

and

Falling,

Fly

SKYLER WHITE

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BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

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SOMETIMES THE HUNT IS ALL THERE IS . . .

She's alone. I see her now, walking briskly north. She, too, has learned not to run. I shorten the space between us too soon, pressing down need and anger. Shall I let her hear me? *No*.

She turns, sensing the darkness moving . . . Her tender heart rate is rising. Now she knows it's me. She struggles not to run, looking hard over her shoulder. Does she hope for a different ending? How could she believe that? How could she try so valiantly if she does not?

Disciplining my strength into grace, I shadow her . . . I'm almost touching her, breathing the slippery smell of her fear. But the thrumming beat of her, visible through the warm flesh of her throat, summons me. My pulseless fingers reach out for the hammering vein and feel it pound swifter against them. She makes a strange noise and runs.

I watch as long as I can, her strong body straining forward, before I slide in behind her. Magnificent, striding flight, her legs stretch and mine shadow. I rein myself back as her endurance fails. Her blazing lungs and her tearing heart echo through me. I could so easily overtake her, drive my teeth into her now, but she will exhaust herself soon and have to stop. And then . . .

Then I will take her . . .

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A BERKLEY BOOK

**Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc.**

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin
Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pt
Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

White, Skyler.

p. cm.

eISBN : 978-1-101-18569-8

1. Neuroscientists—Fiction. 2. Vampires—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3623.H57888A53 2010

813'.6—dc22 2009036368

<http://us.penguin.com>

To Scott and Molly,
who put my feet on this path
and pushed

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my parents for the education, and for their infinite patience and inexhaustible faith. Thank you to my children for their enthusiasm, cheerleading, daydreaming, and forgiveness; and my sister for keeping me honest. Thank you to my editor, Leis Pederson, for making it better than it was; to my agent, Holly Root, for believing in what it could be; and to my cover artist, Craig White, for seeing Olivia more clearly than I did. Thank you to David Bradford for his unerring critical eye; Molly for her graphic design genius and generosity; to ARWA for the education and encouragement, the challenge and acceptance; to Scott for editing and managing and consoling and babysitting; and my crit group—ladies, you're the pits! Thank you to Deborah Morrison for being a mentor in writing, parenting, and adulthood; to Steve Dutton for riding to the rescue more than once; and to Jill White (and Scott again) for that seminal Irish trip. Thank you to Linda Ingmanson for saying no, and Chris Keeslar for saying yes. Thank you to Alison Greco for what she knows about psychiatry; to Sun Sebastian for what he knows about physics; to Beth Henson for what she knows about medicine; and to Michael DiLeo for what he knows about writing and for the coffee.

Thank you to the mythic damned, my friends of contradictions, with wings of stone and hearts of fire, for the inspiration and the company.

My darling ones, Reborn and Undead, Damned, Cursed,
and Misbegotten—Hell calls her absent children home.

De profundis,
G.

The apparently unendurable conflict is proof of the rightness of your life. A life without inner contradiction is either only half a life, or else is a life in the Beyond, which is destined only for angels. But God loves human beings more than angels.

—*C. JUNG, LETTERS, VOLUME I, P. 375*

WHAT YOU SEE

The angel of desire is damned. At least that's what my tattoo says. Okay, if I'm honest, it just says *dam*, with *ned* still only outlined in purple stencil. But twenty-first-century angel that I am, I don't give a fig for honesty. I want speed. If Ed doesn't hurry, no lie I can invent will explain what he's start to see.

He begins the *N* and glances up from the black halo of letters whose half-circle crowns my pubic mound. "So, Olivia, you wanna tell me the story?"

Tattooists are the new priests for the fucked-up and the thrown away. They speak the language of symbol, and administer penance in tiny metallic lashes. They hear confession; and Ed wants mine. Or he thinks he does. And for a minute, amidst the jumbled iconography of Celtic and tribal patterns, the pick-your-own pantheon of Saints Teresa and Betty Boop, I want to tell this handsome nouveau-clerical bent in genuflection over my crotch, everything I am.

"It's my birthday," I say instead.

"Yeah? Happy birthday." He bows back over the *N*, the electric drill buzz of his pen my only indication that the needle has started again. "You just break up with some guy?"

"No, but give it a couple of hours."

He laughs, but it's my birthday, and my boyfriend has something special and secretive planned—dark omen. Men can never resist giving me what they want for my birthday, and so I've slept alone that night every year since at least the shift from the Julian calendar. Probably longer.

"Wanna tell me about it?"

"It's not a story you want to hear," I tell him.

"You can't surprise me, girl. I've seen it all." Crouched like a cobbler, Ed hovers inches above my low-rider briefs. I like the way this new style of underwear exposes the unblemished white of my belly for him. I like that it conceals what would freak out even this New York City pierce-and-brand-style veteran of the skin artist's trade.

"My body misrepresents me," I say.

