind – though not one Paul would act on lightly, if ever.

He'd collected them and many more, a magpie with a purpose. He stocked up on ingredients for the sorts of things he'd already done to help them. He kept a little something from each of his friends on hand at all times, should need arise.

A need had indeed arisen, large and loud and clear.

Paul had only used the divination stuff for a person once, after testing it out on a neighbor's moggie a few times. It was a bit tricky at first, but he'd got the hang of it. And, of course, that person had been Jonny.

Jonny and Ginny'd had a row, and Jonny'd stormed off – something that had happened three or four times over the years. Rather than seek refuge with his other friends, a despondent Jonny would take to the cold and wet streets. They'd find him in a day or two, full of misery and despair.

That last time, they'd started to panic. He'd been gone longer than ever, and they couldn't find him in any of his usual places.

His probation officer had rang, and they were supposed to know where he was at all times. If they didn't have him on hand by the time the bill knocked on the door, he was done for.

So Paul had secretly pulled out the magic.

Paul told Frankie exactly where to look – under some pretense that he'd heard Jonny talking about something near there. Frankie had found Jonny exactly there, soaking wet, but not before Jonny'd caught a case of pneumonia that made them cancel two shows.

Paul could once again use a discarded guitar pick to *divine* Jonny's location. And this would be the right occasion to up the power, and try the next level – use the thing to *trace* Jonny's path, rather than fussing about with a map.

He'd go through the standard motions first, back to the bar, to ask around. With so many people on all sides, it would be hard to get a strong read. If someone could point him in the right direction, though, he might pick up the trail a bit faster.

Paul ripped a flyer off the wall and headed back out into the crowd.

#

Just getting back to the bar proved harder than earlier, the crowd's energy intensified as the event approached its final hours. Paul held his breath as person after person shook their head, every second counted at a time like this. For a moment, his heart leapt as one of them took time for a hard look at the flyer.

"Hair's blue," Paul said, hopeful.

But in the end, all Paul got was another, "Sorry, can't help you."

He was about to give up and go straight to the tracker spell, when finally someone offered up a clue.

"I seen him leave with that woman," the bloke said, raising his voice over the din. He was only slightly inebriated, and Paul believed him. "Blonde, red dress, some sort of spider thing on her necklace. He looked sick."

Kinda sick? Jonny had been fine when Paul had left him, but who knows. Maybe the beer had crept up on him, too.

"Did you see which way they headed?"

"Front entrance, looked like."

*Fuck.* Out of the building, that canceled out any advantage of heading in the right direction. At least he knew now. Paul slipped the man some drinks money and headed for the door, clock ticking.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Viper

Viper sent Ripper and Bullet out into the crowd for another scan. Bricks hadn't finished his latest sweep yet, but would report in any minute now. So far, Marion had yet to appear either inside or outside. They'd had no sign of any bloodsucker activity, either. Viper still expected that to change at some point. The night still had a long way to go, and something foul definitely lurked in the air.

Right now, everything about the crowd and the event appeared utterly mortal. It just took part in a place that stank of bloodsuckers. He didn't even get a hint of a dayling prowling around, but those were, admittedly, harder to detect. He spotted Bricks emerging from the audience and coming up the stairs to the bar.

Viper went to order a drink. Most of it would covertly end up on the floor, you couldn't drink on this job. But it helped him blend in. As he ordered a vodka tonic, someone scrambled through the loose crowd to the bar, asking about his friend.

"Sorry to bother you." London accent. Northern London? "I'm looking for my friend..."

Viper turned and looked closely, without looking like he was looking closely. Five foot seven, maybe 160 lbs, on the soft side. Early twenties. High fashion but functional clothes, with a dash of glam. Backstage tags hanging on a lanyard around his neck. Roadie? For... Viper looked at the flyer, a black and white xerox. The Lost Keys.

"He was just here," the roadie added, "hardly fifteen minutes ago." The kid had circled a member of the band with a red marker. Probably six foot, give or take an inch. Wiry build, very thin, 155, maybe? Hair dark, black or brown. Or something weird like blue or purple, in this crowd.

"Hair's blue."

Well, that answered that. Had Viper seen him? Probably. Had he made any lasting note of him? Unless he showed signs of being a vampire or sunling, probably not.

Viper was in "vampire or not vampire" mode, with a side alert for their associate "sunlings." Right now, most humans would fail to make any impression beyond "in my way or not."

But a missing person? With the possibility of bloodsuckers roaming? That registered. He hadn't noticed the absent man, but he now committed every detail of the kid and the flyer to memory.

"Sorry, can't help you." The roadie moved on to the next bar patron.

Viper turned his attention back to Bricks.

"How many you have?" Bricks was joking.

"Zero, that includes this one. Hold this."

"No thanks. No idea how you can drink that turpentine."

"Touché. Just hold it a second."

Viper ripped a copy of the same flyer off of a post. This band had the dubious honor of playing second to last tonight. No wonder the roadie was in a panic.

"What's that all about?"

"Missing person, this guy in front. About fifteen minutes ago. That's his friend looking for him, and that's all I got for now."

"How about outside? Any word from Daemon?"

"No, it's starting to look—"

Viper stopped in mid sentence, that's when he heard it. He'd devoted only half an ear to Bricks. He'd tuned his other ear and a half to the bar, part of it dedicated specifically to the roadie and his flyer.

"I seen him leave with that woman. Blonde, red dress, some sort of spider thing on her necklace. He looked sick."

*Spider necklace.* That detail stood out more than anything else he'd seen or heard tonight. Without turning his head, his focus shifted fully toward the roadie from London and the punk who now spoke to him, loud, to be heard over the chaos.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the roadie excited and relieved and still anxious at the same time. A different kind of anxious.

"Front lobby, looked like!" A bar patron now pointed the roadie towards the front entrance.

*Spider necklace.* Marion's spider tattoo. *She could have a dayling hunting for her...* Could they really have missed one of Marion's blood flunkies, right here at the bar?

Bricks waited patiently, he knew better than to interrupt whatever had caught Viper's attention or thought process.

"Did you hear that?" Viper asked. Bricks shook his head. "I'll explain in a second, he's heading out." Viper radioed to the outside crew.

"Any of you notice a woman in a red dress leave with a tall, thin guy with blue hair, not too long ago?" he asked Daemon via the hidden mic in his jacket sleeve.

*"Yeah, Blaze thinks so,"* The response buzzed in his and Brick's ear. *"Didn't look much different from the rest of the crowd. Something special?"*

"There's a kid in here, looking for them, he's headed your way ... Purple vest, asking questions, waving a flyer around. Let me know when you see him."

He turned his attention back to Bricks while they waited for a response.

"Guy at the bar just gave that kid a lead. His missing friend went off with a woman wearing a spider necklace. We need to tail him."

It sounded a bit thin as he said it, but his gut didn't kick up like this for nothing. Bricks saw the connection, too, though with less conviction.

"You sure you want to break up the team? Don't chase shadows just because we haven't seen Marion yet."

"You know I don't chase shadows."

Any shadow that Viper chased turned out to be a vampire or dayling. But Bricks did have a point. Viper eyed the club one more time. His gut told him to stay there, but also told him they had to follow the kid. "We stick to the main plan. But that kid's a lead we can't ignore." *Damnit.* When the hell would that bitch get here?

"Ok." Bricks was on board. *Good.* "But let's keep four of them at the doors, don't thin us out so much on a hunch."

Fair enough. Daemon buzzed back through the earpiece.

*"Ok, I see him. Looks like someone else might've seen his friend."*

*"Good. What else?"*

*"I can just about hear what the girl's saying to him, something about him having a bad trip. She's pointing down the street."*

*"Take Blaze and follow him." Viper paused. "And stay really fucking sharp on this."*

What if Marion had got wise and decided to keep to the fringes for the whole weekend? *She could have a dayling hunting for her...*

"For his sake, I do hope his friend was just having a bad trip."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### Interlude 3

Jonny, bruised and bloody, aching and shaking, eyed the blade from the corner of his eye. He knew it and the stiletto were out of reach, and didn't want to give this cunt the satisfaction of reaching for either. He looked at his hand and the blood seeping from it, and tried very hard to not think about long-term implications.

Everywhere else he looked, apparitions and reality blended together and refused to tell him which was which. Through the moving shadows and lingering nightmares, his mind saw and fixated on one thing, the one welcome sight since he woke up in this pit.

His cigarettes. They stuck out of his jacket pocket on the floor. He wondered if he could reach them, and if his lighter were still in his pocket, too.

He'd become a full-fledged chain smoker these past two years, since he got out of Wyckham. It was one of his few defenses against the damages done there, and so had become a powerful addiction on every level for him – physical, mental, even spiritual. At least to the degree an atheist could be spiritual.

He wielded the filthy habit as a meditation tool, the lighting of each cigarette grounded him in reality, provided a momentary focal point to hold the rubble in his head together. Once, long ago, he'd been able to meditate, his hippy parents had taught him young, something useful in contrast to all the Catholic nonsense. But he couldn't anymore. Just one of the many things Wyckham had taken from him.

Since then, the only time his head was his own was while making music or having sex with Ginny, and since he couldn't do those every waking minute, he smoked like a chimney the rest of the time. It was one of the few things he could rely on to keep him just slightly sane.

He needed two or three packs just to get through a normal day, and this hadn't been normal even before he'd come to here. And so, trembling and still chained to the bed by one hand, all he could think about was sparking up.

If he could do that, he might drive the hallucination off and clear his head long enough to figure what was going on. He didn't stand a chance against the nightmares until then.

Unlike the weapons that mocked him – even if he could arm himself, he'd be useless against this bitch in his condition – the square pack was within range.

With each movement the pain grew, as did his tortured exhaustion. But the massive craving urged him on, overruling all other sense and senses.

With a bit of straining, he had the pack in hand, and with a bit of fumbling, he had one blessed snout hanging from his lips. Getting the thing lit was going to be tricky, but at least his lighter was in the pocket, too.

Light glinted off the etched metal of the lighter, and drew his eyes towards the inscription. He used it to keep his focus, until he could light up. Too much longer and he might finally crack for good. He had to keep it together, just a bit longer, there had to be a way out of this shithole. If he could just get this damned fag lit –

*To Jonny ...*

Just the act of putting the cigarette to his lips had helped, shadows began to retreat with the start of the tiny ritual.

A thought sprouted in the clearing parts of his head. He didn't know how helpful it would be, but at least it was his, and deliberate. It found its way to his voice.

"My friends –"

*FLICK! FLICK!*

*... All my love ...*

His left hand wasn't working very well, with the dreadful oozing hole in it. He couldn't think about that. He might've tried to stand, to use his right hand where it was tethered, but after what she did to his leg – he wouldn't be, he couldn't stand – christ how bad was it, what if he – *No! Just focus. Spark the bloody thing.*

*FLICK! FLICK!*

His thought pushed its way back to his lips, he clung to it like a life-raft.

" – my friends are expecting me..."

*FLICK! FLICK!*

All his friends. Even Paul with his stupid good luck charm.

*... All my love ...*

*... Always, Ginny.*

*Oh, Ginny! Oh, god — FOCUS.*

Christ, it sounded ridiculous, this cunt wouldn't care. His hand began to shake again, stars forming at the edges of his vision. He shrunk away from thoughts of what else a skewered wrist might affect. He started to slip away again, the pain, the blood loss, he felt cold with the sweat drying on his skin, and shivered... He closed his eyes for a moment and drew a long, trembling breath.

"They'll be looking for me," he rasped.

When he opened his eyes she was there again, the mysterious enemy that had spent who knows how long beating and bleeding him to death. He avoided her eyes, he didn't want to look at her until he'd cleared up more of the hallucination.

She knelt in front of him, took the lighter from his twitching hand, and lit his cigarette. He swallowed hard, using all his will just to maintain some composure.

"They'll find me," he informed her, but kept his eyes on the tip of the cigarette. He took a deep, deep drag. He could feel his mind light up and his body calm down as the drug took effect. "They always do."

It was true, or at least had been up until now. The dodgier phantasms retreated, but the vague corners of the room still menaced at him.

The beast caressed his face, lifted his chin and forced him to look back at her. With all the hallucinations gone, it surprised him to see that her eyes still ... glowed. Red. ... *shit!*

The other shoe dropped. Jonny realized he wasn't hallucinating: Her eyes really did glow red, and her mouth really was full of horrible, jagged fangs. This wasn't a terrible dream, a crazy hallucination, or a vicious prank. This was completely, monstrously, hopelessly real. It was like his godawful Aunt Dierdre had warned: The Devil had sent a

demon to collect him. He didn't believe in any of that shite, but here she was, staring him in the face. And he couldn't even look away.

The demon leaned towards him and whispered, softly, tenderly, with nails on chalkboard.

"They'll be too late."

He stared at her, trying not to believe it, refusing to understand. Fucking impossible. She held his gaze, watching his eyes for something. He felt something wet roll down his cheek. The cigarette, his one final comfort, fell from his mouth and smoldered into the blood-soaked carpet. Her hand wrapped around his neck and lifted him off the floor. He choked out a pitiful cry, and she met it with a hoot of delight.

As if he hadn't already had enough fright and shock, enough despair and dismay, an even more harrowing vision appeared, crawling over the monster's face. He gaped as gaunt, ghastly features swarmed across her already horrible expression – hollow, sunken eyes, ragged, rotting hair. Death itself had come for him. Jonny tried to scream, but her hand locked tighter around his windpipe. He could only manage a tiny, squeaky gasp. The nightmare inconceivably reached a level of worse, his terror surged ever higher, and his wits completely gave up.

The beast cackled in delight and plunged her teeth into his neck. He felt parts of him being ripped away, with a loud, vicious slurping sound to boot. Something warm ran down his shoulder, he heard a sickening splattering sound.

His good leg kicked wildly, the handcuffs cut into his right wrist as he struggled against attacks both real and imagined. He tried to close his eyes to the terrifying sight, but the new apparition burned inside his eyelids, and he had no escape from the sucking sounds

at his throat. His life did not flash before his eyes, only a parade of more and more impossible horrors. And still his scream couldn't get past her hand around his windpipe.

He still did not want to die. Agonizing pain and fear and mutilation soaked every piece of his body, and yet he clung to an anger, an outrage that he should die like this, in such misery. To lose his life after everything he'd done and endured, been forced to endure, just to build a chance at a life, his fury matched and even surpassed his fear. He would never touch Ginny again, or play guitar, or give her that ring, or tell her how much he loved her, none of it. *No!* His body screamed.

For fuck's sake how could he die? His free hand grasped feebly at the monster's hair, desperately trying to pull her off of his neck. He tried to sob, but he had no strength, no breath left. He would die unable to vent his rage, with no voice for his objection.

He fought to keep his eyes open now, but his vision filled with blackened stars and bursts.

Jonny didn't pray. He'd already logicized most of his way out of Catholicism's bullshit long before tragedy upon horror upon tragedy had struck his life. Before his brother died. Before his parents died. Before Wyckham used him as a lab-rat and left him a shattered mess.

If god existed, he could go fuck himself.

Jonny held on as long as he possibly could. And then he lost his grip.

With one last shudder of violent, bitter, silent protest, Jonny's broken body collapsed into the devil's arms

#

Marion closed her eyes as the rush flooded her body.

