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An Excerpt From *Haloës*, a Novel

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Natalie Rose Ferrigno

June 2015

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June 2015

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For all the women and girls who felt overlooked during the era of paranormal romance. I
know you are out there and I cannot wait to share this book with you.

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Chapter 1

On the last night she was human and whole, Mercedes did what was forbidden. She did not think of it that way, not at the time. All care for personal safety had vanished, the dead heaviness settling in its place. Most of the time, its arrival was unprompted, but today, it had a cause: her boyfriend. That morning, they were supposed to meet for breakfast, but she didn't show. Annoyed, he went to her apartment, unlocking the door with the key she'd given him, a compromise gift after she'd refused to move in with him. He found her in bed, pillow pressed tightly over her head.

This was not an uncommon occurrence with Mercedes—numerous times, he'd found her hiding in her room or ensconced in her desk chair, unmoving and unresponsive. On this day, he once again pleaded with her, pulled on her wrists, and yanked away the covers, but she would not budge. Not even after he left.

When the dead heaviness settled over her, it took all of her energy and will to get herself to move. It downed everything, all light, all motion, all noise. Except, of course, for the sound of a door closing, footsteps echoing and fading.

She knew, even before finding the key on the kitchen counter, that he was never coming back. She had grown familiar with the way a place felt when someone had left it for good. It held a certain new emptiness, as if another room had been dug out of the wall somehow, a room with nothing in it, cold and barren.

Perhaps that's what she had hoped for herself when she went out alone that night, that she would take on a new emptiness, preferably where her heart was. She had slept

into the evening, waking as the sun was just about down, leaving a bluish-white outline of light around the windows, those stubborn lines that not even the thickest drapes could block. The light would creep its way in however it pleased and squeeze in with the darkness, making the room feel crowded. Mercedes couldn't sleep with all this hustle, this silent shoving between light and dark. She had picked her side, the one that would grant her oblivion from reality, a silent, dull place. Waking up, her body was cramped, the sheets twisted at her feet. She didn't move; she almost couldn't even as the cold made itself known to her, pinching goose bumps into her skin. She shivered. Her teeth clacked, trying to give her blood a little push to warm her up.

Still, she wouldn't move. She was trying to find comfort in the cold, trying to freeze her own tears before they could squeeze out. The little parasites. She hated the thought that she would cry. Frustrated by her weakness, she got up and stood in front of her mirror. She didn't recognize herself. There was some other woman, not even a twin, not even with a name or importance staring back at her. Mercedes made herself feel like she was floating, looking down on a woman looking at another woman in the mirror. Then, there were two strangers: a reflection and a living, breathing woman. Mercedes knew neither of them. She was somewhere else, above them. She told herself she was not involved. She was free, she thought, but not for long.

A phone ringing brought her back into her body and out of the blissful disconnect. If only it were real. Looking in the mirror, Mercedes saw herself and the disappointment clinging to her face. The phone rang persistently, making it impossible to bring the

illusion back. She walked to the kitchen. Her body ached: she'd slept wrong. She was cold but now used to it having woken up uncovered. Picking up the phone, she dreaded hearing his voice. But it wasn't him—it was her mother.

"It wasn't meant to be, I guess," she explained, her voice dull and tired. She always did this—she didn't want to get into the details with her mother. She didn't want to cry over the phone or dig down for the words, the ones that described how she really felt, whatever that was. Already, she could feel herself closing up inside.

She thought: *I don't want my mother to know*. What didn't she want her mother to know? It was a secret even from herself, shapeless stones falling into the murkiness of her blood and getting tangled in her weedy nerves. She could dig for them, discover what they would tell her, but she didn't want to know.

After hanging up with her mother, Mercedes tried to sleep more, her heart aching for its oblivion. She just wanted time to pass, for this heaviness to grow tired of her body and leave her as it always did. She longed for the time in between when she was as light as a leaf, able to work through a whole day without pause. Unable to rest, she sat in front of her computer, finger poised above the power button. A project for a client was due soon, but she could not bring herself to turn on the machine. She knew in this state her creative energies would not flow except in dark directions, completely unsuitable for designing a company logo.

Purposely leaving behind her jacket and hat, Mercedes went out in black jeans and a black sweatshirt. If she was going to be alone, she might as well be cold. That's

what being alone meant to her: being cold. Her body would be cold with no one else to warm her. Her heart would be cold, shielding itself from the surprising heat of sadness, the hot tears and warmth building underneath the covers she hid in. Tonight, she'd go ahead and make herself cold, outside. Darkness. Empty streets. Mercedes headed straight for the park. There was one bench below a light that was always out every time she passed it. As she walked, she hoped no one had fixed it. She kept her pace slow and easy, resisting her cold skin's pleas to move faster. Reaching the path that led through the trees, she started to look for it. Her steps were beginning to stiffen; she was getting cold, through and through. Winter wrapped its hands around her knees, strangling them. Mercedes stopped to rub them, letting the quiet fill her ears with its emptiness and push out all other sounds, including her own heartbeat.

So absorbed in her own mind, she did not notice the one who had been following her, the one who had detected her heartbeat as soon as she entered the trees. The follower was pleased. Jumping down from her perch in the trees, the follower crept beside the human, footsteps hardly masked, even though she had the power to make the sound disappear completely. A human, out in the night, defenseless against her and her master, who had such plans! This human was alone in life, she could tell. This human would not be missed if she disappeared for a time and then came back, quite suddenly, changed.

Unaware and unconcerned, Mercedes stepped even more slowly, letting her foot hover in the air before coming down on the ground. She wanted to only leave footprints. No echoes. Her footsteps seemed soundless to her, though her follower heard them quite

clearly, being one of the changed. Soon, the follower thought, she will not be able to hide from any sound. She will have our brilliant skills, this one.

Winter had fully settled over the earth, the trees and ground wrapped in white snow, dead-looking as corpse skin. The air was cold, but not yet bitter. There were still many weeks for it to build to its full sting, which Mercedes almost found herself longing for, being in the mood for punishment. She sighed suddenly, her breath whirling and vanishing in the half-darkness, heat leaving her body. She loved winter, how it sucked the warmth out of bodies, how it drained the color from the scenery, leaving only shapes and shadows. She thought she could really get to know the world then, imagining herself running her hands over the cold surfaces, the textures hitting her nerves purely, no burning distraction of heat. Her eyes slid over the lines and shadows, no colors to obscure or confuse. It soothed her, almost made her hate the world of warmth and color. She liked to see the world in this death-like state, the ground drying out in decay, freezing, hardening.