The whirl of the needle stops as Ed's dark eyes take a slow tour. "I don't see how."

No, how could he? He smells of clove cigarettes and filth, and against the fabric of my unbuttoned jeans, my hips begin to swell. *So Eddie likes his girls a little plump, eh?* With a nervous clearing of his skinny throat, he returns to his work, but it's too late. Already, my tits are filling, pushing against the fine lace of my bra, growing under my T-shirt. My hair darkens a fraction. Ed won't notice I've changed. He'll just wonder why he didn't realize before how gorgeous this rockabilly birthday girl is. I shove my hair back from my face, inventorying the way it now falls in Bettie Page bangs. It's okay unless it slows him down. I can't risk that.

"Four down, two to go." He grins up at me. "You doing okay?"

"I'm fine."

His conscientious, gloved fingers avoid the white cotton framed by my jeans zipper and belt, but I

rests his wrist against the inside of my now-plump thigh. His sunken eyes glance up over the heightened rise of my breasts, and his habitual dabs wipe blood that no longer wells from the finished *D*. If he notices, he will worry. “Do the last two letters,” I whisper, injecting sexy into my voice to hurry him.

I can’t hate him. He is too young and can’t help the way his dominatrix fetish molds my breasts into Wonder Woman cones. I can hate them, though. Just once, on my birthday, I would like to keep my breasts in their native form. Ed works steadily on my *E*, humming along to the music grinding from the tattoo parlor’s massive speakers. The word *parlor*, with its vague overtones of powdery old ladies and prostitute comforts me somehow. I’m grateful for it. Tonight is likely to go badly. I’m meeting my boyfriend of seven months for dinner, and trying not to hope.

To him, I am beautiful and pure, saving myself for marriage and motherhood. He sees me as a virginal holdover from a more romantic age. He has spent entire nights simply kissing me. But he is a genuine twenty-first-century and only faking patience. Tonight he is likely to dispose of pretense and ruin everything with a nineteenth-century idea. I catch myself twisting the hair-fine chain around my wrist, grating the brass key against the lock it can’t reach. I still my restless fingers and swallow a growl.

“I think you’ve got a killer body.” Ed has finished the *E*.

I give him a slow, midnight smile. “You’re about half right,” I tell him.

His needle stops again. “You’re sick, aren’t you? You’ve got cancer or something, you know, down there?” It’s cute, the way compassion wars with disappointment on the poorly mown field of his face.

“No. I’m perfectly healthy,” I tell him. “In fact, I don’t think I’ll ever die.”

It’s the most truthful thing to pass my hellfire-red lips in years. “I’m just . . .”

“Screwed?”

I laugh. “Not ever.” *My, what an honesty streak I’m on.*

“I could, you know”—Eddie shrugs—“help you out with that if you want?”

“I’m sure you could.” *Better. Back to lying.* “Don’t stop.”

“I didn’t.” But now he has. The electric needle hangs above the fork of my legs, immobile. His confusion peers across my newly fleshy belly, over the twin tit pyramids. I have screwed up again. I force a giggle.

“Are you high?” Ed touches the machine to me without breaking his gaze. I wince. He grins. “You’re high, aren’t you?”

The needle jabs again. Again I pretend it hurts me, and Ed’s black, Brylcreemed head bows over my pubis once more. He shares that with the ancient priests, at least—the pleasure he takes in my pain.

“You never told me why you wanted the tat.” Ed’s long, artist’s fingers rub ointment into my belly, oblivious to the lack of inflammation around his freshly drawn lines. “Damned,” he reads aloud. His fingers dip below the elastic of my panties, spreading the slick protective gel to unmarked skin. “What did you say, your body betrayed you?”

“Something like that.”

“What, it go cheat on your boyfriend without you?” He winks, carefully taping gauze over his wound. His fingers are smooth as his lines, but I don’t answer him.

“What’s his name?”

“Adam.”

“He’s a lucky guy.”

If Ed takes any longer taping my bandage, or running my credit card, or explaining my wound care instruction sheet, I run a very real risk of tearing his face off.

“And you’ve got some good antibacterial soap at home?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got my phone number there. I put it on the sheet, so if you have any trouble—any questions—you call me, okay?”

I leave him at the cash register and walk, with as much poise as an impatient immortal can wrangle, to the electric blue bathroom, where I yank up my shirt and peel down the right corner of Ed’s meticulous bandage.

The letters are already fading. I sit on the toilet lid and stare at the dirty floor.

I get the same tattoo every February fourteenth. It’s my little birthday joke on myself, but today just isn’t funny. Not with the dread of what Adam will do. Not with my breasts inflated to a size they haven’t been since the days when my brother Jack walked the London streets. In those days, a lady could stretch a courtship over a year, and be thanked for the privilege. A few months of kissing Adam and the darling expects me to say yes tonight. Ten minutes of kissing Ed, and the ass would expect a different acquiescence. All I want is a tattoo—a bad girl brand on my perfect body to mark me with what I truly am. I check it again. The first *D* is gone.