Dinner sagged in her arms, she held his body close. All the times she'd done fear, she'd never had a hit like this.

The power of it surged through her, not just his fear and his pain, but the force of ripping his life away, after he'd clung to it for so long. She pressed his body between hers and the wall, as if she could absorb his very soul, trap it and breath it in as it tried to flee.

She was a killer. A murderer. A god-damned master torturer. She controlled all life and death in this room, she granted pain or peace at her whim.

*All-powerful.*

She ruled here, at the front line of vampirekind's next leap. Everyone else was afraid of this power, this strength. To hell with those pussy vampires, afraid to dig in and suck down what they deserved, what they owned. Afraid of their own divine supremacy.

Sebastian at least knew they belonged on top, ruling the world. He'd just dragged his little babydoll feet for decades now over getting it done. How long did they have to wait to reign over these mortal worms? Whining about planning, patience. *'It takes time, Marion.'*

A wimp like all the others. Scaredy cat.

They'd understand, if they would only let themselves taste this power.

None of them, not Sebastian, or DeeDee or Silas or Rufus or anyone, would let themselves drink the Fear. They could conquer all the pussy vampires in Boston in a single night, and mow down any fucking Sals along the way.

This feeling, this purest strength... scared them.

Marion looked down at the leftovers. This bloodbag had truly had something special. And she'd taken it, all for herself. She buried her nose into the hole in his throat and slurped noisily.

If only she could have a hundred more like him, she could rule the world.

She picked him up and put him on the bed, his wrist still attached clumsily to the headboard. She climbed onto the bed and curled up next to him.

Pure, pure pure ecstasy.

His last kick of fright rippled through her blood in waves, she hadn't expected it. Whatever had gone through his mind as she killed him had set off an even crazier level of terror in him.

It glowed inside her, filled her with stars.

She traced the wounds on his face with her fingers, and along the edge of the hole in his throat. Nothing else mattered. Nothing in the world. She pulled him close and licked the sticky blood from his face.

She never knew she could feel anything so wonderful. A thousand years might go by before she'd taste a bliss like this again. Every part of her and every sense she had tingled and vibrated.

But it was so much more than that. She felt... perfect.

*Perfect.* His fear and pain and strength had made her perfect.

She wanted to celebrate somehow, defile his carcass in some unusual way. Mark what he'd done for her. She didn't make dessert out of everyone, most times Nancy just dumped them in the acid vat in the basement, and let chemistry run its course.

But Marion did like to play with the leftover pieces, the smell and stains and remains around the room couldn't deny that. Trophies were forbidden, but that hadn't stopped her before. She'd decorated the room with many skulls and bones, identifying marks licked clean to namelessness, of course.

And this one, he was special, oh so special. Rules didn't apply to her anymore. She was *perfect*.

How then to honor him? Crack his chest open and chew on his heart? Gnaw through his neck and pull off his head? Wrap his guts around herself, and wear them to DeeDee's?

Heh. That would show them, they'd bow to her power.

But no, none of it felt right, not yet. She would do all of it, in time. Just not yet.

She put her head on his shoulder and let the bliss fill her skull. She licked him again. The stubble on his chin felt good on her tongue.

Her mind whirled and whirled in circles to angelic sound, visible music poured out of his blood and into every part of her. She wanted to dance.

Yes. She wanted to dance with him.

She'd chain his corpse to her, wrists to wrists, ankles to ankles, and dance him like a puppet – a marionette! She giggled, how had she never thought of it before? A Marion-ette.

She would dance him, now, while he was mostly whole. She could dance him again and again over several days, as the empty bloodbag rotted. She'd have time. A high this good would last for days.

Marion turned to Nancy, to have her fetch the things she'd need. But before Marion could say a thing, Dinner surprised her one last time.

"p-puhleease..." he breathed, so quiet she almost missed it. Marion twisted back to him. His eyes had opened again. They begged for mercy through tiny pools of tears.

She sat bolt upright.

*"STILL ALIVE?!"*

How the hell could that be?! Marion stared down into his face. Could she be imagining it? No, fear didn't make hallucinations. Did it? His lips moved almost imperceptibly.

"i – i don't – *hk* – i can't –"

*Holy fuck.* This bloodbag was still alive. Some tiny pointless scrap of his soul still clung to his dead meat, like toilet paper to a shoe. A whisper of breath in his lungs, all his strength to keep his eyes open.

Marion smiled. If he wanted one last round, she'd give it to him!

Marion leaned over, covered the hole in his neck with her lips, and sucked, hard. Still he tried to fight her, a man hanging from a cliff by one single fingernail. How long could that moment stretch?

Marion drank and slurped as hard as she could, until the sound that came out of him could be nothing but a death rattle.

She lifted her head and watched the bright green of his eyes surrender to the flood of dilated pupils.

Dead eyes.

Marion's entire body tingled and shivered at the sight of it. A tear of pure joy formed in the corner of her eye, just as his last tear of dead despair rolled from his.

*Perfect.*

"That was pretty cool!"

Marion blinked. Nancy really knew how to spoil a moment. Marion turned and glared at her, but the cow had no idea what she'd just ruined.

"Now can we go to DeeDee's?" Nancy's ignorance crashed around like a bull in a china shop. A very stupid bull.

Marion grunted and rolled off her kill. Her plans for the body faded. With the spell of the initial hit broken, Marion remembered she did want to get to DeeDee's with her buzz fresh and rolling. The perfect state to see the last few bands. Marion had skipped the first few nights because DeeDee always saved the best for last. And, well, her last meal – a junkie – had left her wonderfully fucked up until late last night.

Marion stood up and covered Dinner's face with his jacket. She could dance with him later, he wasn't going anywhere, not handcuffed to the bed like that.

The thought struck her as funny, as she toweled off and cleaned herself up.

Marion laughed, loud and high and roaring. *No*, she thought, *he'd be staying in for the night, with that severe case of death he'd suddenly come down with.*

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Paul

Someone had boarded up the door long ago, but someone else had since pulled off some boards – enough to make access possible if not exactly inviting. The door itself was ajar, but Paul could see neither lights nor life beyond it.

*Oh, Jon, what'd you get yourself into this time?*

Paul thought about it a moment more.

*How the fuck could I let you slip away into whatever this is about?*

It would take too long to go back and get help, and the streets here were completely empty. He had to go forward. Jonny may have a talent for getting into trouble, but Paul had a near equal gift for deflecting and defusing it. With any luck, it was only a few protestors breaking ranks and messing with his friend. But the scenario had Paul's instincts standing on end. With a quick look over his shoulder and a ghastly creak to the door, Paul made his way in.

The halls were bloated with rotting junk, graffiti that warned of death, and puddles of who knows what. A faint hint of blood wafted along the air, carried by a trail of dread.

Paul's magical tracer, even more visible now, followed that dread upstream. Among the more standard graffiti, Paul recognized some symbols he'd only ever seen in his uncle's books – the darker ones, at that.

The illuminated path led to an apartment where nobody in their right mind would ever want to be, not even in the light of day. Someone had carved some particularly unnerving symbols deep into the door, a dark red-brown stain overlapped it with signs of similar quality. Paul hesitated for a moment, but his dedication to Jonny overruled his urge to flee the building. The deathly silence gave him the distinct impression nothing living lurked here, and he hoped that meant it was safe enough.

He steeled himself and opened the door, and knew immediately he'd found the right place. Even across the room, he could identify the crumpled form handcuffed to the bed as Jonny. *Handcuffed to the bed. Jesus.*

Paul glanced around, slight and quick to make certain they were alone. Then he charged across the room, his heart in his stomach and his stomach in his throat. His mind went into overdrive, taking in details with each step. Two paces in, they were definitely alone. Another step, alarming shapes all over the room and the walls, but still nothing living or threatening. Another step, Jonny was in rough shape, blood and cuts all over, he hadn't stirred. One more step, nose broken, his leg twisted and bent all wrong, and oh, god, he wasn't breathing, either. Two last steps, Paul could see things he shouldn't see, glistening through blood and tissue at Jonny's neck.

Paul rushed the last few steps to the tortured form of one of his dearest friends. With one hand he fumbled with the sheets to cover the gaping wound, and with the other he felt for a pulse in the hand not cuffed to the bed. His fingers only found more gore in the hole that

ran straight through it. He tried the unwounded side of Jonny's throat, but he already knew the horrible truth.

Jonny didn't respond. His eyes stared blindly at the ceiling, and gave no reaction to Paul's presence above them.

Paul's fingers at his neck confirmed it: Jonny had no pulse.

Paul gaped in horror. There was no peace in Jonny's blank stare. Just the heavy tracks of terror, pain, bitterness, and heartache.

Paul's knees gave out, he turned and vomited all over the not-yet-dry bloodstains on the wall and floor. He'd seen some pretty nasty things, working with emergency services. But this? His *friend* lay here, ripped open and broken on the night that should have been his greatest ever.

All because Paul had to take a fucking leak.

Someone had killed Jonny, deliberately, and they'd hurt him bad first. *Really* bad. He'd died fighting and helpless, trapped in misery.

Jonny was dead. *Dead*. Not just dead. *Brutalized* dead. *Tortured* and *murdered*.

*All because Paul had to take a fucking leak!*

Paul clung to the floor and wept, the oppressive aura of the room hit him in full force. The room stank of butchery and evil, and threatened to choke his own breath from his body.

He staggered to his feet, refusing to look at Jonny's body, lest he lose his stomach again. But everything he saw made him retch. Blood that had once been inside Jonny dripped from the wall, stained the bed sheets, pooled on the floor, and splattered smashed bits of a lamp all over the bed, all sticky and congealing.

Bones and chains lurked in the darkened corners, even a ceiling-to-floor spiderweb of chainlinks. More symbols covered these walls, some still familiar from the books, but many more way beyond his ken. They were not drawn in paint. Somebody or some thing did some very horrible things here, and often. He heaved again.

Paul swayed his way to the window and flung it open. He breathed fresher air in gulps and sobs.

*Oh, fuck, what the hell am I going to tell the band?*

What *was* he going to tell them? *How* could he tell Ginny? He told her he could handle it! He told her he'd get help from the rest of the band. Both terrible lies, though only one of them deliberate.

It couldn't be real. All this shit? Jonny, dead? It had to be a trick, a hoax! He prayed to anything that might hear him. *Please let it be an illusion.* He wished harder than he'd ever wished for anything. *Let it be a joke, a trick, anything but this.*

He held on to the windowsill, he didn't give a damn if he were in danger. Paul would rather die than face the truth, or the band, or whatever happened next. Better he die here next to Jonny, than to let his friend go any further into hell by himself.

But nothing came for him.

He looked up and stared up into the hole in the ceiling. *Please don't let Jonny be dead.* He buried his face in his hands. *Please, I'll do anything, just don't let Jonny be dead.*

And then he sensed it. Something behind him *stirred.*

Every hair stood on end. He turned slowly, was it his turn now? Would he dodge the responsibility of informing the band by getting killed himself? *Be careful what you wish for.*

He turned slow, terrified of what he might see next. But the room offered no *new* terrors.

Must be his mind playing silly buggers on his senses.

He wiped his face on his sleeve. No, he wasn't going to get off that easy. Time to face the music.

And then he caught something out of the corner of his eye: *Jonny stirred.*

Paul blinked and looked directly at Jonny's corpse, hardening himself against the sight. Had he just imagined that? Did he just *see* Jonny's finger actually twitch? He stared, equally afraid of yes or no as the answer.

After several long seconds, he knew he must have imagined it. What now, then? He looked around and tried to get his bearings, he'd need a phone or something. He swept his eyes to the night stand next to the bed, a logical place for a phone, but not here.

He looked around the room. There was a phone on the wall across the room, it probably wouldn't work, but it made sense to try. He took another look at Jonny, and more tears filled his eyes. Through them, he saw Jonny... stir *again.*

As Paul watched, Jonny's other hand moved, just a bit within the handcuff, and his head tilted slightly, as if trying to see why the hand couldn't move more.

Paul fell backwards and panicked, thinking of all his uncle's books, thinking of stories like the monkey's paw, and all sorts of situations where getting what you want had some very bad consequences.

He pulled himself off the floor, and crept closer to the door. He wished and prayed for the opposite, taking it back, *Let my friend rest in peace, please, don't make him into*

*something awful because I'm a fucking idiot! It's bad enough he died because I'm a fucking idiot!!*

A mix of horror and hope filled Paul as Jonny's form twisted on the bed. Jonny reached to take hold of the cuffs that held his one hand to the bed and pulled at them... *until they broke.*

Paul didn't understand how his insides could shake so hard while his body was stuck perfectly still at the same time.

*Christ on a bike, he thought. The things must've been made of crap, that's all.*

Jonny slowly sat up at the edge of the bed, and stood up. Well, he *tried* to stand.

The broken leg gave way under Jonny's weight, and he crumpled to the floor without so much as a gasp. Without a thought, Paul rushed over to help, his natural urge to lend a hand overriding his petrification. Jonny clung to Paul for support, but made no further attempts to stand. Paul lifted Jonny's form back onto the bed, sitting him on the edge and propping him up against the headboard.

Jonny shivered violently under Paul's touch, and wrapped his arms around himself as if against a chill. Paul grabbed Jonny's jacket from the floor, and put the sleeveless thing, useful only for its pockets, on him.

Jonny let him, shaking, helpless, and weak. Paul noticed with alarm that the gaping wound at Jonny's throat didn't gape as much as it did just minutes ago.

*Oh, Jesus, what the fuck have I done?*

*Wait a minute.*

What did he mean, what the fuck have I done? How the fuck could he do something like this? A handful of good luck and protection charms, or a tracking spell resurrecting Jonny, turning him into something ... something what? Something undead? *No fucking way.*

Paul's stomach squeezed as he looked around the room again. The symbols on the wall. Blood and bones all over. Paul didn't do this. He'd tried to protect Jonny *from* this. And *failed*, even worse than he thought just moments ago.

He turned back to Jonny as Jonny looked up at him.

Jonny's eyes now glowed faintly, or was it a trick of the light? Pain and confusion and grief filled his face, that was no trick. Jonny's eyes begged and pleaded, speechless, as his body shook harder. Paul reached for the bedclothes, maybe something warmer than the shoddy jacket could help. He didn't get the chance to find out.

Jonny doubled over in a sudden fit of retching, gasping, and writhing against invisible and unknowable torment. Paul gaped, what the hell else could he do? Was this some new pain? Or was Jonny reliving the last terrible hour of his life? Jonny rasped breathlessly through it, he had no voice at all and couldn't even moan. He clung to Paul and Paul held him, too frightened to think or speak.

The convulsions left Jonny as abruptly as they had come. The silence held for a moment, then something shifted in the air. Jonny's hands gripped Paul, firm and powerful though still trembling, and pulled Paul down. Jonny raised his head to him, the glow in his eyes unmistakable now, though his face still wore the confusion and hurt.

Energy burst from the protections Paul wore around his neck. The force pushed Jonny back and sent Paul flailing to the floor. Disoriented and terrified, Jonny backed off from Paul, dragging himself on hands and one knee to the other side of the bed.

Paul climbed back to his feet, trying to keep his eyes on Jonny.

Jonny clung to the headboard and Paul took a step forward.

"J-Jonny? Are you in there? Please, please, if you are, let me help – "

Paul drew closer, and felt another flash of energy, stronger and more violent this time.