It was these thoughts that kept the follower rapt for the follower could do such a thing as listen to a human's mind. It helped with hunting, with self-protection. This young woman was the perfect candidate. She was already suited to live in the world of those who were changed. *She is already like us, yes.*

After passing under lamp after lamp, some flickering, some shining strong, Mercedes reached a patch of darkness shrouding a bench. It was covered in a few inches of perfect, untouched snow, smooth and soft-looking as a pillow waiting for her. She

began to reach out to press her bare hand into it when she heard rustling in the bushes behind her. She froze, suddenly thinking of how unwise it was for her to be here alone, but she didn't move or start. It was not surprise or fear that shivered through her. It was some other sensation new to her. Something she had never encountered before was near to her, something that wanted her. She could feel it as if hands were reaching for her, along with the looming sensation she got when someone else silently entered a room while her back was turned. Was this how an animal felt when it was being hunted? Not scared, but alert. Focused, ready to run at any second. No other sound followed it and the presence vanished. Mercedes put it out of her mind.

She had a seat and tried to imagine herself having made no print, no mark in the snow. She'd pretend it was still pure and fluffy, untouched as if she were hovering above it, the space between herself and the snow no thicker than a sheet of paper. She placed her feet flat on the ground, also imagining them not touching the snow. She lined up her knees so they were shoulder width apart, not minding the cold she could have spared herself from if she had curled them to her chest. Mercedes sat up straight, hands laying one over the other, her fingers curled upward in relaxation without her mind having to tell them to do so. She was completely comfortable and relaxed. It felt as if her blood could flow freely now, simply slipping from one corner of her body to another without a jolt or a twist. The heaviness in her body seemed to lift slightly, but it remained, for the most part, in place.

The follower was pleased to see Mercedes so thoroughly absorbed in her own slow thoughts that she didn't sense the presence of the blue-pale girl standing right before her. The follower kneeled down and leaned in for a closer look. How delightful! Mercedes couldn't even smell the human blood on the girl's breath. The blue-pale girl was memorizing how Mercedes looked and how she'd tell the scientist that there was a perfect candidate. She found someone they could take for sure. The blue-pale girl even had the gall to sit beside Mercedes, to touch her with her cold, blue-pale hand, the veins shining through like dim lights. The blue-pale girl had a trick that helped her do this. The blue-pale girl had a lot of tricks, like the ones that could allow her to fake death, read blood-scents, and make her own presence go away. If you became powerful enough after the change, these were some of the tricks you could learn. When you began to subsist off the blood of other creatures and food disgusted you. You'd prefer a drink from the neck of a human, or their arm, their wrist, their thigh, or their chest. Anywhere blood flowed, you wanted to stop it. That was the desire above all else: to stop the flow of blood. But for this moment, the blue-pale girl wanted to stop her presence from radiating, so she used the trick.

Mercedes had no concept of these creatures, no idea anything would be out with her on this cold, deeply dark night.

With no detection, the blue-pale girl left to get her master, the scientist. She would give him the pleasure of luring the girl. It was only fair after what he had done for her. Unlike most of the unchanged, he was kind and worshipful. In fact, he was better to her

than the changed she knew, so she became his friend and ally. For him, she would do anything.

—

Mercedes didn't realize he was there until his voice cracked into her ear.

"Are you alright?"

She looked up, irritated that her moment was interrupted. She came here, specifically, to be alone.

A man was standing in front of her, leaning over. Though he was quite close to her, she could not see the color of his eyes. He stood in just enough light for her to detect that he was young, only a handful of years older than her at the most.

"Do you need help?" His voice was somewhat high and almost strained, as if from disuse.

"I'm alright," she said.

"Ah, just asking. It's a bit odd to see a young woman out this late by herself."

"Yeah, I just needed to clear my head."

"Ah, I see. Well, isn't it odd that we ran into each other then?"

Mercedes glared at him, becoming nervous. Is now the time when he'd attempt to lure her somewhere?

"What, exactly, do you mean by that?"

"I don't mean to sound like a salesmen, but I've recently entered into a business deal with a therapist. I'm his financial advisor, you see," he said, casually. "Would you

mind terribly if I gave you his card? I don't mean to presume anything about what you're going through, but he's just begun his practice and needs a bit of a boost. I'm sure you understand."

"Sure." She tried not to look at him.

"Wonderful. I'm sorry. I'm quite into my job. It seems like I never really go off the clock, if you know what I mean. I'm always looking out for my clients," he added, almost giddy. She could see he was smiling. There was no escape from advertising in this world, she thought. Not even in the woods in the middle of the night.

He reached into his coat, which frightened her suddenly. Stupid girl. This guy was about to pull out a knife or a cloth soaked in ether. His charm was meant to make her feel comfortable so he could hurt her with little struggle.

His hand emerged with a small red card gripped between his fingers. Smiling, he extended his arm to her, keeping his same distance from her.

Once she'd taken the card, he bid her goodnight, bowing to her like some old-time gentleman. He walked away briskly, heading in the opposite direction she would be taking to go home. She watched him, holding the card in her still outstretched hand, and waited for him to be out of sight before she would let her guard down enough to examine it. Whatever writing was on it was impossible to make out on the bright red paper. The print must have been silver or white, something aesthetically pleasing but difficult to read. She put it up to her nose, but still couldn't make out the words in the half-light. She wanted to know who it was even though she was not going to visit this therapist. Clearly,

he needed a better designer for his business materials. Maybe she could take him on as a client, at the very least. Mercedes was in no hurry and sat for a few more minutes, putting the incident out of her mind to get just another moment or two of peace.

Once settled down at home with clean, dry clothes on her body and a cup of tea steaming on her coffee table, Mercedes set to examining the card. It was the same size as any business card, except it was soft and flexible like plastic. It was a pinkish red that shined ever so slightly in the light. Mercedes squinted and flipped the card over, looking for a name and contact information, but none was to be found. She took it over to her computer desk and turned on the lamp, bringing the card directly under the bright light. Still, no writing of any kind. She turned off the light and looked at it in complete darkness, wondering if the ink was glow-in-the-dark, a new trend she'd noticed in advertising. She doubted that a serious professional like a psychologist would use such a gimmick, but it was worth looking anyways. She found nothing. The card, as far as her eyes could tell, was completely blank.

What the hell? she thought. I guess that guy was playing joke on me. But he seemed so serious, to just come up to me like that.

Frowning, Mercedes tried to think of an explanation. *Maybe...*

Switching the light back on, Mercedes began to scratch the card with her fingernail, wondering if the shiny red was something to be scraped or peeled away like some kind of packaging. Maybe it was some new advertising trick. Maybe the psychologist was secretive. Maybe he was overly cautious about his patients' and his own

privacy. She scratched. Nothing came free. The card stayed exactly as it was, blank and red. Disappointed, Mercedes settled back on her couch trying to think what else to try.