“Eddie,” I call out the bathroom door, “can you come back here a second?”

I put my alabaster hands on the stained basin of the sink and stare into the mirror above it. I wait for Ed’s reflection to show me my face in the silvered glass. He slouches in. I scowl at the pinup parody of myself and slip behind him to lock the door. I lean against the flimsy wood.

“Does it hurt?” he asks.

“Yes,” I lie. My perfect body can’t feel pleasure or pain, can’t transmit any sensation more acute than simple pressure. But my other senses are keen, and his masculine smell rises over the clove.

His hands take my waist—do they tremble just a little, tough guy? A choked prayer of desire escapes his tight throat, and I put my scarlet lips against his. I let him kiss me, lipstick messy between us for elongating seconds, before I bite into his mouth.

I don’t mean to do it, but the subtle razor surfaces of my teeth and tongue erupt, grazing the inside of his mouth, making cuts too small for him to feel. It doesn’t take much to feed me, microscopic globules of blood from the tiny surface cuts my quilled teeth make in his lips and against his gums. I suck on his mouth and he shudders against me. He’s hungry, too.

In his blood I taste only tedious, arcane desires, but am tempted by the whisper of the dreams that feeding full-tooth would bring. Still, I don’t strike. It’s not his fault. He worked diligently to give me what I asked for—a word for my flesh, a name for my body. But if his inky blood is all I can get, what I want, I’ll swallow what I can.

He grapples at the zipper of my jeans, and I recoil from the danger of his callused fingers finding my tattoo gone. He mutters something about hurting me and slides his innocent hands over my body away from the bandage, to tug on my shirt. I pull it over my head for him. I will give him anything he wants with my sandcastle tits—I can’t feel them—just let me keep feasting on his stained and smoldering mouth.

His delicate hands run up my back, the only ugly part of my body, and close over my breasts grinding roughly, but my tongue laps at his gaping mouth. He would take me right here, if I let him push me hard against the too-blue door. Sex is naked in the twenty-first century, naked as Ed’s need, and he fucks his angels fast and hungry in the nasty bathrooms where kids who find they can’t take the need come to puke their humiliated guts out. If I could, I would let him, because *yes* is easier than *no* the old days, and I’m not a cock-tease or a good girl. But I cannot, because of what I really am.

“Damned . . .” Ed’s fingertips graze the dressing again.

I remember to pretend it hurts me, and his cock throbs against my fat thigh. All the letters are gone but desire still whimpers to him, and he brings his mouth down hard over mine again. I press his hand against the bandage. Why have I never thought of this before? Pain is easier to fake than pleasure. Could this—finally—be the loophole? Could it be suffering that frees me, instead of love?

“Look at you,” he whistles.

“Behold, the damned!” I make a comic little flourish and shimmy my tits.

He groans. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“Yeah, and I need you to, okay?”

“You’re kind of messed up, you know?”

Ed, Eddie, Pontius Edward—he will ask the questions, he will drive the tiny, electric nails into my flesh, but all the time, he’s washing his hands. He doesn’t want to know, doesn’t want to be involved. He’s curious, not concerned; a voyeur, not an actor; and I scent fear beneath the cloves.

He can’t save me, the fucker. If I kiss him again, I will taste his hesitation. I lick my lips for lingering flecks, and he pushes his hair back with fingers that say *hate* across the knuckles. I smile into his innocent eyes and pull on my shirt. “You’re blocking the door,” I tell him.

“What the fuck? You think you’re leaving?”

I grip his earlobe between my forefinger and thumb. He scrambles, panting mutely away from the door as I bring my quilled fingernails together.

I leave him with his new piercing bleeding softly, already cobbling the story he’ll tell about the crazy chick he made out with in the bathroom on Valentine’s Day after he tattooed her *damned*. As his story ages, we will have had sex back there.

My breasts are already flattening by the time the tattoo parlor door slams behind me, shrinking toward the twenty-first-century ideal of full and firm, but more athletic than sensual. At least I won’t be hungry when I meet Adam for dinner tonight.

I have been a fool. Ed could never have been my salvation. Just another fig. Adam, however, might be. If only tonight goes differently than my birthdays always do, if only I don’t have to leave Adam like I left Ed in the blue bathroom—blindly wanting me. They can’t help it. They all want me. I am the angel of desire.

Desire is an angel in hell.



“Lord, deliver us from demons,” Dominic said.

His two junior postdoctoral students, one depressed, one anxious, and both on high alert, squinted at him across a peeling Formica tabletop.

“Do you really think that’s appropriate?” the anxious one asked.

Dominic stretched his jaw against the damage patience was wreaking on his molars. “Professor Dysart gave the ‘Lord, Deliver Us’ speech at the APA conference last year. ‘From ancient times,’” Dominic recited, “‘when mental illness was treated with technologies as crude as drills to cast out devils, to today’s arguably equally primitive psycho-pharmaceutical attempts to alter brain chemistry—blah, blah, blah’—that one.”