Jonny practically leapt off the bed and into the corner with a strangled, animalistic cry, overwhelmed by pain and fear now. Paul stopped and backed away. Jonny stared at him and leaned against the wall, still unstable with the broken leg that looked more stable than it had a minute ago

"I – I don't want to hurt you. I want to see if I can help. You see, I have these books, these things from my uncle. I mean, some of them are back home in London, I don't know, it's pretty heavy stuff, but maybe ... maybe I can –"

Jonny didn't understand a word of it. Paul could see it in his eyes, as plain as the glow. He just cowered in fear like a wounded animal backed into a corner.

Paul took a step back. *Now what.*

Jonny's eyes showed more terror than Paul would think possible, but they came to a fast resolve. Before Paul could act, Jonny grabbed ahold of the windowsill, pulled his broken body to it, and threw himself out the open window.

Paul ran to the window, but could see only darkness in the alley below. He slammed the window shut, on instinct. *Jesus!*

Paul turned and stared in horror at the rest of the room. Dark shadows held skulls, bones, weapons and tortures. These symbols held death and power and evil. They'd worked their horrors on one of his dearest friends on the most important night of his life.

*What was Jonny? Was he attacking Paul, when the charm pushed him away? Could Jonny really have done such a thing, and hurt him? Hell, was Jonny even in there?*

His friend's brutalized form had looked terrified and in agony. But did that mean it deserved compassion? It held Jonny's shape, but did it still hold Jonny's soul? Oh, god, how could this night get any worse?

*Fuck.*

He had to get out of here, try to track Jonny down. He – *it?* – might make his or its way to the club, who knows what it might do in a crowd, or to the rest of their friends, none of whom had protections as strong as Paul's?

Paul made for the door, and tripped over his own two feet in haste. On the floor, in a damp patch of blood, Paul came face to face with a small object glinting in the light. He pushed himself up onto his knees and picked the thing up.

Jonny's lighter.

Bloody fingerprints smeared across the shiny surface. On one side, an etched design of a four-leaf clover, on the other, an inscription.

*To Jonny,*

*All my love.*

*Always, Ginny.*

Paul fell to the mercy of despair. He fought the tears, but his charms couldn't protect him from his own grief and guilt.

*Stop it!* His thoughts screamed. *Get the fuck out of here, and stop him before this gets any worse, before you have even more to feel guilty about!*

Paul clutched the lighter tight in his fist, dragged himself to his feet, and stopped dead in his tracks.

A figure stood in the doorway, a shadow, tall and terrifying, with glowing red eyes.

Paul felt more anger than fear. His protections had just proved to be more useful than he ever imagined, and that gave him courage. This thing before him had killed Jonny and made his body into something terrible when he finally could have shown the world how truly amazing he was.

"What'd you do to him," he demanded and took another step forward. "*What the hell did you do to Jonny?*"

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### Marion

Marion let Nancy lead as they made their way to DeeDee's. She didn't want to have to watch where they were going. She had more important things to focus on.

The warm glow of her high needed, no, *demanded* her full attention.

The *Fear* from her *Dinner* coiled itself around her heightened senses. It soaked them, magnified them, extended them even further.

All detail came into a bright piercing focus. She was invulnerable, invincible, a goddess. Every color, sound and smell came to worship her. Each sense laid a sacrifice at her feet, solely for her pleasure. She would accept and savor each in turn, a reward for devotion.

Glowing neon twirled in a dazzling dance with changing street lights and blinking turn signals. Every single color split into its own spectrum. She saw into and beyond infrared and ultraviolet. The light waves shook and blended into the sounds she heard.

Change rattled in pockets, a dime hit the ground. Trash rustled in the wind, rats scurried in sewers below. Subway trains screeched under the pavement, people and car horns argued in the distance.

She could taste the song of chaos against the background of noise from up ahead. Muted music leaked into the streets from DeeDee's, folding into the crowds all around, the chants of the protestors, opposing challenges, catcalls. Buried deep within the mix, she heard a creaking sound, the exact sound made by the back door to her building.

Marion's ears snapped to attention and her trance *crashed*. She stopped walking, dazed as she tried to figure out what she'd just heard. Or seen or smelled. Whatever.

"Something wrong?" Nancy asked, several seconds into Marion's shock.

Marion turned, confused. *What had she sensed?* She closed her eyes and tried to tune into the broken piece. She lifted her face to a streetlight, and tried to recover something as faint as a hundred-year-old memory. The light tingled as it fell on her face. She pushed out with her ears, a sound had butted in, she was sure now. *What had she heard?* An echo of the note spread out from behind her. Back toward the way she'd come.

Marion looked back over her shoulder. She squinted at the street. She wanted to shake it off, but couldn't. Something was clearly out of order.

Marion growled low in her throat. Whatever had cut into her trance would pay for it. *Dearly*. She turned back, angry and a little curious at the same time.

"You go ahead, I'll catch up," she snarled at Nancy.

And then she prowled off with purpose, back towards her lair.

Marion didn't bother to look back, nor spare another thought for Nancy.

The stupid cow would obey. She might shrug first, but she'd obey.

#

Marion sniffed the air that stuck around her back door. Some bloodsacks had come through here, not quite covering *his* lingering fragrance. Dinner's. She smiled to herself, and thought of his dead eyes again. *Dinner*.

That was his name, in her mind. *Dinner*. Had he mentioned his name? Would she have heard it if he did? Would she remember it if she'd heard?

He probably hadn't said. She didn't eat those kinds, the *important* people that say things like, "Don't you know who I am?" She didn't eat from the elite, not yet.

Her food didn't talk much. The pain and fear kept them out of their mind through most of her preparation. Someday, she would hunt classy prey, and take even more time, so she could hear them beg and plead and offer money. Someday, vampires would reign, and hunt and kill openly, every night.

Fuck all the sneaking around, stealing blood from blood banks, staging fake blood drives. Or scrounging little nibbly sips from the living bloodsacks, making them forget and letting them go. Catch and release. What the fuck was she, a rat? No. She was a vampire. Higher than these stupid things.

Someday they would all be as they truly should be. Sebastian's dream, still years away. Stupid Sal infestation kept screwing things up. Huh. Wasn't she supposed to do something about that? No, she had something more important right now.

What was she doing? Oh, right, the creak. New scents. Something. With effort, she pulled her thoughts down away from her dreams.

She could hear someone else moving and living and breathing inside. Crawling around her web. A few someones, maybe?

She listened and sniffed and listened again.

Three. Yes, three. Three total in here. Oh, yes.

She licked her teeth in pleasure. Her web had caught some morsels all by itself. Good. Good web. Her web was smart and full of tricks. Three more stupid delicious bloodsacks, not just one!

Marion had a strong, clever web, with extras that other vamps could hardly dream of.

It bottled up sound. It gave her more time. It stayed well hidden. It kept *all* her secrets. Nobody had anything like it. Only Marion.

She'd found it when they'd first come to the city – when Sebastian took control after Dorian ran away.

A lot of the work had been done, the tricks already there when she took it for her own. She added her own tricks, she knew lots of this stuff even before she'd Taken her Turn.

The icing came when she'd got one of Dorian's *old* buddies to do the final touches, the really hard stuff, some of it she didn't even understand. She'd found him in hiding, and promised him she'd help him leave the city if he helped her. Of course she hadn't, she'd turned him over to Sebastian as soon as he finished, and Sebastian had made him part of the garden.

Marion loved her web, it had caught and kept so many things over the years. Only Sebastian's studio rivaled it.

She grinned until her cheeks hurt and pushed her way through the door, careful to avoid its tell-tale creak.

Marion crept hunched over and on tiptoe, like she'd seen in a cartoon, through her hallways. Decorated just the way she liked it. She forgot about her anger, she would have fun with this mystery. Big bad wolf looking for the girl in the red hood. No, no, she had it mixed

up. A bear finding Goldilocks. Three Goldilocks, even. Three Goldilocks and the Bear. That was it. She licked her lips again.

What had Dinner said, just before she'd ripped his throat out? "*They'll find me. They always do.*" Perhaps they finally did.

*They'll be too late!* She stifled a giggle. Her best line ever. She drooled at the thought of three of them, crying over his battered carcass.

*Someone's been sleeping in my bed!* She thought and had to stifle another giggle. Three someones in here, somewhere. Would she find one sitting in her chair, another eating porridge, and the last in her bed? With *Dinner*. Heh. Only one way to find out.

She opened the door wide without a sound. Nancy kept this one well-oiled. Marion made sure of it.

She stood in the doorway, unnoticed, psyched to find an intruder and disappointed to find only one. Something had gone missing from the room, too. She couldn't quite place it.

Her trespasser knelt on her floor, holding something shiny in his hand and not holding his tears back very well. Marion smiled at the shiny thing. The cigarette lighter. She started to giggle again, but then remembered to be scary. She concentrated on waiting in silence, just to see how long it took the intruder to notice her.

Not long. *Good*. He stood up with purpose clutching his worthless treasure, and froze as soon as he saw her.

"What'd you do to him," the little thing demanded. How cute. The snack stepped closer. Oooh, she had a perky one this time! "*What the hell did you do to Jonny?!*"

Dinner's name had been Jonny? Even more cute. What'd she do to him? She thought about it. She'd eaten him, couldn't he see that?

Some key thing was still missing. The room felt bare, but she couldn't hold onto it. She could still feel that streetlight on her skin, and hear the arguing car horns, and smell the rats in all the walls for a mile in every direction. How...? Oh, yeah, all because of him.

*Dinner.*

She'd eaten him, that's what she'd done. What else do you do with Dinner?

She would eat this one, too. A quickie snack to boost her crazy high even higher. A little Goldilocks that had wandered in where it shouldn't have.

Maybe that would bring the others. Their breath echoed through her hallways now, their fresh scents spoiled the decay. Yes, his scream would make them come!

She hooted with sudden laughter.

*"Hahahah! Let me show you!"*

Marion skipped the foreplay, went straight for his throat, and sprayed the room in blood for the second time that night.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### Daemon

Daemon and Feather crept down the dank hallway with guns drawn.

Daemon had made a snap decision to take Feather with him instead of Blaze. Recruit or no, he didn't care, Feather had more talent by a long shot. He'd rather head into the unknown with her, let the others handle door duty.

As far as Daemon was concerned, a family lineage with the Salierant didn't necessarily produce the best of agents. If you were born into it, it's what you ended up doing, regardless of whether you had a knack for it. Some people could not be helped by any amount of heavy training. His brother had learned that the hard way.

Daemon and Feather had tailed the kid to an abandoned building, but then lost him as soon as they got inside.

A stairwell led up and down, hallways angled left and right. The two of them could not split up, a bloodsucker might wait behind any of these doors. But they couldn't turn back, either. Two well-trained agents could fend off most any single vampire, outside of a Bloodrunner or something older than an Elder.

Viper had been right to send them, the kid had led them to something worth investigating. How the kid had found the place didn't matter. Even if Marion didn't show at the club, this building was a pretty serious find.

They explored for several minutes in silence, pausing to listen at each door. The air was dead and stale, and the walls seemed to absorb all sound. No sign of life – or unlife – anywhere. They reached the end of this hallway and turned around.

They doubled back and headed down the other hall, a muffled cry broke the silence from up ahead. They should have come this way first.

In one moment, they were at the door, and in the next, Daemon kicked the door in.

Guns drawn, they stood in the doorway. A large, hulking vampire stood in the middle of the room, lapping up a kill – the roadie they'd followed. His body sagged unconscious and limp in the bloodsucker's arms. The monster looked at them, red glowing eyes set into the blood-covered face.

*Marion.*

"Marion!" Feather breathed.

Daemon and Feather opened fire at the same time. Feather didn't need to be told.

*Shit.* Daemon thought. It would take a miracle for the two of them to bring Marion down themselves.

With luck, the beast would run rather than fight. They'd just caught her off-guard in her own lair, and likely stoned. Who knows what the hell she would do? They would find out shortly, and hopefully live to tell the tale.

Marion moved fast. In a blur of supernatural movement, she dropped her victim, leapt over the bed, smashed through the window and vanished down the street. Daemon and Feather got at least four rounds off each, but not a single shot found its mark.

*Whew.*

Feather ran to the window, not realizing it was futile. Marion was blocks away by now.

If they'd had the full crew surrounding the building, they might've stood a chance. Right now, the two of them were lucky Marion had chosen the window rather than charging the door. Otherwise they would not have lived to fight another day.

Daemon knelt down next to the motionless heap on the floor and put pressure on the wound.

He'd lost a lot of blood, but the bite was still pretty clean. Half a second later, and Marion could have left him with a gaping hole they'd have no way of plugging. She'd run her nails down the side of his face, though, cutting deep, and that would leave a hell of a scar if he wasn't already gone.

"She's gone." Feather turned from the broken glass, disappointed.

With two decades' experience pursuing bloodsuckers, Daemon already knew they'd lost Marion, at least for now. They were out of radio range, with no way to get word to the rest of the team.

Hunting a Bloodrunner wasn't like taking down your average vampire. It took patience, persistence and a hell of a lot more than two random agents to take something like Marion down.

But they could keep one more person from dying because of her. The kid had a pulse. A very weak one, but it was there.

"We gotta get him to a doctor, pronto."

Any random doctor or hospital would not do, nor could they call an ambulance.

The Salierant sought to minimize life lost to bloodsuckers, but they had to keep vampirish evidence under wraps as well. The organization had their own emergency medical professionals on hand, highly specialized and well-equipped for their unique needs. Here in New York, one of their strongholds, they had several dedicated locations.

Daemon wrapped the kid's wound as best he could, and Feather shared his the load with him. They'd have to send a clean-up crew to sterilize this place once they were safe, but for now, they had to get out of there, on the off-hand chance that Marion could return.

Viper had really known what he was doing when he sent them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Gary

"Hey, Gin, you seen Jonny?"

"*What?!*"

Gary thought the question was harmless enough, but Ginny reeled on him like he'd just crashed her car or something. Leaving Ginny alone before a show was almost as important as keeping Jonny in sight.

As Gary had spent the past hour arguing with Willem, he'd forgotten about the first part, and very much hoped someone had taken on that second part. Ginny had probably only just finished swearing at her bass a moment prior. With any luck, her irritation was just residue from that battle.

Her words had to force their way through clenched teeth as anger and worry competed for territory on her face.

"Paul didn't ask you to help find him?"

The words struck Gary as odd, put together that way.

"Paul? No, what –" And then it hit him. *Help find him*, she'd said. *Shit*. "What's going on?"

"I sent him to the bar with Paul, and Paul *lost* him." Ginny put her bass aside and stood up. Her voice got harder and sharper with every word. "And *then* told *me* not to worry, to keep working on *this thing*, that he'd get *the rest of you* to help him."

"The rest of us? Everyone's back in the other room. We haven't seen Paul or –" The thought hit Gary in the stomach with the force of a bowling ball: They might actually have a problem. He felt a little wobbly as the dreaded words came to his lips. "You mean he's really missing?"

"They're *both* missing now!" Ginny spat. She kicked and dented a trash can.

"Shit, how long ago?"

"Long enough that almost anything could have happened!"

*Almost anything*, Gary thought. The words made him sick.

A few years back almost anything had truly meant *almost anything*.