It had to have been a prank. *The man was a good actor, I guess. Or I'm more upset than I thought. Why would anyone do this?*

Mercedes turned the card over in her hand and placed it on the table, picking up her tea and sipping cautiously. She drank slowly, letting the gently steaming liquid cascade down to her stomach where it would pool, drawing warmth into her body. Mercedes put down the mug and stared at the card. Shrugging, she picked it up and headed for the trashcan in the kitchen, ripping the card in half as she went. Her hand jumped, a hot liquid pouring over her skin. She looked down and saw red, steaming liquid splattered on her hands, dripping onto her white carpet. The two halves of the card fell to the floor.

What the hell? Mercedes kneeled down and picked them up. They had begun to turn white or, rather, the red was dripping out and revealing white, as well as tiny block lettering. Putting the two halves together, Mercedes tried to read the words. For some reason she could not make sense of them. Something told her there was a name, address, and phone number on the card, but she couldn't focus or unscramble the letters long enough to read them. Mercedes tried holding the card up to her desk lamp. The words looked the same: jumbled and blurry, nonsense, as if someone had typed random letters onto it. Frustrated, Mercedes put the two halves on her coffee table and set to cleaning the red stain off her carpet.

Before going to bed, she had one last look at the card. The letters seemed to be moving around on purpose in order to confuse her. Mercedes calmed herself and thought maybe she just needed to get to sleep. She was tired to the point where she felt drunk. That had to be the reason why she couldn't read the card. She'd been up all night and her eyes were seeing double. Maybe in the morning she'd be able to make sense of what she had been given.

Leaving the card on her table, Mercedes went to her room and carefully closed the door. That night, she dreamt she was in a dark room flipping through a pile of red paper, struggling to read what it said. The pieces of paper were all different shapes and sizes, covering the floor of the room. At one point, she paused on a piece that looked like a business card, which she held close to her face, yet still couldn't read; the words seemed to be crawling around on the page. Suddenly, she was outside in an empty field, a bright sun illuminating the world. The papers were scattered about her, whirling in the cold wind. The card was still in her hand. Looking down, she realized the card was covered in ants and beetles, as were the other papers. Her nerves jumped and the card flew from her hand, heavy with insects. Bugs were crawling on her shoes and she was beginning to feel them on her legs when the dream ended. The rest of the night, her sleep was silent and black.

The next morning, Mercedes found herself standing at a red door. She could hardly recall waking up that day, much less how she had gotten there. All she could remember was putting the two halves of the card together and reading something, then

walking out her door and thinking, *That's in the countryside. I have a ways to go.* Now, she was standing on a porch she didn't recognize. Her feet were bare, sore, and cold, the skin caked with dirt and blood. She was wearing sweatpants and a thin cotton hoodie. How she'd gotten there without freezing to death was nearly as mystifying as the arrival itself. Her lips were dry and starting to crack. She shivered intensely, but did not dare to enter the house.

She turned around and saw black trees surrounding the house like soldiers, their branches bereft of leaves. Snow lay about in patches, withering away as winter took a break from spitting it to the earth. Stepping back off the porch, Mercedes looked up at the house. It was more like a mansion at least four stories high, painted mostly white except for black shutters and a black pitched roof. Even the chimney was made of a peculiar black brick. The door stood out, shining red from underneath the porch roof, huge and gaping like a mouth opening for a yell or a scream.

Mercedes stood as though she were weighted down in place, her limbs beginning to feel as if someone were filling them with rocks. The sense that she had just gone someplace dangerous began to rise in her stomach like a serpent being charmed from a basket. It uncoiled, thrashing its tail about, and slithered up her throat until its tongue was lapping at her brain, causing the goose bumps that were already on her skin from the cold to worsen. It wanted her to go back so it could feel safe enough to curl back down into her stomach where it was dark, warm and wet, where it could rest and she could rest. On top of this, the feeling that she was being watched descended over her like a sticky cloud.

She could feel sweat rising along the hairline on her forehead and the back of her neck, further cooling her already frigid skin. A tingling wave of fear passed through her blood and clamped her body down even more firmly to her spot.

She strained to turn her head upwards, feeling as if someone was trying to hold it in place with cold hands and pointed fingernails. Her eyes struggled to pass over the dozens of dark windows printed along the front of the house. No lights were on and each window was black enough that Mercedes couldn't tell which ones had curtains drawn. Where the hell could anyone be watching from? Where was that creeping feeling coming from? A creak from the front door made her jump out of her paralysis. A hand so pale it looked blue crawled from behind the door and pulled it open. A teenaged girl, whiter than anyone she had ever seen stood in the doorway, black bangs covering her eyes. Without looking up or gesturing, the girl told Mercedes to come inside. That they were waiting anxiously for her.

She'd been lured, but she could not resist entering the mansion. Something pulled her in. She wasn't scared, though. In a way, this is exactly what she'd wanted: to disappear, to never be seen again. If she went inside, she was sure she'd be gone forever and done, at last, with life.

Stepping forward, the world began to pulse. Each footfall was followed by a wave visible only to her, she suspected. Some intensity was wafting out to her, warning her but contorting, screaming, whispering. She walked slowly, never stopping or hesitating. Her heart pulled her in, the sinews reaching out and latching onto something. Her feet seemed

to sink into the first step and then she was standing at the door. The girl was gone leaving only a line of black between the red door and the white exterior. Her vision stilled like a heartbeat stopping.

She reached forward and touched the darkness. It was warm and soft and breathing, steady then faster. It seemed to run out of breath and then stopped, becoming only darkness. The door moved. Sparks ran up her body. Who was opening it? It wasn't until her arm was outstretched that she saw her hand on the door. Only saw it. She couldn't feel it. The pulsing began again and drummed to a high pitch, then stopped and the world settled back in, even the sound of the breeze and leaves sweeping through the branches. She may have heard a voice. A neighbor perhaps? She felt herself moving back for the top stair when she saw the black in front of her and the dim hallway around the corner.

Her steps silent and tentative, she followed the light at the end. The door stayed open, or so she assumed, as she never looked back or heard it close. She thought she should call for the girl to see if she was there in the lit room. But there was no lit room. Only a dining room table, a kitchen, and the dim light of a window covered in dark halfway-open drapes. Someone was here she was sure. She turned as a cold hand settled onto her shoulder.

Somehow, the girl had gotten ahead of her. It made sense and didn't at the same time. No footsteps, nothing. She must have been fast. Mercedes turned to face this creature, this girl, she corrected herself, though there was something creature-like about

her: long hair that covered her eyes, extremely pale skin that glowed in the mostly-dark. The girl brushed her hair away from one eye and glanced at Mercedes, then dropped her head down again and waved her hand. Mercedes should follow. The girl led her down a hallway. She stopped and opened a door. Light flooded out. The girl brushed her hair aside again and looked at Mercedes, the dark eye so frantic and wild, impenetrable, yet Mercedes trusted her. She'd trust anything at this point. The girl began to descend the steps, her bare feet soundless. Mercedes looked at her path: dimly lit stairway with white, blank walls on both sides, a solid-looking square of black at the bottom.