Peter, still worried, whipped a notebook from his lab coat pocket and began transcribing. “I thought we recommended ‘Psychopharmacological Therapies and Posttraumatic Stress Disorders’ for the

APA,” he said.

Paul shook his jowly head. “That’s too technical for TED.”

“Obviously,” Peter sneered. “It’s the Technology, *Entertainment*, and Design conference, for God sake. They’re not all medical doctors, much less neuroscientists. Some of them are artists. Dominic right. ‘Lord Deliver Us’ is perfect. What was the subtitle for the PTSD speech, D?”

“Demons to Drugs.”

“Christ,” Paul said, “is there anything you don’t know off the top of your head?”

Peter continued his furious note-taking.

“I have it on the laptop.” Dominic gestured at the weathered shoulder bag on the seat beside him but Peter scribbled on. Paul took a swallow of coffee, and Dominic surveyed the cafeteria again. It was a garish, uninteresting space, the only spot on the MIT campus he had not yet photographed. He squinted, mentally experimenting with focus and filter, and resolved to bring his camera in over spring break, just to challenge himself.

“Dysart won’t go,” he said, returning his attention to Peter and Paul. “His last flight had mechanical trouble, and he’s seventy, for Christ’s sake. Why don’t you two put in a joint travel request?”

“To speak at TED?”

“Both of us?”

Despite the union’s peppy color scheme and the energetic noise of undergraduates, it was the eagerness arcing between the two postdoctoral students that reminded Dominic how tired he was.

“You’re the senior research fellow, Dominic,” Peter said. “And the best speaker.”

“You wrote that speech,” Paul added. “You’re the one—”

“If you boys worked this little skit out ahead of time,” Dominic interrupted, “your script sucks.”

The two snorted but relaxed, only to bolt back upright again. “Hello, Professor Dysart,” they chorused.

“Gentlemen, I have exciting news.” A meaty hand landed on Dominic’s shoulder. “Peter, be a good chap and bring an old man a coffee?” Dysart handed over a crumpled bill and sat heavily beside Dominic, dropping a strategically folded newspaper before him. “Take a look at that,” he wheezed.

Madalene Wright, the article announced, had just withdrawn her funding from UCLA, the only other American university performing advanced research on brain chemistry and mental illness without pharmaceutical industry money. Dominic flashed a predatory grin and pushed the paper across the table to Paul. “Do we have a battle plan?” he asked Dysart.

Peter returned with a steaming mug and a jelly doughnut, which he placed before his idol. Dysart was not supposed to eat doughnuts. The distinguished scientist did not request them when he dispatched his underlings for coffee, nor did he send money enough to buy anything but the coffee he never touched. Without acknowledging its existence, the professor sank his yellow teeth into the forbidden offering. Dominic took the opportunity to change topics.

“We’ve just been discussing the TED conference next month. Since you’re cutting back on travel, Doc, why not send the Ps in your stead?”

“Paul and Peter?” Dysart regarded Dominic through gray barb-wire brows. “I thought you would go.”

“I’d rather not.”

“You spend too much time in the lab for such a good-looking young man. An escape to warmer climes might do you some good. Besides, I hear from Alfred in Chemical Engineering that the TED conference, to a hotshot young scientist, is like spring break to a buxom undergrad.” The professor winked lewdly. “The gratification of all your earthly desires, my boy!”

Peter writhed in suppressed anguish, and Paul sank deeper into his ample flesh, but Dominic held his athletic body motionless, leaning back in his chair. “The advancement of knowledge is my fondest desire,” he declaimed.

Dysart and acolytes laughed. The tension eased. “Very well.” The doctor nodded, sucking his fingers for jelly. “I don’t suppose you fellows could tear yourselves away in March?”

“Professor, I—”

“I think we’d—”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Dr. O!” A petite blonde with a heart-spattered T-shirt peeking out from her hoodie waved shyly to Dominic.

“Hi, Jessica,” he said, and swallowed against the sudden, unwelcome but familiar bitter taste in his mouth.

The Ps waited just until the girl turned the corner. “Dr. O?” they sneered gleefully.

“From my last name,” Dominic explained. “O’Shaughnessy.” But the sounds and faces of MIT were fragmenting into liquid shards, flying apart slowly, as Dominic’s memory seized on an image of the pretty coed as vivid and clear as it was impossible.

“What about ‘the advancement of knowledge’ and all that, my boy?” Dysart’s voice was a distant echo.

“I said it was my fondest desire,” Dominic struggled to joke, “not my only one.”

But it was too late. Already, a memory that could not be his had captured him. He was running, stealing away from his village with that girl—a girl—on a festival day six hundred years ago. Ghita tripped, and he tumbled with her willingly into the smell of grass growing. He rolled her under him, blond against the green. She tasted like mead, and he cupped her breast, pale and still panting, spilling from an undeniably medieval kirtle. Ridiculous, for him to have medieval memories.