From stealing cars to shoplifting to tangling with rival bands, Jonny had fucked up gig after gig, causing many delays to the band's potential success. His aunt had once even sold his guitar and locked him in the basement. Only the band's illogical and undying loyalty had saved him through it all.

Any other group would have left him in the dirt and moved on. But the band's determined bond persisted above all else, on both personal and professional levels. Jonny would be as good as dead, or actually dead, if they hadn't stuck by him against all odds and reason. And honestly they wouldn't have got this far without him.

Sure, he'd stalled their liftoff on many occasion, but they soared so much higher *with* him than without. Whenever they actually got to spread their wings, at least.

And they all had their flaws, they'd all had moments when they'd screwed something up, and badly. They'd all thrown in their lots with each other, for better or for worse. One rickety ship to sink or sail.

Jonny's year at Wyckham had put an end to his more impulsive ways, but that hadn't kept things from happening *to* him, merely on account of him being him. What fate had dealt Jonny in talent, it had carved double out of him in luck. He'd got stuck on broken down trains a few times, fallen gravely ill several times, and even got hit by a car – twice. He hadn't fallen down a well yet, but Gary wouldn't put it past possibility.

And that was just the random happenstance. Enemies had done all manner of things as well, with no provocation, many a time.

In the hours or even a day before a show, those what held the strongest grudge against Jonny threw a frequent wrench in his works. Fans of rival bands stalked and delayed him in all manner of ways, up to and including punching him in the throat and leaving him unconscious and locked in a broom closet.

Back home, the police pulled him off the street any time they laid eyes on him, just random searches and intimidations. They knew him all too well and would love to find any reason to bring him in.

It didn't always keep them from taking the stage, Jonny'd played bruised and bloodied, even with a broken collar bone once. For a time the Lost Keys had quit promoting their shows and just let news get around by word of mouth, to see if that would help.

It hadn't.

Their best defense was never to leave him alone before a show – a task you'd think they'd all find easy. But every now and again, it completely got the best of them.

Gary couldn't believe that they'd cocked that up tonight of all nights. He had hoped that, thousands of miles away, they could relax their vigilance, just a little. Their first day in New York had kicked that hope down the stairs.

Since then, every interaction they had with anyone other than each other had shrunk hope just a bit more. When Jonny had accidentally got locked out yesterday afternoon, that confrontation out front had set the whole mess of damaged hopes on fire.

Still, Gary couldn't fault Jonny for responding like that. Wyckham hadn't left Jon with much beyond a few crumbs of his wits and the ability to yell. And he was lucky to have even that, everyone else came out of there with much, much less.

Jonny didn't talk about it at all. He screamed about it in his sleep, and sometimes shouted during band practice, unintelligibly or in Irish – it all sounded the same to Gary – during some songs. Gary couldn't understand a word, and wasn't sure he wanted to. Gary was just grateful the place hadn't taken more.

Jonny put what he still had to good use, and wielded his talents as weapons whenever he could. He had a knack with crowds, an ability to push them over the edge of whichever way they leaned. If a crowd liked him, they'd love him in the end. If a crowd disliked him, they'd come at him with torches and pitchforks given half a chance.

Jonny didn't care, he took some pride in doing a damned good job of it. The world had consigned him to infamy regardless. Might as well make a good show of it, to hell with the consequences.

Of course, the threat of consequences had started to pile up as soon as they'd got off the plane. The natural cycle of action and reaction and overreaction started to spin. The cult-like protestors, the neglected local bands, and the aggravated press all would happily queue up to take their shot at Jonny. Which consequences would strike first, only time would tell.

While Gary didn't like the notion of these assholes fucking with Jonny no matter how he might have earned it, time was once Gary would have been at the front of the queue. Their friendship had only come after years of animosity and friction, though little of that existed between the actual two of them.

Years back, Gary had run with a pack that would someday grow into one of The Lost Key's rival bands. A boy named Julius led that pack, a textbook bully with dedicated cronies and Gary as his best strongman. Before any of them had hardly learned to count, Julius had picked Jonny as his archenemy for no good reason other than to be a bastard.

Oh, and Ginny. She was probably a very good reason. When toys and swings were the most important things in the world, Ginny had opted to tolerate Jonny and spurn just about everyone else, Julius in particular. Jonny was the first boy who hadn't cried or run away when she'd hit him, so the story went.

Julius had all his cronies target Jonny ruthlessly, and Gary had relished it more than anything else he did. He was an easy target, thinner and weaker than most, yet the type who never walked away from a fight. Back then, you could pound on him for an hour and he'd keep getting up and coming back for more. Jonny had to bring a creative twist to hold his own in a fight, and that's exactly how Gary'd got stabbed in the leg with a broken bottle.

Shortly after that incident, which had also resulted in a broken arm for Jonny, Gary swapped all his friends out for new ones. He and Jonny found their friendship behind the

walls of a place where they sent boys who cut each other up and broke each other's bones for no good reason. Nothing so formidable as Wyckham, where Jonny went a few years later. At least Gary had dodged that bullet.

Now Gary spent a lot of time and energy trying to keep things from happening to Jonny, defending him against those who would tear him down. The whole band did. And now, they might have botched it.

To think that someone might be pounding on his once-enemy-turned-best-friend, that they might have come all this way only to fail –

"Paul said he'd find him." Ginny said. Her words convinced neither of them.

"Well, Paul doesn't seem to be anywhere, either," Gary snapped. "Damn it, not tonight. I just can't believe something could happen tonight of all nights!"

"It's too close to showtime for this bollocks –"

As if on cue, a stage manager found them.

"Be ready in twenty."

-----

Twenty-five minutes later, Gary wanted to punch a wall. Or Willem. Or both. Ginny's pacing was driving him only slightly less mad.

After searching as far and as fast as they could, they'd regrouped here, a small area to the side of the stage. Here any bands in waiting could watch the performances – or hear more than watch. The section offered a shoddy view at best, to the side of one stage, and well across the room from the other. They didn't have a lot of company here, all the bands had

played already, except for The Lost Keys and the one band slated to perform after them. A few barriers and a handful of security, as well as the rubbish view, kept the area clear of the general public.

At least they could pace and panic in peace as the minutes continued to pass and Jonny and Paul continued to not show up.

Even Willem kept his distance. He'd started up his prattling bollocks as the band returned from their fast and fruitless manhunt. But Gary had just the glare to shut that down. The arsehole now paced in his own private circle, not far, but not close, either. The bastard would leg it now for sure, but his curiosity would keep him around long enough to watch the final act.

The whole band had come up with nothing, not one of them had a thing to show for their search efforts, not even a distant spotting. They'd all returned empty handed and empty hearted.

Reg had shown up last, incensed and sputtering – One of DeeDee's bouncers hadn't even known who he'd meant.

"How the bloody hell could anyone forget the arsehole who – only yesterday – drove everyone completely mental?! All day long, even!"

Gary knew the answer to that. It wasn't a matter of forgetting. You couldn't forget Jonny no matter how much you might want to. But turn a blind eye? Now that could be done with little or no effort. Jonny had not endeared himself to anyone these past few days ... or at all, ever. Why would anyone care if they saw something go dodgy for him?

The band paced, sighed, glared, smoked, drank and held their collective breath. What else was there to do?

Reg put his back to a wall and sank to the floor, with a beer he'd lifted from back stage to soothe him. Gary had nicked one himself, but it hadn't helped. On the contrary, it had made his stomach worse. The shit these people drink over here...

Gary's heart skipped a beat as yet another spike-haired figure turned out not to be Jonny.

Christ on a fucking bicycle.

What if this was it? What if they really blew this? What if Jonny was dead, or had done something horribly wrong?

They weren't kids anymore, and they were far from home. Jonny wouldn't last a week in American prison, if it came to that.

Gary didn't really believe that Jonny would slip up that badly, not of his own accord. Gary feared more that something – perhaps very serious – had slipped into him.

So, what then? It wasn't the first time he'd contemplated their lives post-Jonny.

They'd find their way back home. Sulk for a few weeks. Maybe forget music altogether, once and for all. While talented, Gary knew he wouldn't want to play with any other band, nor would Ginny. He also knew odds were against them without Jonny.

For all his bother, Jonny was the glue that held them all together. They'd come apart, completely unraveled over the year he spent at Wyckham. They weren't much less criminal than he was, just better at not getting caught. In Jonny's absence, they'd descended into drugs and thievery, musical stagnation and vicious arguments that would have ended most friendships.

When they finally all reunited, when they finally reclaimed Jonny, they finally had purpose again. As soon as they put him back together, he pulled them all back together as a band. And as friends.

Their talents and flaws all worked in harmony, all mutually dependent. Like the wheels of a car, if one blows out, the rest can only limp along and cause more damage along the way.

With Jonny gone, musical leadership would fall on Ginny, more talented than Gary or Reg by a long shot, second only to Jonny.

But it would take everything in their power to keep her from sliding back into the wide world of junkiedom – every mood, every up, every down requiring some remedy to make it happen. Gary didn't have that sort of power, and Reg wouldn't have the control to keep his own nose clean, let alone help with his sister. It took Ginny's ridiculous relationship with Jonny to keep her steady enough to stay in the clear.

And what would he, Gary, do? At least he could make use of his secondary talents, as a bouncer.

That's what he'd done, anyway, when the demands of Jonny's already unusual parole terms required all those he associated with have a job. And the band stuff hadn't counted.

Ginny had always helped their father around the auto shop, and had taken on more and more as his back – injured in the war – got worse with age. Reg worked the bookkeeping for the shop and drove a cab here and there.

Better at pounding on things than anything else, Gary rented himself out as a bouncer. This lucky work had helped them land some gigs in a few otherwise untouchable clubs.

It had been harder to find something for Jonny – nobody wanted anything to do with him. But Willem pulled some strings and got him set up sweeping and mopping the floors at the recording studio. Probably torture, being so close to music but having to do something else.

They all had some little thing outside the band, but something hollow and empty, compared to what they would shortly lose once and for all.

And now, a stage manager had come to chat with Willem. Gary clenched his jaw and held his breath. The whole band stood frozen as Willem wandered over.

"They're ready to cancel you," he informed them, in a mix of contempt and fulfilled prophecy.

Shooting the messenger had never tempted Gary more than right then and there. If only.

After everything, it had come to this. Blown all to hell after teetering on the cutting edge of success for so long. Ginny caught Gary's glance, the same look they all wore, a combination of helpless, uncertain, and testy. Willem stuck with just testy.

"I talked them into ten more minutes. I'm getting myself a drink or two or seven. See if I can't delay the record company noticing how you're fucking this up. You lot can just stay here and hope for a miracle."

Willem started to turn away, then thought of something else to add. "If you can't find me later, remember what I said on the plane..." And with that, the arrogant little bastard toddled off.

Wanker.

Ten minutes. Still time. Gary couldn't help it, he kept scouring the crowd for any sign of Jonny.

"I say we go on without 'im." Fucking Reg.

"If you could actually play guitar, maybe we could," Gary snapped. Reg really wasn't all that bad, he couldn't really have held his ground in the band otherwise. But compared to Jonny, near everyone sounded like a soggy broken ukulele tossed down an escalator.

But, really, it just might have to come to that, as much as Gary hated to admit it. They were here, and they'd never get another chance. It would take some convincing to get Ginny up there, but given the choice between something and nothing... Maybe they'd even get Trick in there, he knew the songs near as well as anybody.

Sure, everyone would notice that the loud-mouthed yob was nowhere to be seen. But at least they'd do more than nothing.

"This can't be happening, not again," Ginny breathed.

Gary blinked. Hard. His mind might've started working on the backup plan, but his eyes still scanned the crowd for any sign of their missing man. And, just when he might have given up hope, they finally landed on something.

Spiky blue hair, thin as a rail, stumbling toward them through the crowd.

Gary took a step forward in disbelief, his words stuck in his throat. Suddenly he couldn't move fast enough.

He pointed, "There he is!" He jumped the barrier, shouting again, "there he is!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ginny

Ginny studied the crowd for any sign of Jonny. She wished she couldn't remember the last time her stomach felt like this, but she could. She remembered each and every incident in vivid detail, and also remembered with great clarity the one thing that could take this desolate feeling away. She let herself close her eyes for a moment.

"This can't be happening, not again," she breathed.

"There he is!" Ginny's eyes snapped wide open at Gary's shout.

The sick, sour feeling in her stomach twisted and burst, flooding her body with adrenaline.

Gary'd better not be joking. If he were, she'd kill him without hesitation.

Gary pointed and jumped the barrier, still shouting as Ginny watched. She followed his direction and saw what she needed to see: The unmistakably Jonny-shaped form, in a loosening section of crowd, and crumpling slowly towards the floor.

And then Ginny was in the air, too, hardly a step behind Gary. Ginny nearly slammed into him when he stopped short in front of the broken heap that was Jonny on the floor.

Any relief Ginny might have felt shriveled up and died at the sight of Jonny's condition.

"Oh, *shit*." She pulled him to his feet while Gary kept the crowd at bay.

"ginny...?" Jonny exhaled weakly, unable to keep his legs under him. "issat you?"

She dragged him away from the crowd, supporting most of his weight, Gary enforcing some space around them.

She gave Jonny the once over as best she could while they moved.

He was senseless, from booze or a beating, Ginny couldn't tell right away. Maybe a large serving of each, history being what it was.

He had blood caked all over his face and shoulder, and more smears decorated his clothes all over. Even larger, deeper spatters spread under his jacket. Ginny checked to see if he had a knife sticking out of him, or some gash still gushing. Serious damage could easily hide under all those stains.

But at a glance, he appeared mostly intact. His clothes, however, were more ripped and torn than usual, and a half of a pair of broken handcuffs dangled locked around his wrist.

*Great*, Ginny thought. Whatever it was, it had involved the authorities.

"Christ, Jon, how long before the cops show up?"

"idznotwatchafink, luv" he slurred, and clung to her as she hauled him into safety, Gary covering their backs.

In the relative peace of their protected oasis, the band went through a well-known, practiced drill. Trick found a chair, Gary pulled out a bandanna, Reg liberated some ice from a half finished and forgotten drink.

Ginny sat Jonny down and started to clean up his face. The act had nothing to do with any nurturing sense, she didn't really have one of those. Jonny simply wouldn't let anyone else touch him when he got this bad, and Ginny stood the best chance of getting the story out of him.

And, well, he'd done similar for her, so...

"Not what I think? Well, what is it, then?"

"i dunno... not cops."

Ginny glanced up at Gary as he, Reg, and Trick formed a defensive half circle around her and Jonny. Their human barrier shut out prying eyes and anything else that might jump the barrier and want to hurt Jonny some more.

Jonny looked worse than Ginny'd seen in a long time, and he wouldn't look at her. He was shaking, hard, and his confusion went well beyond his usual same-old same-old.

"It has to be something, Jon." She struggled to keep her voice gentle and calm. She didn't dare think about getting on stage yet. If they had any chance, she couldn't spook him further by pressing for answers.

"I don't bloody know." The desperation that squeaked through Jonny's voice gave Ginny the chills. She spared another glance at the rest of the band, but nobody else had picked up on it. Of course Reg had heard the words well enough.

"Great," Reg scoffed. "His head's on the blink again. What a surprise."

Ginny shot Reg a glare and went back to cleaning up the blood. One thing at a time. She loved Jonny, but someday, he'd have to pull himself together. He'd have to become more than a disaster she simply couldn't turn away from.