Her feet were cemented. She closed her eyes. In one version of the story, she ran, through the hall, out the front door, down the street until her feet bled and surroundings turned familiar and civilized. She returned to her life, her empty apartment, the solo suffering. In the real story, Mercedes didn't care at all. Mercedes wanted to die and someone here wanted to kill her, she was sure.

The girl was standing at the bottom of the stairs, head down, face completely obscured. Someone else was down there with her, waiting.

Chapter 2

Mercedes began to descend, her body still tingling with dissipating numbness. Though she was walking, a force seemed to pull her along as well, as if to be sure she would not turn back. Her eyelids became heavy as she approached the bottom step.

The air was humid and musty, filling her lungs with filth she could feel accumulating in her chest. Was it poison? Something to knock her out and ease her suffering? No. Not *her* suffering. She tried to open her eyes, but one already felt swollen shut from the dust in the air. A smooth, grey stone surrounded her on all sides. The sound of liquid trickling seemed close, though she couldn't detect any dampness in the air, that clear scent that often accompanies water. Something thicker was there, something with the scent of an animal. Human sweat? It smelled fleshy, rich.

A bright light was shining in the corner of her half-closed eye, a haloed pinprick of soft yellow. It flickered, became blocked and then unblocked as if someone had stepped in front of it for a moment. She couldn't sense the presence of anyone else. Where had the girl gone? She stepped forward.

She started to wonder if this person would even bother with her. Didn't killers take pleasure in the struggle and fear of the ones they took? A willing victim didn't seem like much of a victim at all to her. Unless this was about something else, something much worse than dying. At this point, almost everything seemed worse than dying.

Mercedes turned towards the light and before she could make sense of what was there a familiar voice chimed in, the man she'd met a day before. Or had it been longer

than that? A few days? Even a week? Maybe it had been sooner, only hours before. The moment of their meeting floated in her mind, tethered to no context as if it had always been with her, implanted there before her birth.

“So, you’ve come.”

The smile in his words was unsettling, overeager. Too real to be exaggerated, though. He touched her back.

“It’s been so long since I’ve had a visitor. Please, sit down.” His hand pressed her forward until a gilded chair with brown leather cushioning came into view, emerging as if from a black fog. A small gold table was beside it. The table appeared to be empty. She turned to him, but she could barely see his face. It was blurred, as if she was looking through distorted glass. She tried to imagine what he looked like based on their previous meeting. Nothing came to her. A blank space occupied her mind where a man should be. Sad. She’d never know the face of the one to end her. Maybe it was better that way. Less personal. She could feel more alone in her death.

“I won’t ask you too much about your condition outright, though I can sense it strongly. That happens after a time in a position such as mine. I’m an expert at finding the...unusual in a living thing, if you don’t mind me saying. I don’t mean to suggest anything rude, that is.” He spoke formally, careful and even. His voice was neither low nor high, but a rather crystalline tenor, perfect. A smooth, clean voice that betrayed no fear or tension. She seemed to remember it differently, as if something had been wrong with it before. The sound had all the kinks worked out, flowed flawlessly from the well-

oiled machine of his voice box. She had the feeling he had been speaking a lot since they last met.

“You’re not quite the type to kill yourself, otherwise you would have already done it. You came here because you expected something else. I understand that. She can tell, you know.” He appeared to gesture to the left. The teenaged girl was there, watching through one eye, her head slightly tilted so that her hair hung to one side. “It’s a strange phenomenon. Not mind-reading, but rather a very accurate use of inference. She’s well-practiced, so be careful if you want anything to remain secret, though that’s not much of a concern for you anymore, is it?”

The girl mumbled something in a guttural voice, low with pinches of girlish high notes.

“I don’t think she heard,” he said.

“She doesn’t need to hear. She’ll know soon.” The girl’s voice was pretty, bell-like, but strained and a bit nasal. If she spoke clearly, it would have been a lovely sound. Instead, she mumbled making it sound distant, disturbed like broken glass.

Her image, on the other hand, was perfectly clear and whole. The man was still blurred, his face a mush of tan with two little dark smudges in place of his eyes. A blob of red undulated on the man’s face when he spoke. The girl’s long, perfectly straight black hair flowed over her extremely pale, almost bruised-looking skin, covering what appeared to be a delicate face she liked to hide.

Mercedes was silent for a moment, her mouth feeling glued shut, her lips still dry. Her throat seemed sore. Perhaps she had walked all through the night to get here and her body had dried out from breathing the cold air.

“Why can’t I see you?” she asked, peeling her mouth open to speak.

“Help her,” he said to the girl. “This is Xyza, by the way, and I am Soren.”

Xyza came forward and reached out, one jagged finger pointed. Her nails were long and black with dirt, jagged as if she’d been scratching something abrasive. “Do not blink. Don’t, no matter what.” Gripping the back of Mercedes’s head with her other hand, Xyza briefly touched the other woman’s eye with a cold, dry fingertip. Though the touch was light, Mercedes’s eye still stung and watered. “One more.” Xyza touched the other eye. “Now blink.”

Mercedes let her eyes flutter and then looked at him.

He was young with pale brown hair cut short, but messy, as if by unskilled hands. His skin was fair with a faint golden glow. His nose and lips were small, as was the frame of his face, which gave him a rodent-like quality, though he was not ugly. At first, his eyes were a golden brown and when he blinked they sometimes became a bright orange that momentarily tore through the dark.

“If you accept the offer we’re about to make, one day you’ll be able to disguise faces, including your own, like Xyza can.” Soren gestured as he spoke, his hands moving in a gentle, flowing manner. “The change will make you powerful. It will drain away all your worries, lighten your life. Tell her how much better it is.”

Xyza's eyes became misty with remembrance. "I can't describe it. When I was like you, all was bleak and heavy. When I changed, life became vivid as it never was before. I became strong. The world falls at my mercy." Xyza's voice was clearer than it was before, as if she meant to treat these words differently. As if they were sacred or delicate. She stared at Mercedes with one wild eye, the large pupil making her whole eye black except for a ring of radiant blue encircling it. The ring sparkled as if from another source, a brighter light Mercedes could not see. She had to leave. Now.

Mercedes turned and took a few steps. A hand took her shoulder and squeezed. Sharpness sunk into her skin. Xyza wiggled her fingers as her nails dug in, the wet heat of blood flowing down Mercedes's back. "Don't make a mistake. Stay. We'll only offer this once and you'll find it very difficult to say no. I'll make sure of it."

Xyza squeezed and ground her nails deeper until the blood gushed out like it had been trapped. Mercedes started to feel faint and when the girl leaned in, breathing cold air onto her neck, drowsiness suddenly overtook her. The girl was still speaking. Mercedes heard none of it. She was already asleep.