“*Parlan d’amore*,” he whispered. Her delicate eyes crinkled in joy, but from Ghita’s beautiful lips came Dysart’s coarse laugh.

The hallucination flickered. Dominic shoved his fingertips hard against his eyes.

“I think the message that D.O.”—Dysart put a heavy emphasis on Dominic’s first initial—“was trying to convey, is that he can celebrate the rites of spring without the aid of an academic conference’s bikinied bacchae.”

“I’m not interested in the spring riots,” Peter clarified earnestly. “It’s the girls.”

Dominic opened his eyes, grateful to see only ugly men again. He stood up, shaking himself, as if to shrug the delusional memories away. “Peter and Paul will do great,” he said and slung his laptop bag across his body. “I’ll email you both a copy of the speech.”

He had already turned to leave when Dysart’s phone shrilled and the professor gestured for him to wait. “My spies,” he mouthed, flipping open the slender device.

Paul and Peter exchanged a grin. Each man would have willingly sacrificed the other for the chance they now both had. Dominic held his steely focus on them. He would not return to Ghita, her skin, so richly pale, distended in black buboes. “*Acral necrosi*,” they would say now, not “the Black Death” with little Luciana still suckling the breathless breast. He had buried them together, mother and child.

“Confess,” Peter whispered, mistaking Dominic’s fierce scowl. “Now you want to go, don’t you?”

“God, no,” Dominic said. He rested his laptop bag on the table, impatient to fire up the machine and document the latest, spectacular failure of his clandestine pharmacopoeia. Insomnia he could have continued to tolerate, but grief-wracked delusions of a wife lost six hundred years ago indicated a complete failure of the AEDvII.2 formulation. “Besides,” he explained, catching the Ps’ puzzled stares, “there’s no way the department would agree to three of us going.”

“Dominic?” Dysart snapped his phone closed. “I’m sending you.”

“What?” Peter leapt to his feet, and even Paul unfolded himself in protest.

“Madalene Wright has accepted an invitation to the TED talks. She has registered for a number of lectures, including ours. I have a very stout grapevine, have I not?” Dysart beamed.

“Then it’s gotta be D.” Peter re-creased the newspaper, closing Wright’s artfully pickled face away from them.

“If she’s going to be there, yeah, it has to be,” Paul agreed.

“Madalene has just pulled her funding from UCLA,” Dysart reminded them. “She’ll have a few extra million just freed up to hand about if she decides she’d like to.”

Peter drilled nervous fingers on Formica. “If Dominic could persuade her to redirect even some of UCLA’s endowment to us, we might start the memory project in earnest, start to parse which neurons are involved in a given memory—”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, gentlemen.” Dysart lugged himself to standing. “Dominic, you look ghastly.”

“Sorry. I’m fine. Tired.”

But Peter was electrified. “If we can pinpoint how neurons come together to form networks, we might find the physical representations of specific memories. And when we understand memory learning and expression, we’re one step closer to memory eradication . . .”

“We’ll patent the new soma,” Paul whispered.

“We’d be hearing from Stockholm . . .”

Dr. Dysart waved the Ps silent. “You’ll go then?”

Dominic released pale lips from the vise of his teeth and nodded. He didn’t give a damn for patents or prizes, but he did care, with rigidly masked intensity, about the neuronal signatures of memories and their identification. Even the impossible, if found, can be destroyed.

“So it’s D’s quest,” Paul mumbled, when Dysart had ambled off toward the lab.

“Slay the dragon lady and bring us back the gold!” Peter gathered three empty coffee mugs and one full one.

“Give the ‘Lord Deliver Us’ speech,” Paul said to the table. “What was its subtitle?”

“‘Following the Chemical Footprints of Devils in the Mind,’” Dominic said, handing the licked clean doughnut plate to Peter.

“You have one hell of a memory,” Peter grumbled. “You have no idea how lucky you are.”

“Yeah, I’m blessed with a hell of a memory.” Dominic turned down the corridor to hide a bitter smile. “I guess it beats a memory of Hell.”



My flesh clings too tight around my bones, at least a dress size smaller than when I left Eddie bleeding in the blue bathroom. He wouldn’t recognize me if he walked in the door. Not that you get many punk tattooists in swank sushi joints. I have showered his smell from my scentless skin and traded in my beater-T and blue jeans for a velvet vest and silk skirt which match the restaurant’s décor—tastefully understated—although it would be difficult to conjure two words further from my true essence.

Adam, innocent darling, believes I am an account exec at one of the ad agencies downtown. It

something I could actually do, from what I read in the bookstore careers section. Every one of the elegant and polished bodies in the restaurant anteroom has a job to eat up their time in exchange for the titles they feed to one another. I want one.