But for now, as always, one thing at a time. She wiped up the blood and let him breathe a bit. Oddly, he had more than just crusted blood clinging to him, she realized. A scattering of small white crystals trickled from the folds of his clothes. Like sand after a day at the beach.

"What the hell is this, Jon? Salt?"

She didn't think he could get even more pale, or shrink even further into himself. But somehow he managed to do just that. She sighed.

One. Thing. At a time.

She'd cleaned down to skin on his face, neck and shoulder to find hardly a scrape or scratch beneath. Odd for him to be mostly whole and unscathed under it all. She paused. If he hadn't bled out all this, then who had?

"Jonny, all this blood," she kept her voice even and calm, "how much of it is yours?"

He finally glanced up at her, his eyes full of terror.

The chair wouldn't allow him to shrink back any further, so he started to slide off the seat. Gary stepped over to that side, to keep him from falling.

"Easy, now, Jonny," Gary said as he rested a hand on Jonny's shoulder.

Jonny near jumped out of his own skin. He looked like a trapped animal. Cornered, but too scared and wounded to fight.

The last time he'd been that afraid of anything, pulled away like that ... Ginny felt her heart break all over again as she thought about it.

Two years ago. His first days after Wyckham.

One.

Thing.

At a time.

Ginny took his hands, shaking and freezing cold, and tried to look into his eyes. He wouldn't look at her for more than a glance. What the fuck was he hiding?

"Jonny?" No response.

She looked up at Gary. "Get him a fucking cigarette."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jonny

Jonny couldn't remember feeling so relieved, at all, ever, just to see his friends. Something bad had gone down, he wasn't sure what, or how bad. He had managed to get back to the club, he had no idea how or from where. He'd only just come to his senses while pushing through the blurs and shadows of the crowd. Everything leading up to that was still dark.

*Everything.*

*Darker* than dark.

He'd had one thought, it reached back as far as he could remember – get to the band. If he could just get back to his friends, it would all be alright. Because it had to be. Tonight it really had to be.

Now he was here, under their protective shield again, with no answers for their questions. Only more fear.

His nerves were a wreck, everything inside him shook. He didn't want to look at his them, he didn't want to look at anyone or *anything*. Something might tell him where he'd been, remind him what had happened.

Even Ginny's touch, the one thing that might soothe him, even her divine touch sent his wits scampering. And now Gary had just about scared him to death, just with his hand on his shoulder.

"I– I just don't know," he repeated, sinking his head into his arms as he shrunk further away.

The world had stopped spinning around his head, but he still didn't feel safe, even surrounded by his friends.

Too many questions, too much time missing. Too much shock still coursing through his body. What the hell had left him like this? Even the worst police brutality or a severe punch-up would not shake him up this badly, he was certain of that. But what, then? He didn't want to know.

Deep breath. *Pull yourself together.*

"Where's Paul?"

Jonny flinched and squeezed Ginny's hand, hard. Whatever thin veil of composure he might have recovered went to pieces again. Trick's question had punched a hole right through it.

*Paul.*

Shit, was that something else he should know? He had to calm down. Maybe if he focused on this thread, on Paul, he wouldn't have to figure out what had happened to himself. That sounded better than anything else right now.

*Where had he even last seen Paul?* He felt his lips moving, but couldn't fill them with any words.

"Ok, let's just give him a moment," Ginny rescued him, with her rich, melodic voice.

She put a cigarette in his hand. Yes. His angel of mercy, his saving grace. Everything he needed in life flowed from her... right up to the point where she couldn't get the matches to work.

She fumbled with the pack, struck one, and swore as it sparked a bit but failed to light. And then repeated the act with a second match, to the same effect.

Long seconds passed, as match after match refused to light for Ginny.

Jonny had a sudden, deep-seated fear that she might ask him for his lighter. The one she'd given him. *Why?* For some reason, he didn't dare reach into his pocket to see if it was there.

The group's patience grew thin in the face of his silence and Ginny's fumbling. Jonny might've grabbed the things himself, if he could stop his own hands from shaking. But he didn't have the right to be impatient, nor the calm to manage any better. Hell, the shakes in her hands had probably spread from his.

Another match. Another profanity, louder than the last.

With that, the rest of his friends broke their silence. They had to fill the air with something, while he worked his way back to the world and Ginny tried to make fire.

Jonny closed his eyes tight, tried to shut out everything except for the taste of unlit anticipation. But he couldn't. He covered under their plague of banter like a man in freezing rain with neither coat nor umbrella.

"You really know how to make enemies, mate," Gary started. "Musta got those nuts out there pretty wound up to leave you like this."

*No. Not the protestors*, Jonny thought, loud and clear, to his surprise. He didn't know how he knew it, but he *knew* it. He tried to shake his head, but the wobbling made it hurt again.

"The whole world just hates him except for us five." Trick probably had the truth of it. Jonny didn't care, but it'd be nice if fewer of them were driven to violence over it.

"That's you four, I'm still on the fence." Reg. Reg always said things like that. But through all the years, he'd never stabbed Jonny in the back, nor done a thing to actually hurt him, not once. Reg might hold a grudge out for all to see, but he'd always stood by Jonny's side, even as he railed on against him.

His friends. One missing.

"*Damnit!*" Ginny still hadn't got a single match to light. "What's that on your necklace?" A simple question, to distract him while she swore her way through the sodding matches. Jonny's hand touched the necklace, and remembered the guitar-pick charm Paul had offered him.

"...P-Paul. He gave it to me."

"One of his luck things, then?" Jonny nodded. "He did a decent job of it, skipping the tacky shit he usually uses. Didn't do much good, though, did it, luv?"

He would've chuckled if he could. But another minute of this and he might burst into tears.

*Please, Gin-Gin*, he thought. *Just please light the goddamned fag for me!*

All Jonny wanted was one fucking cigarette first, before he had to think any more. Until he'd had one, he'd be useless, and they knew it. He could feel all their eyes on him as his head split further into two.

Ginny didn't have a lot of matches left to try.

"Paul didn't get mixed up in the same shit as you, did he?" Trick. Jonny couldn't fault Trick for pushing. Jonny was their only lead, and Trick had a right to worry. But damnit if his head didn't throb just trying to think.

Jonny sniffed and shook his head again. The act stirred up more shooting pain, and he gasped. The unlit cigarette fell to his lap.

No, Trick was off on that one, Paul had not been with him. Like Gary's comment about the protestors. Jonny didn't know how he knew, but he just knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

"Paul's too smart for that," he said quietly, and put the cigarette to his lips again. Jonny wished he himself was too smart for that.

Little prickles of pain danced just behind his forehead, growing and expanding, threatening him with another lightning attack. His insides felt completely shredded.

But this was important. Paul was important, he had to try.

Jonny rummaged back to his last memory, the last scrap he could make sense of, every piece agony along the way. He gripped his head in his hands, and bit down on the still-unlit cigarette.

"We were at the bar, Paul went off for a piss. After that, I don't know."

His voice trailed into a whimper at the end, as his head throbbed. *How long did it take to light a fucking cigarette?!*

- - - -

The conversation went on about Paul, without Jonny's input. Their words, the lights, the smells, everything assaulted him and sent the pain worming further into his skull.

Ginny pulled the last match from the pack.

"Paul might be smart, but he's also cocky enough to get in over his head," Reg said.

"Maybe he's just lost track of time." Gary trying to reassure Trick. Not bloody likely.

Jonny finally heard the flare of a match. He opened his eyes with gratitude and relief.

Ginny offered the flame to him and he guided the end of his cigarette towards it.

"If he takes much longer, he'll be too late," Ginny said, about Paul, looking over her shoulder at the rest of the group.

The words distorted as she said them, though. She said more words after them, but those just fell apart. Everything shifted and spun around again. Ginny's face, the club, all his friends' voices faded to miles away. Jonny gripped the sides of the chair.

Red, glowing eyes, a mouthful of jagged fangs stared back at him, holding the flame in front of his face. Not Ginny.

*"They'll be too late."*

The echo of evil hissed in his ear, nails on chalkboard with a full sound system amplifying it.

"wha--?" he whimpered and backed away.

*"THEY'LL BE TOO LATE!"*

The vision lurched at him, at his throat. He could see no sign of Ginny or anything else beyond it. He felt cold breath on his neck and teeth ripping through his veins.

"GAH! Geh-GET AWAY!!!"

Jonny sprang up suddenly, knocking the chair over. He staggered backward, and scattered his friends like bowling pins.

The disjointed memory withered in and out of view. The words "TOO LATE!" screamed and scraped inside his skull, and his friends' shouts pried their way in from the outside. Jonny groaned and clutched his head to keep it from splitting wide open.

"FUCK!"

"What is it!?"

"What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Ginny! What'd you do?"

Their demands buried him like an avalanche, he didn't know who shouted what. He slipped and tripped backwards as he struggled under their weight, until Gary caught him by the shoulders.

And then Ginny was there, taking his head into her hands, trying to get him to look at her. The world stopped reeling, the hideous vision vanished as quickly as it had attacked. Something in his stomach squeezed, hard.

Jonny pulled away, brushing them off as he almost lost his balance again. His every nerve felt raw, every touch sent his skin screaming. At least the cigarette was lit, and somehow he'd managed to hang onto it.

He turned his back on his friends and walked a few paces. They let him have his space, for now.

The hallucination was gone and had taken any specifics with it. Like a lot of his memories, he didn't want it back. He sucked deeply on the cigarette and was surprised to feel

tears welling up in his eyes. An emotional response still tumbled down the rabbit hole after the vision. He sensed the distant echo of a deep, piercing loss.

In that instant he knew, whatever had happened, he had genuinely feared for his life.

Maybe he should tell them that...

"I thought – *koff koff* – thought they – *koff* –"

...if he just could get the words past this cough. Not smoke, something in his throat?

Sharp, wet gravel. "*koff!* t-they were – *koff koff!* – were gonna kill me ..."

"*What? WHO!?*"

His friends, they meant well, they just wanted to help.

"*Where were you?*"

But their interrogation hit him like a tidal wave. Higher and harder, even more demanding.

"*WHO, Jonny! What did they look like?*"

"*Not those fucking protestors, was it?*"

But Jonny was at an even greater loss to answer than before.

"*C'mon, Jon, there's gotta be something!*"

He was already drowning, didn't they know? Couldn't they see?

"*Jonny! You can't just say things like that! Tell us!*"

He couldn't get his throat clear even if he had an answer. He pulled the cigarette from his mouth, and saw the end speckled with blood.

"*shite.*"

The coughing fit started about a mile under his feet, gaining speed and hitting his gut from below. The force flooded his vision with starbursts and wracked his entire body. He coughed, spat, vomited, and maybe even sneezed up blood.

*Effuck, really?*

Jonny had no illusions about what two or three packs a day would do to him, but he thought he'd have a few more years before the smoking ate away his lungs.

Jonny hit the floor hard and felt Ginny close behind, kneeling next to him, helpless but willing. Horrible rasps scraped up the insides of his lungs and throat. The hacking had hardly eased when the stage manager showed up.

"You got three minutes to either get on stage or get the hell out of this club."

And the night's failure was complete.

Jonny tried to calm the spasms down as Trick, Gary and Reg pled his case for him. The hacking had left his eyes full of burning tears he couldn't see through.

"What? You gotta be joking!"

"He's just been done over!"

"Just a few more minutes!"

Jonny breathed in short, ragged gulps. He crumpled forward and put his head down. He was too weak to turn his head, let alone contribute to the argument.

"The last band's ready, over on the other stage, we're more than willing to end this thing without you."

"Look at him, he needs a hospital!"

The word struck a nerve. Jonny clung to it, used it to pull himself out of his trauma and into the conversation. He gasped in another breath through grit and bleach.

"No hospitals," he gargled. Fucking hospitals were full of fucking doctors.

"I don't care either way, I gotta show to run. I've been more than generous, and they're getting pissed off out there. Drag what's left of him up there, or get the fuck out."

*Fuck.*

There it was. The tipping point. Jonny exhaled and closed his eyes again, and willed himself to stop shaking. He drew another breath, and only choked a little this time. *Now what?*

The floor was cool against his forehead, Ginny's hand warm and firm on his back. The ultimatum made everything simple somehow, crystal clear. They'd either come here to fail or to succeed, and they'd never get another chance. They had to get it together. Right now.

He took a deep, slow breath. And then another, and another, each smoother than the last. His trembling calmed, his head started to clear ever so slightly. After three more shaky but improving breaths, he thought he might sit up.

He gripped Ginny for support and pushed himself to his knees. He finished the cigarette in one last, long drag and flicked it away.

With another deep breath, he wiped blood from his chin. He could almost breathe normal now.

"I – hegm – I can do it."

"What, you must be joking!"

Jonny looked at Ginny, the comment struck him as odd. *No, I'm not.* The rest of them looked at him the same way. What, did they really think he'd let them haul him off to hospital? The crisis had come to its peak, they had only one course of action now. With that clarity, all else fell away.

Whatever happened before didn't matter. He was here.

He'd spent most of his life screwing things up, badly, for himself and for his friends. But they'd finally made their way into the clear. Tonight's when it all starts, for real, everything being all right. He wouldn't let anything ruin it, or change its course.

Because that's what Jonny did. He hung on and hung on until something else happened, better or worse, shitty or not. And then he pulled himself together and went on with whatever was next. It's what he did, and he'd do it until the day he died.

The clock was ticking and the band had put up with far too much on his behalf, long before they'd arrived here. He had to pull through, for them. They watched as he pushed himself to his feet, each move needed a little less help from Ginny than the one before.

"didn't come this far to *-koff koff-* quit here."

Jonny steadied himself on his own now, first pulling his own self together and then all of them together as a band.

He couldn't do a lot right, but this was one of the things he could do, even in his tattered state. The music would keep his head straight for a while, if he could just get up there and get started. The music had carried him through at times when even Ginny hadn't been enough.

"We have to do this. We've played in rougher shape." It wasn't completely true, but still. Close enough.

"Well, it is now or never," Gary agreed.

Jonny scratched at some dried blood on his left wrist, should he be more worried about its condition? It seemed ok. But where had the blood come from?

"Sixty seconds, assholes!" The stage manager shouted.

They slogged towards the stage like condemned criminals to the gallows. Trick handed Jonny his guitar in silence.

"Thanks," Jonny muttered, wishing he had more to say. Trick deserved answers, but Jonny didn't have any. Paul really was smart enough, right?

There would be time for that later.

Right now, the '57 Strat felt good in Jonny's hands, its familiarity calming him in ways neither Ginny nor cigarettes nor anything else could ever manage. The worries of the world receded as if by magic. He held the thing tight against his chest for a moment.

This hunk of wood and strings and electronics reminded him who he was. What he was here for.

Something awakened in him. Something that got brushed aside somehow, in the more traumatic moments of his life, when it wasn't right in front of him. The music. His awareness of the music. His soul, his purpose. The whole goddamned point of his existence.

Completely calm and detached now, he looked back as his friends gathered to follow him.

Ginny consoled Trick as she passed him, just a few steps behind. "Paulie's still just out there looking, so don't you worry, ok?"

"I know, Ginny. Just go play. Show these motherfuckers how it's done."

Next Reg turned to Gary with a lot less optimism.