She woke up an indeterminate amount of time later to find herself sitting half-bent in the gilded leather chair. The table, which had appeared empty before, had several gold instruments perfectly lined up on it. She recognized only two: a scalpel and a glass syringe with a gold needle. Another was scissor-like or clamp-like, she couldn't tell from a distance. The remaining two objects were identical: thick, needle-like. Pointed at one

end, approximately two inches long each. Black tubing was attached to the blunt ends and ran down the side of the table into the darkness.

She couldn't ask what would be happening to her. Something strangled her voice, kept her mouth clamped shut.

"Relax. We've done this before. We've improved the procedure, so you should turn out just like me," Xyza said, kneeling before Mercedes, her pinched voice back and ringing through the dusty air. "Maybe even better." Mercedes squinted at the instruments, which appeared to be clean, shining in the dim light. The table was stained with some kind of liquid, black spots spattered across the otherwise shimmering gold. Dust motes fell from the air around her, yet didn't seem to land on the equipment, instead hovering above the instruments for a moment and then flowing down the sides of the table as if they were protected by glass. Grey, sand-like powder collected at her feet and coated her skin.

"It's as clean as you'll need it," Xyza said, rising and backing away, her feet leaving prints in the powder. A hand gripping a cloth-lined mask came from behind her, pressing the chemical-scented device to her mouth. She breathed it in, moist and noxious, falling asleep again, her last memory the feeling of her body sliding down in the chair, her weakened legs unable to stop her. Mercedes felt her whole body dissipate as numbness pinched out her nerves. Her mind became white and nearly thoughtless, the static of distant memories sprinkling themselves like pins in her brain tissue.

Warm liquid surrounded her, thick and difficult to move in. She stretched her arms out and touched nothing. She leaned forward until her fingers felt something flexible and gel-like. It depressed under her touch, bending outwards. When she tried to speak or cry out, her mouth filled with an iron-tasting liquid. Panic sizzled through her body. She writhed and struggled, pressing herself against the membrane as hard as she could, hoping it would break.

She opened her eyes to a world of black and red with liquid and darkness surrounding her. She scratched and thrashed against the membrane until the world began to sink. Her feet touched cold ground, her body slowly following. The membrane started to draw closer to her. She squinted. Dark liquid was pooling below her and flowing across the grey stones into the darkness. She must still be in the basement or wherever it was Xyza had led her. The liquid drained away until the thick, translucent skin clung to hers, traces of red coating the inside in tiny, vein-like rivulets. She clawed at the membrane and managed to tear it open. She crawled out and peeled the warm, red-stained substance from her body.

A river of blood rolled away from her. That's all it could possibly be. Blood.

She felt dizzy, weak. Touching her skin, it seemed dry and loose, as if she were emptying out. She gripped her arm for a moment. Her fingers left indentations.

It had to be hers, the blood.

Hands grabbed her, pinning her down. They pulled the membrane back over her, pinching the tear shut as if it were clay. A needle-like pain stung her neck, which ached.

She reached up and touched two metal stubs, the rubber tubing still attached to them and running down her back. Coldness began to spread through her body, starting at her neck and spilling down. Her limbs stiffened, her mind shut down and aching. Again, she slept.

When she awoke again, her body felt full, but light. She touched her skin. It felt moist and taut. She was sitting in the gilded leather seat, no trace of the membrane on her body. The table was empty, with a new layer of dark liquid splattered on it. She could see now that the liquid was a deep red.

In fact, everything around her seemed clearer. She could see all the way to the far corner of the basement in front of her. Several feet from the far wall, a dark trench ran parallel from one side of the floor to the other. The blood flowed into it, trickling audibly as it spilled over the edges. She heard Soren's footsteps. He walked past her, heavy heeled boots clunking on the stone. He wore a long dark coat and gripped a gold chalice in his right hand. Kneeling down, he dipped the chalice into the trench.

He turned slowly, holding the chalice delicately as if to avoid spilling it. He glanced at her with fiery orange eyes and smiled just before taking a long swig, red dripping down the side of his mouth and chin.

"Pardon me. It's just difficult to drink this slowly. It's very salty and bitter. Xyza says I have to drink it, though, if I want to keep you safe with me. Don't worry. You'll take to your new tastes right away. I've...adjusted you for them." Soren's eyes turned on someone behind her. Xyza crept up beside her.

"You had a bit earlier, Xyza. How is it for you?"

“A deep, flowery taste, strong. Reminds me of a forest and, also, the ocean. There’s a bit of ocean water in there. And a bit burnt as well. Like burning roses and seawater. Yes, that’s it.”

“Sounds exquisite, doesn’t it? I’d offer, but I would not want to ruin what we’re doing for you here.”

“How...how am I alive?”

“We’ve replaced your blood. Her body used to be filled with what yours is now, though she got it from another of your kind and I made yours just for you. I’m hoping it’s actually better.”

“What’s in her body now?”

“You’ll see. How do you feel?”

Mercedes closed her eyes. Though her veins were filled and the dead heaviness was absent, something felt wrong. Something deep inside her that she had never noticed before was gone, something she could not place.

“I’m not sure I feel better, to be honest,” she said. “I think I feel bad in a different way.”

He smiled. “That’s what the other one said. I’m sure you’re just getting used to it. I’m positive you will not have his...defects. I improved the formula for you.”

“What if I don’t want to help you? What if I want this undone so I can just go home and forget about this?”

“I don’t know how to do that. Besides, you can’t leave. I drank your blood. You’re mine now. The other tried to leave and nearly died.”

“The other?”

“He can’t leave me.”

“You could be lying. Or that could be one of the defects I won’t have.”

“Well, then,” he said, nose up, eyes confident. “Go ahead and try.”

Mercedes tried to stand and slipped in her blood, limbs smacking against the stone. He smiled, perfect teeth stained red, a bit of blood still on his chin. The orange of his eyes undulated, watching her struggle. She stood again, slower this time, and walked to the stairs, wary of her blood-slicked feet. She watched him over her shoulder, worried that he would follow. When she reached the stairs, she began to run, her hands gripping the railing, his laughter echoing up the stairwell behind her, rushing past her. Xyza jumped in front of her when she entered the dark kitchen and grabbed her shoulders with sharp nails.

“Trying to leave, are you? The one who owns your blood is here. You won’t get very far.”

“Let go.”

“I will. I’d like to see you try to go. You want to know what happened to the other? He began to bleed all the blood I gave him. He screamed and screamed. He may have actually died if I hadn’t brought him home. He is weak. Let’s see if you’re stronger.” She pulled her nails out of Mercedes’s flesh and pushed her back. “Go on.”