Can they sense how different I am, nestled amongst them in the stylish lobby? Their appraising eyes rank each other and compare themselves, but I am thin and expensively dressed, and it is enough. Blind to my angelic lineage and my damnation, they note the style of my shoes, not the state of my soul. Just as well. They're six-hundred-dollar heels.

"Happy birthday!" Adam's light touch lands on my shoulder. I stand to greet him, quickly shrinking an inch from my native height. I always forget he's short. My muted terra-cotta lips yield to his adoring kiss, my teeth's sharp edges neatly tucked away. I need nothing from him after my inky snack. He steps behind me, forming a warm mantle of love against my back and shoulders in the packed lobby's electric loneliness. I want to wrap my pulseless shell in the human noise and heat of his head and lungs. I want to drill my unbreakable angel nails into this moment and refuse to let it slip. I would drain time and swallow it to keep the two of us standing thus, my body inside the protective cloak of his arms and love. It is enough to hope.

I steady myself against the scent of his wanting me, and touch the fragile answering ache of my own desire. Not for him, not for his body, not even his blood, but for his mortality and love. If I could tuck myself in his arms and tell him every poisoned thing I am, and still smell desire, not rank fear—if he could see and love me—could I slip through him, out of human flesh and time, back to angelic wings and freedom? This is my threadbare hope.

Every vampire is a fallen angel of desire, and we nourish our deathless beauty on what we fleetingly inspire in mortals who live but briefly. But just as I would break my teeth on Adam if he did not want or fear me, he must see through the desires I create and those I embody, in order to taste my truth and free me. But desire, like humanity, is quick to breed and quick to die, and accustomed to do both with closed eyes.

"You look incredible." Adam's lips brush my ear. He sounds excited, maybe nervous. Is there a ring in his pocket? Has he called ahead and planned something humiliating with a waiter? His capable hands squeeze my elbow. I look at my expensive shoes. Red tears bite my eyes.

"Adam?" The hostess is a luscious thing in green velvet.

"Right here." He twines his fingers in mine and excuse-mes his way through the lobby. I trail him following the hostess, winding through the lush rows of tiny tables dotted like topiary in this garden of sensory delights. The men, women, and tables are all draped in the same rich, earth-toned palette of wealth and sophistication—designer skin, exotic eyes, flesh and food in artful presentations. But my skirt is too red. It's expensive and exquisitely detailed, but blood-colored, and draws glances. I am forever tripping over the human thread between eye-catching and obscene. I hate every woman I pass.

Adam beams across our table. "How was your day?"

"I got a tattoo," I tell him.

"Very funny. How was work?"

I only want to study his strong jaw and wide cheekbones, the way his blond hair falls into his earnest eyes—mortal beauty is so moving—but Adam's end-of-day reunion ritual dictates we confess our grievances using the form of the employees' creed. I learned the contemporary version easily, two variations on the theme of "my betters are worse than me."

I elect to berate The Client, the mysterious entity who pays our salaries and thus, in a market economy, is our superior and therefore, in American mythology, our inferior. Adam recites his day in the Idiot Boss variation, but I barely hear for feasting my eyes on his face, and hoping. The waitre

brings glistening jewels of fish on tiny rice couches and handleless clay mugs of tea. Adam orders wine. Not a glass each, but a bottle. Reckless, for him.

“Olivia.” He grasps the stem, but does not drink. “I have something I need to ask you.” He toys with the fine rim. “I know we haven’t known each other that long, in the grand scheme of things.”

The scheme is infinitely grander than he can comprehend. And he doesn’t know me at all. One man once, a few hundred years ago, almost did, but I could not sustain even that for long. Poor Vlad, I’m not sure even he ever fully believed me.

“I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you,” he says. But has he fallen far enough? Too deep to scale the sheer wall of his desire? If I can show him everything I am—wingscars and quills—and he can stay fallen with his fallen angel, then I might finally be free. But I’ve screwed this up every time since the fall of man. I must watch my step.

“I love everything about you, the way you look, your eyes, your laugh . . .”

I have to tell Adam now, before he proposes, or the loophole will dissolve. If my body had seen like a mortal’s, I would smell wet fear.

“I love that you think my jokes are funny, and that you care how my day went.”

In his infant-blue eyes, I see naked hunger glint like light off glass. He wants me, truly and deeply. He wants me, and his desire creeps through my body like food. I could sustain myself on such hunger surely? Fill myself up with his need? It isn’t love, but it is power. Almost as sweet.

“I want you to know”—Adam leans forward, his voice a husky whisper in the crowded restaurant—“I totally respect your intention to save yourself for marriage.” His eyes, darting to the adjacent tables, give the lie to his professed respect. “I would never put any pressure on you to do something you weren’t comfortable with.”

I’m not comfortable with the close-spaced tables, with the red of my skirt, or the briny smell of Adam’s excitement. The waitress brings more small plates—shimmering Szechwan pork ribs on curled lettuce leaves—and takes the rest away.