"Of course we're gonna sound like shit, you know, with him like this."

Jonny flexed his hand again. Where *had* that blood come from?

"Well, then you can go back to your dream of being an accountant when this is all done, eh?"

His friends. He almost managed a smile to himself. Almost. But then he thought about Paul again. He wanted to think everything would be alright. But deep inside he wondered if things would ever be the same again.

That would have to wait. They had a show to do, and Paul wouldn't want them to blow this.

A warmth washed over Jonny from the inside as the heat from the stage lights warmed his skin. Here, on a stage, he was safe, apart from the world, apart from his damaged past, and one with his closest friends. Here and only here, he held some power over his life, some control over his destiny.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Viper

*"Still no sign of Marion anywhere. Daemon and Feather haven't returned."*

Viper delivered Whirlwind's update to his inside crew ... and let Bricks handle the rest. Even Viper found himself agitated in Marion's continued absence.

Could Marion really have stayed in, stayed away all three nights? There were explanations for that, but somehow, none of them rang true, no matter how feasible. She *could* have had a hangover. Sebastian *might* have stepped in and put an end to her habit.

Hell, Marion might have her own private view, in here somewhere, if the club catered to the bloodsucking population as much as he might suspect. But Marion was into chaos. As a fear junkie, she'd crave it even more. She'd want to be in the thick of it, feeding off the energy.

Where in hell was she?

Viper had never been this wrong. He'd developed this hunt with Carrios himself. Bricks, Thorn, all of them, all the connections, all the intelligence on Marion indicated this was the perfect place to pick up her trail.

There wasn't much show left to go. Two, maybe three hours, tops, if they were lucky. Assuming the show continued on its planned schedule. That was a dice-roll, too.

The overall scene inside and out had taken a turn for the worse, building more and more tension and excitement. This whole thing would end with an explosive bang. Just over the past hour, the protest outside had clamored louder than ever. Here inside, the bands had played back with increasing vehemence.

The more the night dragged on, the more Viper considered pulling the plug on the whole thing. Even if Marion did show, the chaos could keep them from doing anything useful at all.

With every band, every song, it became more and more dangerous to engage the hunt. They'd have to chase Marion even further out before they'd have a place to trap her, safe enough from civilians.

Viper wondered once again if Daemon and Feather might be closing in on the night's target.

If that were the case, what a nightmare, only two agents out investigating and the rest of them here at DeeDee's. He couldn't change that now, no matter how much he wanted to. Never mind that Daemon had undermined his order, taking Feather instead of Blaze, he'd deal with the insubordination only after the sun had risen and the hunt closed for the night. In the meantime, he had to work with what he had.

"So we got nothin' again, is that it?" Ripper's agitation had grown to more than a nuisance.

*Fucking recruit.*

"The night's not over," Viper growled, "she'll show."

Viper flashed a look at Bricks, who then stepped in to prepare Ripper and Bullet for another patrol around the club. Viper'd made the right call, keeping Bricks inside with him, though for different reasons now than before. While Viper did have a deep well of patience, Bricks had a much deeper well of diplomacy.

Just more evidence that outside recruits lacked the instincts you built when your family had been tracking vampires for generations.

Viper opened up his ears and eyes to the room again. Bitching would not bring Marion, but vigilance would make sure they didn't miss her if she did show. The music had died down for a few minutes between bands, this time for a longer intermission than with the others. A commotion on the side of the stage caught his eye.

Instantly, Viper knew something was off. He could tell just by looking at them.

He ran through the night's line up in his head, and looked down at the flyer to confirm it: They'd come to the penultimate act. The Lost Keys. The band whose lead man had gone missing, and had presently shown up looking like he'd lost a knife fight.

Any number of things could have caused his problems, lots of explanations that didn't involve vampires. Still, Viper noted the roadie from earlier was not among those pulling the band together. He also remembered the detail about the spider necklace.

"Something's not right," Viper interrupted Brick's strategy. The team followed his gaze towards the stage. "That kid, getting on stage. All the blood on him."

"I don't know," Bullet crossed her arms. "These shitheads fight all the time."

"No," Viper looked back down at the flyer. "He's the one that disappeared earlier, the one that roadie was looking for." Viper looked back at the stage. "...something clearly went wrong for him, that's for sure."

"That's just the asshole who picked a fight with that cult out there!" Ripper grabbed the flyer, took a quick look, then shoved it back at Viper. "Yeah. Yesterday afternoon. Half the crazies out there is 'cuz of that idiot."

Viper and Bricks exchanged glances. They knew a lot of shit had gone down around DeeDee's event these past few days. But they hadn't paid close attention to the daytime details. They'd spent their energies as they always did: Combing through new intelligence from their spy network, looking for signs of vampires, missing persons, odd hospital reports, their usual. And scouring through their current mission, to make sure they weren't missing anything.

"Yeah, I'm with Ripper here," Bullet said, looking over Viper's shoulder at the flyer. "They must have had a private moment with him."

Viper squinted back across the room. Ripper's explanation made sense. A lot of sense. But something in Viper's gut told him there was more to it than that. He glanced at Bricks again.

Bricks took another look back at the stage, then back at Viper. He shook his head at Viper almost imperceptibly, making sure the others didn't see. Viper knew, it would take more to convince him on this.

Viper looked back at the stage again. He never doubted his gut. It had never failed him before, not once over his whole career. But his gut had just kept them all here for three nights now with no Marion. First time for everything, right?

Bricks took another look at the stage as well, but Viper could tell: he bought Ripper's explanation. He was just going the extra mile because he knew Viper's record.

They knew each other too well.

Aside from marrying Viper's sister, Bricks had been one of his mentors, and a very good one. But that wellspring of guidance had dried up quickly as had all the others, as Viper had surpassed all his teachers, just as his sister had. Now their roles had all but reversed.

Bricks still had a few natural talents that Viper preferred to leave to someone else. He made a great second-in-command. Enforcing. Making sure the shit got done.

But Bricks could not think outside the box nearly as well as Viper, could not pick up on fainter threads, or see a whole puzzle coming together from only a few pieces. Viper's instincts had made him one of the most successful and respected members of their ranks. Bricks might not see the same things Viper did, but he trusted Viper's intuition because he'd seen it work so many times.

Bricks did not begrudge Viper his talents and achievements, and Viper utilized his ability with professionalism and grace, without arrogance or boasting. Those born into this life had no ego in the matter of wiping out all vampires, no personal ambition, not if they wanted to succeed here. They learned their strengths and learned how to use them best within a team.

Their eyes met, and Viper knew. Bricks would follow his lead, if it came down to it. But Viper also knew he couldn't let them get distracted from their current, high-risk mission. They had bigger fish to fry, should Marion ever show up.

Viper squinted at the stage again. The music was getting to him. A migraine had taken root inside his head, making him lose focus, tense up.

"Keep half an eye on him," Viper said as the Lost Keys began to play. "But only half – Marion's still our primary target."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### Willem

Willem couldn't remember the last time he felt so relieved. The band was on stage. That stupid, god-damned four-car pile-up of a band was on stage. They hadn't let him down. And, as if it were even possible, they sounded better than ever.

But it wasn't all good news. On stage, musical lightning raged, but side stage, the storm cloud of questions and confusion still hung in the air. Charlie Patterson of Iconoclast Records rumbled with the first sounds of thunder.

"I thought you had him straightened out, Willem."

"I did." snapped Willem. "The rest of 'em keep letting him go all crooked again."

Charlie stuck like another massive thorn in Willem's side. In his head, Charlie carefully recorded and filed away every offense the band had ever heaped upon them. He took almost, but not quite, as much care and diligence with it as Willem did in his own mental tally. And for that reason, Willem resented the hell out of him.

Willem could not deny that their brightest star had shown up only just in time, adorned liberally with blood and accessorized with broken handcuffs. As far as Willem was

concerned, the band had blown it at least as much as Jonny had, they hadn't watched him close enough. Willem couldn't take on much of the surveillance himself. Too much proximity between he and Jonny made for unproductive, explosive turbulence for everyone.

As if Willem needed another nuisance, Frankie Weller now appeared, Charlie's business partner and late to the game as usual.

"Good lord, what's happened to him this time?"

Willem wanted to like Frankie, as he was much easier to deal with than Charlie. But really, he was just a big, soft lackwit with almost zero business sense. As such, Willem couldn't stand him one bit. Thankfully Trick stepped in so Willem could duck the burden of having to talk to the man, at least for now.

"He just showed up like that, Frankie, we don't know what's happened. They had to get on stage before we could figure it out."

"Poor sod."

Willem stifled a scoff. Unlike Willem and Charlie, Frankie actually saw Jonny as more than a golden goose, an actual person deserving of some kindness. This trait just made Willem loathe Frankie all the more. "Just can't stay in the clear, can he? It's like he's cursed or something. But it's got to lift one of these days, eh?"

*Not soon enough*, thought Willem. There was enough curse to go around for the lot of them.

"Cursed?" Charlie exclaimed. "He *is* a curse – on us!" Even Charlie could barely tolerate Frankie sometimes. "We can't hang on to a band that keeps blowing up in our faces." That was one of Charlie's most commonly said things, and it made Willem shudder every time.

Willem had had his fingers crossed ever since he stumbled upon this sorry lot as a bunch of teenagers. But it had gotten worse and worse each time, each incident. Frankie was ever-willing to hang in there, but Charlie had started looking for an excuse to drop them before the ink had dried on the contract.

Willem wanted to reassure them all, persuade everyone it would be alright, but he couldn't half convince himself of that.

"At least he's not too fucked up to play!" Willem could at least remind them of the bright side. "I mean, just lissen to that! Did you ever think he'd just keep getting better?"

The magic in the way the boy played kept them all glued to their places in the band's life, however reluctantly. At least it had so far. There were only so many times Willem could play that trump card, someday it would fail him.

"Mind-blowing, sure," Charlie agreed, "but how long before the police show up?"

Willem's stomach sank a bit more at that. He couldn't keep his relief afloat any longer without another drink. Or two. Or seven. But he couldn't tear himself away from watching and waiting for whatever might unfold on stage. If only he could just escape these sideshow gawkers and watch in private agony by himself.

"Patrick, where's your friend Paul?" Frankie the pillock even cared about the band's arsebandit crew. Willem rolled his eyes at the floor.

Willem had noticed Paul's absence, but he'd planned to ignore it for now, until it was time to pack things up. At that point, he could officially dock the little shirtlifter's pay.

"He went out lookin' for Jonny when we couldn't find him, he probably just lost track of time. He'll be back when he sees what time it is..." Trick didn't quite believe it, Willem could tell. They all clung to a little thread of hope that things weren't about to go all belly up.

"Well he'd better show up soon, I'd hate for you to have to pack everything up yourself!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DeeDee

"Son of a bitch! Someone's Turned one of my contestants?"

DeeDee swore as she looked down from her private box above the crowd.

"Apparently, Lady DeeDee," Geoffrey agreed. But of course he'd agree. His ten years of training and service to DeeDee had seen to that.

The raging chaos below had DeeDee in a mad whirl, trying to decide which part of the disaster pissed her off the most.

Oh, DeeDee did love chaos, but only of her own making, and not if it interfered with her own chaotic plans. And someone *had* interfered, she could hardly believe her eyes.

Someone had Turned *one of her contenders*.

Someone had Turned him *without permission*.

Someone had Turned him and *let him loose on her fucking stage, covered in blood*.

That someone would pay very dearly, and not just at DeeDee's hands.

She signaled down to her head of security to send a team up to her. The fledgeling was on stage, not going anywhere without her notice, but she should get someone working on

it. Her hidden layer of staff and security would already be investigating, if they were paying attention. DeeDee had no reason to go off willy-nilly to find the culprit, *aside from the need to scratch this itch by finding the root of her anger.*

*Someone had Turned one of her contenders.*

DeeDee hadn't set her heart on Turning one of the guests, she'd just said that to get under Dominic's blueblood skin. After all, none may have proved worthy in the end. But she had hoped to find a *potential* Candidate – or a few – after evaluating the bands up close.

Now some asshole had gone and spoiled the game for her.

This band, the one from London, now had a fucking vampire as their lead. He'd been out in the sun only this morning – *Impossible!* Turning could take days, and full recovery weeks, even. Yet here he was, inconceivable, on her stage, in all his vampire glory.

Nobody but another vampire or some particularly astute Sal would see him for what he was. But to those who knew what to look for, he practically glowed with it. Definitely a *strong* Turn.

She seethed at the embarrassment. Sebastian would know. *Everyone* would know. Hell, everyone here already knew.

*Someone had Turned him without permission.*

Any vampire in New York needed permission from one of the three Keepers – DeeDee, Silas, or Sebastian – before they could attempt to Turn a mortal. If the Turning succeeded, the Sponsor vampire had to hand the fledgling over to the Keepers, for indoctrination. Everyone knew that. This wasn't some free-form playground like Boston. New York *enforced* their rules, with explicit severity and commitment, for all to see.

During orientation, the fledgeling was Marked and Imprinted, accompanied and monitored at all times. Feeding, sleeping, and waking were rigorously controlled and governed. Even the Sponsor vampire could not visit without permission.

The indenture typically lasted ten years, but could stretch longer if a vampire Turned a Candidate without pre-clearance. In such a case, the errant vampire would then join the fledgling in servitude.

No other Keepers took such extremes in preparing new vampires for their society.

DeeDee would have known if either of her co-rulers had approved this Turn. The party responsible for this rogue fledgling would suffer great consequences, that was always a good time. Beyond that, someone – like DeeDee – might then Claim the fledgling as her own. She'd have just cause, with him parading around her event like this.

DeeDee should feel happy about all of that. But as much as she would enjoy it all, she very much wanted to Turn someone *herself*. It had been so long.

She'd tried a few times over the past few years, as Geoffrey neared completion. But, as Dominic had so rudely pointed out, the process had failed each time.

She'd ruined a perfectly wonderful Neo Classicist painter, wasted a stunningly talented poet, and lost one of the best Shakespearian actors she'd ever known.

All had just slipped through her fingers as she tried to Turn them.

Of course, the fault did not lie within DeeDee herself for these failures. The changing times worked against vampires in many ways. A mortal had to cling to life long enough to survive the jump to immortality. Every decade it got harder and harder to find Candidates capable of this.

That didn't stop the gossip that DeeDee might have lost the ability to Turn new vampires, and the jokes that she might kill all the good Candidates if she didn't stop trying. These misguided scandalmongers had secured themselves a place in the Studio far below, to ponder their folly for at least a decade. Most of those candy-asses had never even tried to *find* someone to Turn, let alone attempt a Turning themselves.

You had to find someone truly willing, and that required full vampire disclosure. You couldn't Turn a Candidate against their will. They had to know what they were getting into, because they had to fight for it with every fiber of their being, through and beyond death. If only they didn't have to consent, DeeDee might have an army. She had tried once, against all wisdom a few hundred years ago, knowing the lore of all those who'd asked it trying. She found it completely and irrevocably true, just like history warned. The unwilling mortal had died, loud and messy, and his death nearly pulled her right down with him. DeeDee had survived, but holy shit, only by the skin of her teeth. It had fucked her up for weeks.

DeeDee knocked back the last of her drink and scowled again at the mess beneath her.