Mercedes walked, calmly now. Approaching the door, she pulled it open, heart racing. She could die with this simple act. Get her wish. But, what about the part of her that had gone missing? She could not leave this world without knowing what it was. She moved over the threshold.

At first, the pain was excruciating. Blinding. Her vision flashed, her limbs cramped and she curled over herself. She had gotten to the head of the stairs before she fell, causing her to tumble down the steps to the ice-hard winter ground. Mercedes strained to unfold her limbs, which ached to the bone. Her body was covered in a clear liquid. It had no smell and stuck to her skin like oil without a sheen. She coughed, spitting it out of her mouth. It had no taste. A lightning bolt of pain shot through her when she stood. She started to run and her body tried to cramp up again. Her right thigh muscle twisted in on itself, causing her to limp, but she persisted. The moment they realized she was getting away, they'd come for her.

To her relief, the pain subsidized the further she got from the house. She felt an odd strength in her body and, eventually, she could run with little effort. Mercedes assumed this burst of energy was from adrenaline. He hadn't taken that from her, had he?

She was a mile or two away from the house when darkness overtook her. Once again, she would not know where she had been, who had done this to her. Whatever the change, it appeared she was wearing it better than whoever Soren had gotten before. All she cared about right then was getting home.

Once she was back in her apartment, the pain was gone, but her body still felt strange. The emptiness nagged her like nausea. It didn't relent even after she'd had some hot tea. She found herself suddenly craving her daily routines, the cup of tea and the sound of her computer starting up. No matter what she did to try and mask the unusual events of the night, the emptiness persisted, reminding her that she had been changed.

It was still night when she returned, though she could tell it would not last much longer. Soon, light would try to worm its way into her living room where she sat, computer flickering in the corner, tea cold and abandoned on the coffee table. She had her knees bent, hugging her legs to her chest. Her skin was cold, though she felt comfortable even in a set of thin grey pajamas. She didn't bother to adjust the heat and, in fact, turned it down with the feeling that she would not need it for quite some time.

When the sun began to infect the darkness of the living room, she rose and went to bed.

She dreamt of a tiny fetus floating in blood, its body half black and half white, its eyes an alien red, huge and taking up most of its small head. A faint light shone from behind it, creating a blurry yellow ring around it. The light made it appear to glare viciously, as if offended or angry. It twitched and turned in the blood-filled womb, its abnormally small limbs thrashing. Its spine seemed sharp and reptile-like. It wasn't until a small, stubby hand reached out that she realized it had claws and teeth, very sharp teeth. It looked at her and she had the horrible feeling she was looking into a mirror, not a dream.

When she woke the next day, the nausea was gone, along with the color in her eyes. The iris was still there. She could see the cracks when she looked closely. From a distance, her eyes appeared completely white with perfect black dots in the middle, giving her the look of some kind of reptile or feline. She could see everything clearer, every flaw in the mirror and a patch of discoloration on the otherwise white bathroom sink. Mercedes backed away from the mirror and pressed against the wall behind it. What kind of illness does this to you? She was sure that's what they'd done to her: made her sick. It was some kind of experiment. But why did they let her go? Did they want her to spread it or something? She remembered seeing a report on bioterrorism, one of the justifications for the war she'd almost forgotten they were waging. It was so far away, out in the deserts that ringed the city.

For a moment, Mercedes missed Lucas. He'd understood biology better than her and he paid closer attention to what was going on in the world. It was useless. She knew she'd missed all of her chances.

This thought struck her as odd. Normally, it took her months, if not years, to get over almost any kind of heartbreak or loss. Maybe this disease wasn't so bad.

Either that or she hadn't valued Lucas as much as she thought.

Her ears were more attuned as well. She could hear the neighbors wrapping their possessions in paper, ripping tape to close moving boxes. They couldn't hear it, but a music box was playing, stuck partially open until they'd discover it unpacking at their

new home. It was the tune to some ballet Mercedes could not recall. She could picture the little plastic ballerina, peeking out of the partially open box, looking almost half crushed by the lid.

A faint scent reached her. A mix of hay and fresh winter air. It was one of the neighbors who was standing close to the wall. Moments later, more scents came to her. The musty smell of recent rain and the clearwater scent of fog. One neighbor loved open spaces, the other loved the city.

She'd barely spoken to these neighbors in the time they'd lived next door. Surely an argument was about to emerge. She could detect a faint amount of fear and tension in one voice, carefree joy in the other. One said something about moving further out and the other reminded her that any place close to the desert was unsafe. Where they were going was even better than here. They were bound to snap and Mercedes did not want to hear.

The feeling of her own division was disturbing enough.

It took her until the evening to realize this was the feeling. Not just emptiness. Something was missing from her, but not gone. It was still inside her and broken. She could sense it, holding a cold cup of tea she could not bring herself to drink. She closed her eyes and found she was able to look inward, inside a deep part of herself that was now barren. The space was dark save for a soft yellow light. Something was there, or someone.

When she opened her eyes, the tea was frozen. She could see her breath, yet she felt neither cold nor warm. She put the teacup in the sink and turned the heat on. Even at

ten and then twenty degrees higher, she felt no change. Her body simply adjusted to the temperature. She stopped it at the usual sixty-five degrees. It had been two days since she last ate, yet her stomach felt comfortable. She felt no thirst; her throat was moist.

No, nothing had changed. It was just a trick.

The sun must have come up while she was asleep. A fine line of gold outlined the window in her living room and cast a faint pool of light on the floor. She went to the window and immediately her face began to flush and sweat collected on the back of her neck. The light made her eyes ache like she was staring directly into a light bulb. Mercedes ran to her room and hid under the covers until her body felt cool again.

It took several days for her body to crave nourishment, for her to feel the urge to leave her apartment. But she couldn't bear to let herself go because what she craved was unspeakable. She would not believe it or trust it or heed it.

Each night, she dreamed of the fetus floating in pieces. One white arm, one black arm. One white leg, one black leg. Chunks of torso. Ten tiny white bits and ten tiny black bits—its fingers and toes. Tiny black claws and white teeth swirled among the body parts. Two of the teeth were longer and sharper than the rest. The red eyes drifted, larger and more malice-filled than before. They glared, a crooked, melting face shining in the blood-womb.

She, too, felt such malice.

Chapter 3

Until the new guy moved in next door, Mercedes thought she was adapting well to her condition, though she feared it still. Going without food for a few days was nothing new to her. When the dead heaviness hit her hard, her appetite was usually the first to go. Not because she wasn't hungry, but because she just wanted to feel the pain in her stomach. It told her she was still there. This time, however, she was full-on appalled by food, only able to stomach a few cups of water a day. Hot water, specifically, warmed enough to feel like someone else's skin as she held the mug in her hands. More importantly, it quelled the nausea she'd begun to experience everyday giving her respite that usually only lasted a few hours.