“Olivia, I want to wake up every morning and see your heavenly face beside me. I want to come home every night to find you there.” His fingers convulse around the glass and release it. His hand disappears beneath the table, reaching toward his coat pocket. He is shifting in his chair. Will he get down on one knee here, where there is barely space to stand between the tables? The ridiculous, antiquated, public gesture will knock something over. It will ruin my chance.

“Adam, wait a minute—”

“No, don’t make me stop. There’s something I need to say.” His mouth, anticipating, is delicious. I hate to shove truth into it, but he must taste before he speaks.

“Just a minute, Adam. Please.”

“I love you, Olivia. I want us to be together.” He is still fumbling, still reaching.

“We can never be together.” I say. “Not the way you mean it.”

“Why not?” His easy smile clouds over.

“I can’t have sex,” I whisper.

“You’re just frightened.” But he takes his hand from its pocket—empty. “It’s because you’re innocent.”

“I’m anything but innocent. I’m bad—wicked.”

“Honey, don’t say that.” He reaches for my hand and strokes it. “You’re not wicked; you’re everything I’ve ever wanted in a woman.”

As if those two things were ever mutually exclusive.

“I don’t understand why you don’t have more confidence. Look at you, you’ve got it all: a gre

body, great job, a great guy . . .” He makes a funny little gesture toward himself, the rational man comforting the emotional female.

“I’m cursed,” I tell him, “ruined, destroyed . . .”

“Don’t be silly, Olivia. You’re a beautiful woman.”

“I’m not! I’m not a woman at all. I . . .”

Oh, crap.

The terror rises acrid and fast. I hear horror shrieking in his mind the single word *transvestite*.

Fuck, men are stupid. “No, Adam, stop. Adam, look at me! You know that’s not what I mean.” His heart thunders blood through him. I have to stop the panic.

“Adam, I-I’m a vampire.”

Adam is blank. He gazes, unseeing, into his plate where his forgotten food is cooling. It will be thrown away untouched. “Why do I always fall for the crazy girls?” he mutters to his ribs.

His wine glass reflects an inverted table, a reverse Olivia, an upside-down world in its yellow-white orb. “God, there must be something wrong with me. I thought you were different. You’re so pretty, so classically beautiful, I thought . . . Is this an eating disorder thing?”

“Adam—”

“You’re not a vampire. That’s stupid. I’ve never even had a hickey from you. If anything, you avoid my neck.”

“I don’t have to feed that way. I can get everything I need just kissing you. My teeth have quills—my nails, too—tiny, sharp, hollow spines that you don’t even feel when they harvest—”

“Do you mean you’ve already—”

Bad idea to go into feeding practices right away.

“We’re angels, actually,” I scramble, hoping he’ll find some beauty in the lineage. “All vampires are—fallen angels.” I should shut up now. But the knot of disgust between his brows is deepening, and I want to keep talking until it unties. “Our parents were expelled from Heaven for something horrendous, and . . .”

“What?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“No, damn it, what are you saying? Can you please stop being crazy for just one minute and let me think this through? Of course you’re not a vampire.”

“Adam, shhh!”

“You’re not an angel either. I just can’t accept this.”

He can’t. Acceptance requires despair, and Adam isn’t the despairing sort. It’s a feature that attracted me to him, perversely—his dogged confidence.

“I loved you . . .”

“Adam, you can’t love what you don’t know.”

“I know you!” His voice climbs too loud.

“No,” I whisper, raging. It is, after all, all I’ve ever wanted. And all I have always been denied. “You don’t know me!”

“Bullshit. Tell me something about you I don’t know.”

“Do you know what would happen if I picked up a knife and opened my arm with it?” I lean forward, trying to anchor his wheeling eyes to mine. “It wouldn’t hurt. I can’t feel.” I am reckless with disappointment. “Before an ambulance could get here, the bleeding would stop and the opening would start to close. I would heal completely in less than ten minutes.”

“That’s disgusting!”

Why do moderns respond to miracles this way?

~~“I can’t have sex. I can’t die,” I dive on. “I don’t cast a shadow, not that you ever noticed. And when I’m alone, I can’t see myself in mirrors. I have no idea what I look like without someone else’s eyes on me.”~~

It isn’t working. I’m scrambling down the precipice, but his grip is slipping and my eagerness to reach him showers rocks on his upturned face.

I leave him sitting there. I have seen hope’s self-immolation too many times to sift through Adam’s ashes.

Eden Sushi occupies the last building on the block, and I disappear around the corner as Adam explodes through the restaurant doors. I strike unbreakable angelic nails into the mortar and scale the bricks’ rough face on talons and heels.

“Olivia! Come back here!” Adam yells into the night, blond and vulnerable beneath me, “I want to talk to you.”

Shout yourself hoarse calling for your angel, but don’t lift up your eyes to see.