At least this one had survived. No matter who'd Turned him, she'd see if she could scoop him up, Claim him as her own. She could charge that as penalty for Turning him and *letting him loose on her fucking stage*. Her glass smashed as she tightened her fist around it. She threw the remains to the floor.

She simply had to have a new feather in her cap, another dazzling *creative*. Another *trophy*. She needed new material soon, so she could work *her* art.

This one would do, quite nicely.

After all, that was a major part of hosting this insane event. She needed someone to take Geoffrey's place.

With his ten-year anniversary at hand, Geoffrey would take the tests soon. If he passed, he'd gain full vampire citizenship. As early as next week, even.

The ten years had passed so quickly. But he would bear her imprint, and her *sigil*, for as long as she required it. A medallion of dangerous gold hung from a thin necklace around his neck. It bore the runic symbols for "harvest" and "ice" – DeeDee's nickname, from ages past. She was the early frost determined to ruin the last harvest and claim it for her own. The medallion declared that Geoffrey was hers, and his songs would always belong to her.

She closed her eyes and listened to the music from below. If she didn't look at the scene, she could almost enjoy herself. She hadn't heard talent like this in centuries. This one could do more with a guitar than Geoffrey could ever do with his violin.

Yes. He'd do very nicely.

DeeDee might even pass him off as her own Turned. She could, if she and her co-Keepers kept the lid on the truth of who'd Turned him, once they caught the perpetrator.

Sebastian and Silas probably wouldn't care, they might encourage it, as evidence of her might and prowess above the rank and file of New York. It would show them all she still had it, even if she didn't. The masses might question letting him appear on stage in front of all these mortals, everyone knew DeeDee never would allow that. But she could wave that off, make up some excuse and Sebastian would have her back.

Heh. That'd have Dominic sputtering out his own spleen. A smile almost worked its way through her fury.

Then she looked down at the fledgling again. *On her fucking stage, covered in blood.* She scowled all the harder now.

There'd be hell to pay for his appalling condition. He looked like he'd been allowed to hunt – and badly. It disgusted her and made her uneasy, the sight of him in public like that.

Neither DeeDee nor her co-Keepers could tolerate sloppy hunting or uncontrolled cravings, even from the newest of vampires. They simply couldn't risk it here, the way the Sals plagued the whole city. Every single bloody murder led the enemy closer to some vampire's doorstep.

And so the three Keepers went to great lengths to make sure every vampire behaved. As Prime Keeper, Sebastian insisted on it, with no exceptions. This started with training the fledglings, but any of New York's vampire citizens could be sentenced to a period of conditioning, should their loyalty or habits appear questionable.

DeeDee had never seen Sebastian cut anyone any slack until his sluggish response to Marion's recent behaviors. And even that temporary reprieve would come to an end very soon.

Their ruthless measures produced a complete, undiluted loyalty to New York's vampire leadership. Sebastian required the utmost allegiance. His opponents paid a high price for defying him or any of his allies.

No other Keeper demanded such from every citizen.

But Sebastian was like no other Keeper. He had plans that went far beyond mere survival. DeeDee had made these plans with him, and they then shared them with Silas when he joined forces seventy years ago.

The three of them knew that vampires were superior to humankind, and that someday they must take their place as lords over the mortal cattle. They would lead vampirekind to rise up and assume their rightful status. They could then all do as they wished freely in the

streets. But not before the proper time. Until then, Sebastian secured the respect and obedience of all, for the day when he'd need an army.

That respect and obedience came through the system DeeDee and Sebastian had perfected, and the distinctive methods Silas had brought to the table.

She and Sebastian had experimented separately at first, and then together over hundreds of years. Each had abducted many of their brethren and stolen many fledglings to use as test subjects. It was easier back then, before worldwide instantaneous communication, before skyscrapers and security cameras, before Keepers had emerged in response to the needs of vampire civilization.

To this day, nobody but the three of them knew the breakthroughs she and Sebastian had achieved in their studies. Those who'd witnessed it had either ashed it or had successfully *converted* to their ideology and needs. Like Jillian there, silent and static next to vibrant Geoffrey. DeeDee had crushed her into a mindless doll.

DeeDee didn't do that with her shining stars, her creators. She had to leave them a *little* of their own mind, otherwise the creativity got fucked up and then what use would they be?

But Jillian was nothing of the kind. DeeDee was at a loss for how the plain jane had even survived Turning, with clearly so little to live for. She'd come to DeeDee as an established vampire of over two hundred years, looking for some spice. Oh, DeeDee had spiced her up, alright. A handmaid to DeeDee for a hundred and fifty years was surely spicier than anything she'd seen in her previous two hundred.

Her name wasn't Jillian at the time. DeeDee had renamed her a few times over the years.

She wore DeeDee's sigil, too, in a more permanent manner. DeeDee had welded the gold band with the runes around her neck, and seared the mark into the flesh over her heart in a manner which couldn't be healed without DeeDee's say-so.

DeeDee's security team arrived in answer to her summons. Four Elites – her top tier hidden layer of staff and security, not her run-of-the-mill bouncers – stood at attention. They knew what this was about, and weren't fooling around.

"I need to know everything about this band's activities today. Every detail, what they ate, how many times they shit, how many times they fucking blinked. All of them, not just the fucking bloodsucker spectacle in front."

"And I want a list of every vampire who showed up tonight, and any seen skulking outside."

DeeDee settled back into her seat. With this course of action, she could let go of her anger and enjoy the show.

So long as things didn't get any worse.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### Marion

The shots didn't startle Marion as much as the words. She'd just barely sunk her teeth into the one Goldilocks when the door burst open and shouted her own name at her. She felt the guns aiming before she heard the *blam* of gunshots.

She'd expected the others, but since when did Goldilockses have guns? And know her by name? She almost couldn't handle the intensity, with her Fear-boosted senses.

Instinct drove her through the window before she could even think, before Dessert had even hit the floor.

Around the third *blam*, one foot on the bed, the other halfway through the window, that's when it hit her. Not a bullet, but that moment of realization. Her left foot on the *empty* bed.

*Dinner.*

Dinner's leftovers were *gone*.

But she couldn't stop now. Momentum crashed her through the window. She landed, sprang into a sprint and kept going until she was three blocks away. Hardly a few seconds.

Holy shit, that was *insane*. Fucking Sals? How had they even found her lair? And why only two of them? What an insult.

She crouched behind a dumpster and sniffed the air. The Sals hadn't chased her. Party poopers. Well, there were only two, they'd know better than to chase a bloodrunner. Maybe they weren't really on to her, like everyone thought. They would've had a battalion waiting in that room, in the alley, all around the building. Instead, a pathetic two of them were probably trying to save the Dessert mouse that had found its way in.

And what the fuck was up with Dinner? She hadn't eaten him up, she had plans to dance him until the flesh fell from his bones. Where the fuck did he go?

The Sals couldn't have moved him, the timing was all off. Could Dessert have moved him? That didn't sound right, why would he return to mouse around? Had some still unknown invader plucked him out of her web? Geez, her web hadn't had so much traffic since that family of five kept her amused for a month.

All this shit might upset a lot of other vampires, but Marion had felt the guns aimed at her before the shooters even knew they'd shoot. She always knew when a weapon was pointed at her, that was her thing. She'd started moving before the rounds even left the guns, even jacked up on Fear. Or *especially* jacked up on Fear.

Either way, time to head back and exterminate her pests. She would learn the Sals' purpose before they'd breathed their last breaths. It had been too long since she'd tortured a hunter for more than just the fun of it.

She stuck her head out from her hiding place, sniffed the air again, and her plans for the night shifted yet again.

She growled low, she did not like what she smelled. She'd had just about enough surprises for the night. Any more of this bullshit and she'd miss DeeDee's finale.

It took a moment to separate the scents enough to be sure. With the Fear in her, the odor blend included things from a mile away in every direction, she had the peel away the layers before she could make sense of it all. She plucked out the nearest and strongest and most meaningful, and tracked them.

Sniff.

*Blood.* Dead, cold, but recent blood.

Sniff.

*Nancy.* Silly, perfumed, loyal Nancy.

Sniff.

*And Dinner.* Jesus fucking Christ on a bike, what the fuck was up with Dinner?

It was impossible. She sniffed several more times, she had to be sure, and got more angry each time. The more she checked, the more she knew it: it was current, and not an echo from before.

Furious, Marion stalked the streets until she found the source. She stopped in front of the alley just as Nancy's clumsy self spotted her.

"Marion! There you are! That guy! Dinner! He's not dead! *He's not dead!*" Nancy blubbered away, but Marion had already figured that out.

*"No shit."*

Towards the back of the alley, just out of the light, a body lay in a pool of blood, his throat more of a mess than Dinner's earlier that night. A *Punks Will Perish* sign lay next to him, one of the protestors.

*Fuck.* Marion thought. Sebastian had declared these bozos hands-off. Oh, well.

*Cleansing fire cures all*, as the rest of their graffiti usually went.

How the fuck had this even happened? She could only pick up two scents – Dinner's, and the victim's. All other smells were too stale or distant.

"Oh, fuck! He did this?" Nancy, the rocket scientist.

"*Where is he?!*" Marion grabbed Nancy by the shoulders and spat into her face.

"*Where did he go?!*"

"H-he got on stage, Marion. He's at DeeDee's!"

Marion shoved Nancy to the wall.

"*What?! You brought me one of DeeDee's fucking guests?! You idiot! How could you be so fucking stupid!*"

"I didn't know! I swear, I had no idea!"

Marion's anger drained away, making room for dread to fill in, head to toes. She'd never had anything so fucked up in her entire two-century life. She let go of Nancy.

"*Do you have any idea what you've done to me?!*"

Marion panted and paced. This was bad. Really really really bad. She'd give anything to get back that glorious high she'd just had, that wonderful feeling, better than anything before it. She wouldn't feel that again anytime soon, if ever.

It didn't make sense. She'd *killed* him. How could he still be moving? He couldn't have Turned. Marion had never Turned anyone, she wasn't sure she even could. And Turning *hurt*, both the bloodbag and the vampire. It took *days* to pull off. Weeks, even. How the hell had this happened to her?

Marion fell to her knees. She couldn't think. The sights she could handle. And the sounds and the smells. But now, the Fear cranked up her own fears, her thoughts and fucking emotions. Her muscles started to twitch, like overstretched rubber bands.

*"Holy shit. Holy fucking shit. What the hell have you done. What the fuck am I going to do?"*

If Sebastian found out, he'd, oh god, she knew exactly what he'd do, all the things he did down in the Studio to everyone who'd ever fucked up. She couldn't deal with that, she had to do something, she had to clean this up, hide it, and then she could run and hide herself. Maybe he'd be so angry with the shit going down at DeeDee's he wouldn't think that Marion might have anything to do with it!

Nancy might give the whole thing away, though. Sebastian wouldn't even have to ask, he'd just read it in her eyes. Marion would have to kill her, then, to cover her own tracks.

Marion could deal with that, though she had hoped to wring a few more years out of the sunshade. She liked Nancy, in the same way she might like a pet fish that could do the grocery shopping and scrub floors.

Marion had to trust Nancy like no other sunshade before her. As Marion's feeding needs got trickier, Nancy kept pace, scoring just the kinds of kills she craved. And Nancy stood by Marion, faithful, as more and more vampires came to eye Marion's habits with doubt and disapproval. Never mind that Marion's Imprint on Nancy guaranteed that loyalty.

Marion would miss the cow. But slaughter time had come. *After* she helped Marion clean up this mess. They had to start that, and fast. She pulled herself together and reeled on Nancy.

*"We -- we have to -- clean this up. Get it done before Sebastian, before he —"*

*"Before Sebastian... what?"*

Marion spun around, and Nancy spun with her. Sebastian prowled into the alley.

"I- I-"

Marion shrank back and clung to a wall for support. She shook with fear, while he shook with rage. Marion stood more than a foot taller than he did, and weighed twice as much, easily. But the Prime Keeper of New York could scare the ever-living fuck out of her, like nothing else in this world. *Nothing.*

*"Forgot what you were going to say? Good."*

Sebastian's voice cut straight to her ears, a sound more terrifying than her own voice. Maybe she should just spill it all. He'd find everything out soon enough, but if she were the one to tell him, maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

*"I need you to clarify some things for me."*

He paced the alley, slow, and she bit down on her tongue, she knew better than to interrupt.

*"Right now, at this very moment, a newly Turned vampire performs on stage at DeeDee's. I know that he spent the evening in your... company."* Sebastian tilted his head toward the dead man on the ground. *"And I can smell his first kill from the other side of the city."*

Sebastian turned towards Marion again.

*"Now tell me, dear Marion. How could you possibly Turn someone without my permission? And did you think you could completely skip breaking him in?"*

*"I didn't Turn anyone!"* A lot of things got fucked up tonight, but she knew that part for sure. She could defend that to the death. *"I just drank him dry! I swear!"*

Sebastian reached up and put his hand on her shoulder. Marion knew better than to resist, and her sinking buzz had left her a little weak in the knees.

*"Then what is he doing at DeeDee's?!"* Sebastian growled. *"Vampires don't Turn by themselves, Marion. It's a long, deliberate and difficult process, or don't you remember?"*

*"I – I only killed him, I swear! How the hell could anyone Turn that fast!?"*

Marion yelped as Sebastian flung her down next to the body. He grabbed her by the hair and forced her to look at it, her face hovering above the dead man. He rubbed her nose in the blood as his puppy, scolded for pissing in his shoes.

*"THEN HOW THE HELL DO YOU EXPLAIN THIS?!"* He bellowed in her ear. The sound hit her ears and made her throw up. Sebastian shoved her the rest of the way to the ground, and turned away in disgust. *"We both know your playground has a special relationship with time!"*

Marion kneeled before the kill, shaking, and trying to find her voice. She was headed for a hard and heavy crash.

*"I – I can't turn an hour into days! Nobody can!"* She struggled to make sense of any of it, her mind buzzing with the Fear, and all the things it made her feel. It hurt now, trying to think with all the details riding her senses.

Sebastian pulled her chin to look up into his silver, pupil-less eyes. *"Tell me, then. What happened."*

*"I killed him, drained him, and left him dead. Completely dead."* Sebastian's eyes bore through to the back of her head. She didn't know why he made her say it, he could get it all from her eyes if he wanted to.

*"We were headed to DeeDee's, Nancy and me, but I went back. His body was gone, and someone else was there. I killed him, too, then Sals busted in, and I ran ..."*

*"Why didn't you kill them?" He tightened his grip under her chin. "That's what you do, you're a goddamn Bloodrunner!"*

She had nothing to say to that. She did love her work. But lately she loved the taste of the Fear so much more. And they'd surprised her.

*"No response? Well, I know already. You're stoned again, it smells worse than this kill," he spat. He let go of her and turned to pace again. "You didn't 'just drink him dry.' You tortured him to the ends of his wits. And now he's one of us."*

He looked at her as he said that last part. Another heavy dread plunged through her. Marion had heard about bad Turnings. The madness, if it hurt too much but the Candidate still hung on. Like everyone else, she wrote it off as bullshit, more rumor than anything else. Nobody could name a single actual incident.

And it did nothing to explain why he didn't stay dead, the way she'd left him. *Stupid fucking asshole bloodsack.* She wanted to kill him all over again, slower this time, and stay with him after, make him stay dead, to hell with DeeDee's show.