She thought she could beat it, whatever had been done to her. They still hadn't come after her. Not yet. She double-and-triple checked her locks every dawn before the light drove her to sleep. Though she'd considered it, an alarm wasn't necessary. Her hearing was now sensitive enough that she was sure she'd beat any machine. In any case, it seemed they were no longer interested in her. Maybe they were disappointed in the results and off now searching for a more obedient lab rat.

Her sense of smell had improved, which didn't go well with her increasing disgust towards food. Around dinnertime, she'd bury her head in a pillow desperate to avoid the scent of meals being cooked in the apartments around her. Even so, she could not bring herself to throw away her food, only tossing what had rotted or expired. She kept hoping that one morning, she'd wake up to the daylight, hungry for cereal and orange juice.

The water only kept her for so long. Then she started craving something thicker, from an animal. The only thing she could think of was milk, so she boiled it together with the water, much like she did when she made chai tea. It was better and lasted longer than the water. A temporary fix she found slightly less unsatisfying. It was the wrong color and the wrong animal.

But it was better than nothing.

Her body was folding in on itself from weakness. She'd never gone this long without actual food. The sugar and protein from her tea-less milk should have been enough to keep her energy up, but it had the opposite effect. When it had been a few hours since her last glass, a craving overtook her, making her sit by an open window, scanning faces for someone. Someone she could take. As she watched, the satisfaction of drinking a warm liquid drained away and a darkness seeped into its place.

She stayed inside for fear of hurting someone, yet she couldn't resist looking. You'll know the one when you see him, the darkness said. Its words were in her head. It sounded like her voice when she thought.

She watched Jade move his belongings in by himself through a crack in her door. It was him. The glass of warm milk she had in her hands slipped from her fingers and shattered on the ground. It didn't matter to her. She never wanted to taste it again. The sound of the glass made him start and look to her door. She backed away, afraid he'd see her eyes.

Mercedes recognized him from high school. He'd been a kind but troubled kid. Rumor had it he'd been kicked out of school and locked away in a mental hospital. Some said another student caught him in the boy's bathroom, a razor in hand and blood dripping from dozens of cuts on his arm. The kid panicked and told the counselor. Later, a story went around about how he'd killed himself with only two strategic cuts. Mercedes's mother disputed this. Her mom was in the midst of one of her stints with work, keeping a job as a secretary for a psychiatrist who told her that cutters usually don't want to die. They just want to hurt, to distract themselves from their emotional pain with physical pain. Sometimes it's punishment or just a habit, too. Her mom insisted there was little chance Jade had killed himself. He probably just went to another school to escape the people who now knew his secret. Mercedes didn't argue, knowing her mom was just trying to comfort her. She must have asked the psychiatrist about it out of worry for her daughter.

Jade hardly looked any older than he had in high school, his face narrow and boyish. There were only a few streaks of brown in his otherwise bright blond hair. He was rail-thin and would have looked fragile if it weren't for his height, which had to be well over six feet tall. When he turned away from her door, she pressed it open slightly and peeked while he unlocked the door. He went inside, his head barely clearing the door frame. He carried a box and two guitars, one on his back and the other slung over his shoulder, into his apartment. Jade didn't seem like he'd changed much at all. He still

wore tight-fitting jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. Mercedes remembered seeing him in the same sort of clothes all year, even in summer.

It wasn't until he was expelled that she realized why he had to suffer the heat in such a way. She'd caught a glimpse of him leaving on his last day, one sleeve rolled up and bandages wrapped around his forearm. No one waited outside for him.

Mercedes was headed back upstairs clutching her mail, one of the few things she left her apartment for anymore, when a bout of of crippling nausea swept over her. She collapsed to her knees, gripping the railing until her knuckles would have shown white had she not grown so pale, her atrophied muscles shaking.

It was quiet except for her breathing until a muffled static-like sound came from above. It got closer and closer, making her nerves curl up, visions of Xyza reaching for her and Soren standing blurred in her shadow. The static grew, filling her sensitive ears until she picked out a beat and a voice singing right as a hand touched her shoulder.

It was Jade with headphones blaring and, for some reason, no shoes.

"Are you okay?" His voice was soft, though he wasn't whispering. She shook her head, the image of her predators falling away.

The last thing she remembered was accepting his outstretched hand then a white hot light flash as her skin touched his.

When she next opened her eyes she was laying on a new-feeling grey couch in a strange room, thinking of how, once again, she would not know where her hero had taken

her. Maybe Jade knew Soren and had been sent to give her wish to her. Jade seemed like the type to understand what it's like to want to vanish, no matter the suffering needed to bring it on.

She tried to sit up and a searing pain scorched through her nerves. Her mouth began to hurt and her grip tightened, the darkness shoving its agonizing way into her limbs. It made her want something to kill.

The urge was strong enough to get her through the pain it took to stand. When she pushed herself up, the pain surged up her arm and her legs. She hit the ground.

Mercedes would have him. The voice that sounded like hers coaxed her along.

"Hey." The same soft, unobtrusive voice reached her ear, signaling his exact spot in the room. "Hey!"

The pain flared when he got closer.

"Woah, woah. I'm not sure you should be up yet. You're shaking all over." She was stiff and shaking, but she reached for him. This time, his touch calmed her. He helped her settle back down.

"Thank you." She kept her head down. She couldn't handle looking at him because she'd see his skin, his face. The face she knew was hers the moment she saw him. He lifted her chin and touched her forehead with the back of his hand. "Well, you're not running a fever, but you sure look pale. Though I kind of remember you that way."

She smiled. He recognized her.

“I don’t mean any harm,” he said, though she didn’t understand why, unless a smile meant something different to him. “My name is Jade. Yeah, yeah Jade with green eyes. My parents weren’t too creative. Do you remember me?” He smiled briefly, but it faded when his eyes met hers. “Really, I don’t mean any harm. We went to school together, remember?”

Why did he feel like a threat? *She* was the threat.

“It probably doesn’t help that I remember your name, Mercedes.”

“It’s okay,” she said, though he didn’t look any more convinced of her comfort level. “I need something to drink.”

“I can get you that. Anything specific?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’ll get something when I get back to my place. I just need a second.”

Jade insisted he could get her something. It took several minutes for her to talk him out of it.

What are you doing? Get him close to you, the voice said. She had to get out of there. The voice that sounded like hers *was* hers. She wasn’t imagining it.

Giving up, Jade sat down close enough that his thigh brushed hers, the heat of his body radiating upwards through hers, putting a taste on her tongue she never had before. What you’re tasting is blood, she thought. And you will have it. But first you need to get him to trust you.

“So, you just moved in?”

“Yeah. Just got out of my parent’s place.” He blushed a little, an intense red on his fair skin. “I’m a bit late, I know, but it took me a long time to find a job I could take.” He hesitated. “I’m not too good at showing up to things.”