“Olivia! Where are you?”

My skirt billows on the black breeze, the proud, scarlet flag of tattered desire. I step back from the roof edge and from hope, listening for the pulse of my pale city beneath its ugly electric skin. But I can only hear my sisters’ howling hunger.

“Come on, Michael!” Adam pleads with the bartender who followed us out to say we’re no longer welcome within. “I won’t make a scene. Dude, you know me!”

But I am already gone.

I should go to my sisters, but not tonight. Tonight, I will be the bogeyman, a thing half seen, the sudden shiver crawling, ranging fast and silent through your night, my glorious daybreak. Tonight, I will hunt with Adam’s rage on ruined shoes, and I will feed full-tooth.

Desire denied consumes.



Dominic frowned at the smudgy ovals his wet socks left on the sparkling kitchen floor, and listened. No sound came from his mercifully deserted town house. Margery must have finished her cleaning and left while he was still out running. Dominic smiled. He’d done an extra five kilometers in the exact hope. And in advance atonement for the icy slices of porcine heaven he unpeeled and dropped into an ancient cast-iron fry pan. High cholesterol ran on his dad’s side, making six fat strips of bacon contraindicated as an afternoon snack, but Dominic prodded his indulgence with a fork and grinned. He’d end up like Dysart if he wasn’t careful—hand-fed death in small bites by overeager postdocs.

He inhaled deeply, waiting on the knot that the smell of tree smoke and plenty always untied in him. Anger let go in his chest, and he leaned against the spotless countertop to stretch his calf muscles. The bacon’s smell was working, and that mattered more than understanding why this scent always carried him back to a wide-hipped woman by a massive wood stove. He smiled at the image of her, back turned, singing to herself while he, four years old—five maybe—sat at a flour-sprinkled table with his rolls in an old pan, waiting for breakfast, dressed for church.

The familiar clatter of his housekeeper descending the stairs jostled him from his scent-dream.

Dominic bowed his head. She had not left after all. “Dr. D?” Margery yodeled. “You makin’ bacon again?” Dominic grasped an ankle to stretch out his quads, and nodded to the wild-haired woman standing, capable hands on ample hips, in the doorway of his kitchen while his two cats, Hubel and Weisel, circled her ankles.

“Honestly,” Margery pronounced, “I don’t know why you won’t use a treadmill on a day like this. You’re soaked through. I’ll tend the bacon, you sit down. Or go shower. I’ll have those rashers and some nice eggs with toast ready by the time you’re cleaned up.”

“Sit down yourself, Mrs. L. There’s enough here for both of us.”

Margery regarded him through narrowed eyes while the kitties went straight to their dishes. “Things bad at the lab today?”

“No actually, it was a good day.”

On his twenty-first birthday, Dominic sold a stash of Civil War-era gold, paid off his parents’ mortgage, and bought this modest town house for cash. Margery, excessively well-paid to come in and clean once a week, represented the singular exception to Dominic’s six subsequent years of monklike austerity.

“I’m going to California next month,” he said.

“And you’re not happy about that?”

“Not particularly, no.”

“That explains it.” Margery nodded her red ringlets.

“Explains what?”

His housekeeper took her usual seat at the little kitchen table, still nodding her head. Dominic refilled the cats’ water. “You only make bacon when you’re upset,” she said. “Otherwise it’s those dreadful boil-in-the-bag dinners.”

It was true. To deliberately trigger a memory-like seizure for the warmth and serenity it brought was stupid, but hardly the riskiest game Dominic played with his bizarre affliction. He’d done this before, trying to rule out temporal lobe epilepsies, but they generated no abnormal electrical activity. In the EEGs and fMRIs, his brain lit up exactly the same as when he remembered first grade.

“I wish you’d let me cook for you.” Margery went on, propping her feet up on Dominic’s chair. “I’ve got plenty of time on my day here. You barely move things one week to the next. I could whip up a few meals for you. They’d cook while I clean, and you’d have a hot dinner waiting when you come home, with more in the freezer for the week ahead.”

Dominic drained the bacon fat meticulously into the emptied cat food tin he fished from the trash. “I pay you for the day, Mrs. L. You could just leave when you’re done. You don’t need to stay until I get home.”

“You say that every week, but I hate to think of you coming back to an empty house.”

“Really, I don’t mind.”

“You say that every week, too. But I have the time. Or I could start tidying the basement?”

“No.” Dominic put two more pieces of bread in the toaster. “No. Thank you.”

“It just seemed a shame to leave you here alone, today being Valentine’s and all.”

“Is it? Oh yeah, I saw Ghita in the student union. She had hearts all over her shirt . . .” Tension coiled again between his teeth and ears. “No. That’s not right. What’s her name? Jessica. I saw Jessica.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s hard to keep students straight in your mind. You’ve got so many in those introductory psychology classes.”

Dominic cut with more force than strictly necessary into a tomato. He had explained to Margery to

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