Sebastian turned away again, heading towards the street. Marion sighed a little, in her mind. He was getting ready to leave. He looked back at her with one last order.

*"I don't like this. Get him out of there, and bring him to me."*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ginny

Ginny could probably kill Jonny if she didn't love him so damned much.

Four songs in, she was actually struggling to keep up with him. Not the speed, that wasn't it, he hadn't picked up the pace or anything. It was his goddamned energy level. Fuck. He could hardly stand up not twenty minutes ago, and now the bastard had gone complete maniac.

The whole band was having a hard time of it, as she, Reg and Gary exchanged glances between songs.

Had Jonny been holding back these past two years? She shuddered to think of it. But maybe he'd played it on the very safe side until now, lest something else get out of control and he take the fall for it.

Fucker.

People knew The Lost Keys as a good, solid, highly talented band insofar as the music went. And people knew them as a band that really proved their mettle playing live, at least those who'd seen them in London, the one place they'd ever played until here.

For all his faults and problems, Jonny had an intensity, a purpose when they took the stage. He radiated a leadership that could not be denied, one that surpassed even his genius when they wrote the music and recorded.

It wasn't all him at the front. They each had songs they had written, some where someone else took the lead or the vocals. But Jonny pulled it all together.

That's what made all the other bollocks worth it.

That passion and ability all but forced them to let him join the band in the first place. As young as they all were, Jonny was even younger. They might have been perfectly happy as a moderately talented trio if Jonny hadn't picked up Reg's guitar that one afternoon, six years ago.

Jonny's brother had just died, while the whole family was on holiday or something, visiting relatives in Ireland for part of summer. Ginny had never found out exactly what happened, Jonny never talked about much of anything, even before his head got scrambled.

While he'd been away, Ginny, Reg and Gary had got it in their mind to try being a band. They were all a bit older than Jonny, and had a little more in the ways of resources to piece some things together. Garage sales, trash bins, a little resourcefulness and ingenuity and they were ready to start making some noise. Ok, really they'd mostly nicked stuff and pawned it off to buy most of the equipment. But the rest had come into play as well.

From there they spent several weeks making an awful lot of noise, set up in the garage Ginny's and Reg's dad managed.

Jonny had reappeared, quiet and sullen as the rest of them tried to bang out something that didn't sound awful. Ginny thought she was making some headway, but Reg was having the worst time of it, and Gary had almost had enough of him.

Gary'd left the room to go nick a beer from the icebox. Jonny'd been just sitting there in the corner, listening to them with this intense silence. He'd been close to his brother, and wouldn't talk about what happened. So they just let him be to brood while they went about their way.

It was the first time he'd sat in on one of their practices. He stared at Reg while Reg made the least progress of them all, just trying to get the hang of the thing.

"Oi, give it here, Reg," Jonny had said. Reg had happily handed the thing over. What happened next still gave Ginny chills to think about it.

Jonny sat holding the thing for a few seconds, just like Reg had, and touched the strings a few times. But, suddenly, as if something didn't feel quite right, he flipped it 'round the other way. Ginny knew he could write and throw with either hand, but to see him hold the guitar upside down...

Reg had jeered, "You can't even hold it right!" and reached to grab it back.

Jonny pulled away and started plucking at it, testing his fingers in different positions. A few chords later, he started playing a little something.

They'd found out later that he had some musicians in his extended family, in addition to his parents. He'd had some opportunity before to play a few different instruments, but he'd never let on to it. Not to them, his only friends. Not until that day.

Ginny and Reg had just stared at each other, neither knowing what to make of it. Gary's voice came back to the room before he did. "Oi, Reg, sounds like you're finally getting it – oh." Gary had rounded the corner and arrived in the doorway to see it was Jonny. "Oh, bloody hell."

"What do you mean, bloody hell, Gary? What's wrong? Listen to him!"

"He's fourteen! That's what's wrong! A few years, we might go somewhere, and he'll only be sixteen!"

"But just listen to him!"

It really didn't take much convincing. The more Jonny played, the more they needed him. Once they'd accepted him as part of the band and rescued a battered old Strat from the dump just for him, a side to him emerged they'd never imagined existed.

From that point on, they practiced under Jonny's tutoring, long and hard until they bled.

The four of them worked and played and fought and ate together. They almost couldn't stand it, until they heard what they'd achieved.

They all were *one* when they functioned as a band.

They could achieve perfect synchronicity, an almost psychic connection. They became known for their ability to jam live, to make up new songs on the spot and make it sound like they'd played it for years. Like each of them knew what the rest of the band was thinking as they played. They could tell from Jonny's body language, a subtle twitch or motion that told them he was about to change keys or pick up the pace or make up another verse on the spot & carry a song long or whatever.

Jonny pushed them until they were better than they ever imagined they could be, and then pushed some more. He pushed himself as well, always. But he'd started from another level, one that the rest of them had hardly achieved after a few years of hard relentless work.

And now, six years later, Jonny still managed to amaze them. He still managed to push himself and them harder and higher. Poor Reg had worried that he'd suck because of his

condition. Bollocks. Jonny never sucked. Or if he did, nobody noticed because it was still a far cry above anything else.

Ginny found it exhilarating, if a bit exhausting. It also made her horny as all hell. Playing live was foreplay for her and Jonny. Once they played last chord, they raced for the nearest privacy.

Jonny's eyes met hers for a moment. Sometimes he had to work to remember that other people were on stage with him, that the instruments didn't magically produce the music with him, he got so lost in the sound.

It was time for one of her songs. Maybe they could catch their breath if she could keep this one song under her command. She winked at him and licked her teeth at him. He grinned back. He hadn't even broken a sweat.

Ginny would have her revenge soon enough, pushing *him* higher and harder in some broom closet, just the two of them, when this was all over.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### Willem

Willem boggled and shifted nervously.

His relief had scampered off witless, taking even the memory of its existence along with it. This band would be the death of him soon, he was sure of it. Nobody would go home quietly tonight.

The Lost Keys now played better than they'd ever played before, and that was really saying something. As much as he hated all the fuss and supervision they required, these hooligans could really perform.

But now it was going too well, and showed no sign of easing off. A volatile ingredient for an already unstable recipe. Just like the show that ended in a riot, with a sixteen-year-old Jonny being dragged off in shackles, that first occasion where a record company had almost signed them.

*Please, Willem prayed, don't let this end with another riot or arrest. Please, no headlines.*

Willem did suspect something criminal had taken place before the show. They could not weather an event like the one that got Jonny sent away for a whole year and returned him more damaged than ever, almost useless. It would truly spell the end of everything they'd worked for.

Willem caught Trick's wicked grin, momentarily lost in the music, adding to his unease. Jonny had stopped playing guitar, now just singing and shouting, getting the audience riled up in a way that only he could. Once the guitar started to come off, it was only a matter of time before the bastard ended up in the crowd.

*Hell.*

Willem needed those drinks more than ever. His eyes scoured the shadows, perhaps a stray bottle hid here somewhere, side stage? Too much crowd, too much crazy rowdy crowd, occupied the space between him and all of the club's many bars.

"An' there e' goes!" Trick chuckled.

Willem whirled to see Jonny's feet leave the stage. He landed amid the audience as though nothing unusual had gone on before the show. Willem gaped as Jonny disappeared into the crowd.

Willem often thought of Jonny as his arch-nemesis, their destiny irrevocably tangled until one killed the other off. Either Jonny would give him a heart attack or Willem would throttle the reprobate with his bare hands. Possibly both at the same time. Yes, it would be just his luck to die and have no chance to savor the pleasure of killing the sod.

Willem honestly feared tonight would be the night. That son of a bitch would be the death of him within the hour. And no way to get a fucking drink first.

"Heh," Frankie smiled. It took every bit of self control to keep Willem from kicking him. And now, any second now, predictable Charlie would hurl his threat...

"If there's a riot at the end of this one, we're through."

And the night was complete. Willem turned away, his stomach turning as he broke out in a sweat, and wiped his brow.

"I can't bear to watch!"

## CHAPTER THIRTY

### Viper

Viper didn't think he could hate Marion even more than he had before. But he did. Still no sign of the bitch, inside or outside. Still no Daemon or Feather. Shit was going down somewhere, and they had no idea where. And that really pissed him off. He turned all the night's details over in his mind one more time.

If the roadie with the flyer had in fact been looking for this new bloodsucker suspect, he could be in a lot of trouble right now. And what to do next about this suspect? Maybe they could weasel their way backstage with this bullshit talent scout cover.

And did any of it connect to Marion? Could she be the one that Turned him?

Now *that* smacked of madness.

Bloodrunners didn't have time to Turn anyone. They didn't have time for fledglings. Their job – keeping the Salierant from doing their job – kept bloodrunners very busy. And nothing could explain why the hell he was on stage. The puzzle just would not come together, not through this headache or at these decibels. He needed just one more piece to figure it out.

"Viper! He's headed this way." Bullet's voice rang out above the din. She pointed into the crowd and Viper could hardly believe it.

The new suspect, this punk, had jumped into the crowd and now pushed, shoved and kicked his way through. The masses were just eating it up. And, to Bullet's point, he was headed in their direction.

"Want to get a closer look?" Bricks said the words, but Viper had already thought the thoughts. "Probably won't get a better chance."

Viper gave it a serious thought. A lot of bystanders – civilians – stood and thrashed around. Could they make contact and not compromise their core obligation? Could they, under these circumstances, still protect all these people from even the very *knowledge* of vampires' existence? Whatever went down, responsibility would fall on Viper's shoulders for it.

On the other hand – they had a bucketful of nothing to show for the night, and the crowd would serve as excellent cover. While Bricks might follow Viper's instincts, Bullet and Ripper were not fully convinced the punk was a vampire. The rest of the team should see it for themselves before any further course of action.

Viper figured they should con their way backstage after the show if Marion didn't turn up. But what if she did? They'd lose the chance to verify this suspect. This opportunity was too good to pass up, he decided. If the kid was indeed a bloodsucker, confirming it might lead to a much bigger fish. They could check him out, and still be ready if Marion's ugly head ever popped up.

"Let's do it. There's not much we can do in the middle of all this. But we can confirm his status. Trip him up, give him the once-over as we get him back on his feet." It sounded almost foolproof. *Almost.*

Once Viper had made the decision, his earlier edginess lifted, they had a tangible course of action now. An intense calm always came over him on an active hunt. The shakes only came after sunrise, the headaches only in the lulls in between, never during a hunt, not even when things went wrong.

Ripper appeared in the crowd right next to the punk, and before anybody could stop him, he unmistakably did more than just trip the guy.

He struck hard and fast, landing three terrible blows. The first punch caught the kid in the gut, doubling him over. The next swept across his face in a bloody smear, spinning him to the side. The final blow landed on the back of his neck as he fell. The kid hit the floor with a mouthful of his own blood before he even realized he was on enemy ground.

*Almost* foolproof. As Viper watched the spectacle, powerless to stop it, it dawned on him that Ripper could be high. *Damnit.* Of course he'd missed it, he'd been paying attention to everything else, looking for vampires. He shouldn't have to scrutinize his own fucking team in the middle of a hunt.

Ripper hadn't shown any signs of this bullshit before, otherwise Viper wouldn't have picked him for the team. He'd come highly recommended by Carrios and Bricks as well.

But now he'd just knocked the sense out of the most interesting person in the room, surrounded by rabid fans.

*Shit.* A sudden iciness clenched Viper's stomach. What if he was wrong? What if Ripper had just wiped the floor with a human? Well, at this point, it might go easier than if he were a bloodsucker.

"What the hell are you doing?" Bullet gaped and yelled, moving to block the crowd's view.

Bricks shoved his way into Ripper before Ripper could start kicking. Bricks might be the only one of them who could stop Ripper if he turned crazy on the team.

"He's a fucking bloodsucker!" Ripper shouted back, as if that explained everything.

"We're in the middle of a fucking mob!" Bricks roared, furious.

"This crowd's too dumb to even see!" Ripper straightened up and faced off against Bricks, how stupid could he get?

The scene was something out of a schoolyard. And Viper had had enough.

"Stand down! All of you!" Viper commanded. They froze – including Ripper. *Good.* Bullet and Bricks weren't wrong, but reprimand would have to wait. They had to take advantage of the chaos while they could. "Get him up! Let's have a look before someone sees what we just did!"

Bricks grabbed the punk by the back of his collar and pulled him to his feet. Viper took a quick look around, but everyone else was engaged in the surrounding chaos. "Hold him." If the punk was indeed a bloodsucker, better to be safe than sorry, particularly since Ripper had just laid him out on the floor.

Ripper grabbed and pinned one of the punk's arms behind his back, while Bricks tangled up the other arm. Still stunned, the punk offered no resistance, he couldn't even stand.

Bullet yanked his head back by his ridiculous blue hair. Pain went a long way in keeping a bloodsucker off-balance and under control.

Viper reached forward, grabbed the punk by the jaw, and looked him in the face.

The skin under Viper's grip felt just a bit too cold. The slightest glow slipped between the punk's eyelids as he squinted in pain. His lips raised in a wince to reveal fangs among the clenched teeth.

"Oh, yeah. We got ourselves a bloodsucker."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Jonny

Jonny found himself on the floor on hands and knees, his head spinning in wild, explosive pain for the hundredth time that night. He couldn't really remember the other ninety-nine, but he was pretty sure they'd happened. Like a hangover, you knew it you'd got it from drink, even if you couldn't remember the bender.

The attack caught him completely off guard. Crowds had jostled and shoved and elbowed him before, just as he jostled and shoved and elbowed his way through, it came with the territory. He couldn't say he'd never been struck during these antics, but not like this. Never like this.

Someone pulled him to his feet by the back of his collar. His legs refused to support him, he dangled like a kitten by its scruff. Hands, several pairs of hands, grabbed and wove around him, holding him up and pinning his arms back.

He couldn't see or hear anything clearly, not through the pain. A massive, scrambled blur of sound and light surrounded him and sank down into his bones. He struggled, useless against adversaries he could scarcely see.

Someone grabbed his hair and yanked his head up. One last blurry hand reached out to him, and gripped his face by the jaw.

"Oh, yeah." the blur said. "We got ourselves a bloodsucker."

- - End Part One - -

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## **Thanks to...**

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## **About the Author**

Angi Shearstone is an award-winning professional artist with an MFA in comics, a small herd of cats, strong geek tendencies and a fondness for ska-core. She's worked in children's books with Mercer Mayer, in comics on Batman: Gotham County Line with Scott Hampton, and on Princeless: Tales of Girls who Rock with Jeremy Whitley, collaborated with Mur Lafferty on Beyond the Storm: Shadows of the Big Easy, and otherwise has self-published a handful of comic book projects, two of which with Joe Sutliff Sanders.

She currently designs, illustrates, works with video, and sells fine art painting while working on BloodDreams. A previous version of BloodDreams Part One plus portions of Part Two have been shared at [JukePop.com](http://JukePop.com). The first two comic issues are available at [ComiXology.com](http://ComiXology.com), and a printed version of the first issue can be ordered direct from Angi at [BloodDreams.com](http://BloodDreams.com).

Angi's comic book work can be found at [paintedcomics.com](http://paintedcomics.com) , her fine art at [AngiShearstone.com](http://AngiShearstone.com), and her and video work at [shearstonecreative.com](http://shearstonecreative.com). She currently resides in New England.