“It’s okay. I’m the same way.”

She said it even though she could already feel the nervous discomfort of bonding with someone, a small dark charge clinging between them, a live nerve. Something that would sting with electricity if it was ripped apart.

Jade must have felt it, too, hugging one knee to his chest and leaning his chin against it. “I work as a counselor now. I guess my own insanity makes me a natural.”

“You don’t seem crazy to me,” Mercedes said.

A faint smile appeared on his face. “You don’t remember then? I thought the school would have practically exploded with rumors after.”

Mercedes looked away. She didn’t want her face to give away the truth, but he knew and didn’t seem to mind. He seemed worn out, in fact. His eyes could be brighter, she thought.

“You sure you’re alright?”

Aside from affection, another feeling kept bugging her. The blood. The longer she sat with him, the more she could smell it. A salt-and-sweat smell. She wanted to know if it tasted the same way. “I’d better go.”

The voice that was really her own said it wasn’t time. She had laid the breadcrumbs. Let the bird fly into the trap.

No, she thought. I can't. If she could let herself live, then she had to do the same for another.

She thanked Jade for his help and left, her body starting to shake as soon as she stepped out of his apartment. She stayed up the rest of the night trying to distract herself with work, which she was behind on. She sipped more milk but it only left her aching.

She listened to Jade move through his apartment. When she had been looking for a place to live, the owner of the building showed her the layout, so she had a good idea how Jade's apartment looked even if she'd only seen the living room. She could imagine every move he made, could guess what he was doing, tried to pick up on any patterns she might need in the future. The darkness encouraged her. It said she could make a trap if social manipulation didn't work. Mercedes curled up in shame when she realized that if the voice was really hers, than the darkness was, too. It was all her. The craving and coaxing. It all came from within.

It calmed the shaking a bit, to imagine him. He stopped sometime around one o'clock in the morning, his body settling with a thump from a place she guessed was his bedroom, near to where hers was. His stillness got her body shaking again. She tried to calm it and put aside her work so she could concentrate. Even her well-worn couch couldn't soften the feeling in her limbs, that their strength was drying out.

The salt-and-sweat permeated the walls. It was worse the dinner smells. Mercedes buried her head in a cushion.

The nausea returned, growing from a small seed in her stomach to a crippling knot that pulled her down. At dawn, she fled to her room, exhaustion hitting her hard and fast. She couldn't tolerate the light anymore. As soon as the sun crept in, she went straight to sleep. She slept more than she ever had before. Her days and nights were completely reversed. The torment of trying to sleep through the night and stay focused the next day was gone. Yet, she never felt rested, as she would have expected. She simply did not feel tired. In her wakened state, she was present, the world clearer and more vivid than it had ever been before, though it felt at a distance, as if she were walking through a painting.

The spark connecting her with Jade was the first touch, the first anchor she felt to the world since the change. Thinking of it frightened her. Why hadn't they come for her yet? Even if setting her free was part of the experiment, wouldn't they still want to keep her within view? She kept her windows closed. If Xyza was watching, she refused to give her the satisfaction.

The next night she found a note outside her door: *Sorry, if it got too personal. With my job I'm so used to talking about my problem, I forgot most people don't want to hear it. Guess that's why we need counselor's right? –Jade P.S. I'm going out tonight, but maybe we can hang out some time?*

She smiled at the spelling mistakes. Little quirks like that always got to her in a good way.

You won't need to track him anymore. He's inviting you right in. The warmth she felt was cut off. How could she think these things?

The light flickered in the hallway, the note flashing before her eyes. Should she accept or toss it in the trash? She put the letter on her counter where she could see it every time she stepped into her kitchen.

She bit her lip thinking of him. It stung, liquid dripping down her chin. She touched it. Watery-looking blood collected at her fingertips. A half-prepared glass of milk sat near the note. She dipped her finger in and watched the red spread through the white. Without thought or will, she wiped her mouth again and swirled in more blood. It's not quite red enough, she heard in her mind. She squeezed her lip between her fingers, leaning over the cup, ignoring the sharp pain.

Now the milk was pink. Close enough. Mercedes smelled it, eager to take it in. It was fleshy, but underneath she detected the scent of chalk, the kind she used to coat the driveway with as a kid, dozens of colorful drawings scratched over the blacktop. The smell of daisies swirled through, too, the kind that had surrounded their house. Her first and only house. The daisies were her choice at the age of nine. Her mom liked to let her help out. Living alone, Mercedes understood this more than she had back then, happy that her mother had let her make a decision for them both. It's better to have someone else make some of the choices. Having complete control couldn't happen without being alone.

Chalk and daisies. Didn't Xyza say her blood was...roses? Burning roses? And something else. Maybe it was just her perception. Unless, of course, Xyza lied. It didn't seem beyond her to lie.

Mercedes curled up on her couch and tucked her knees under her chin, steadying the mug in her hands. Bringing it to her face, she breathed it in, let the memory take her. Her mother was putting daisies in a vase, calling Mercedes into the house. She was happy, even when she told her daughter that it was about to rain, that her drawings would all go away. She asked if she wanted the camera to capture her art before it vanished, but Mercedes had refused. Already she knew that some work was temporary and that was part of its charm. The chalk drawings wouldn't mean so much to her if they stayed forever.

The fleshy smell cut in and egged her on. Tipping the mug, she drank. She lost her appetite as soon as the milk hit her tongue. It tasted of chalk and flowery pulp. The nausea retreated. She remembered, with a shiver, Soren drinking her blood and smiling while he complained about the taste. His teeth were so perfect, aligned so they looked completely flat.

She put the mug on the coffee table and pushed it away. It was like eating her own flesh. It eased her stomach but sickened her mind.

Mercedes felt her teeth, wondering how a small nip had drawn blood. They were sharp and ached, as if they were growing in. The blood milk settled inside her and the

soreness in her mouth dulled away. A few minutes passed and her teeth felt small and flat again.

What did they do to me? She stared at the glass, feeling it becoming cooler without setting a finger on it. Pacing, she searched her mind. What kind of disease did this? Something had been given to her, to replace her.

It wasn't at all what she had been hoping for.

She stopped in front of the coffee table, her hands curled into tight fists. Her eyes fixed on the mug, which looked innocuous from here.

She needed more. If she had more, then she'd be better for sure.

Mercedes grabbed it and warmed it to a bubbling heat and downed it in one gulp, the liquid tumbling down her throat with only a sting and a throbbing pain in its wake. But nothing burned. No dulled sense of taste, no scorched, dry-feeling throat. Any other person's hands would have been blistered just from touching the mug she'd drunk from.

The blood settled her stomach for the night, but the rest of her still felt uncomfortable. She'd drank her own blood. She was worse than the man who changed her. Her mind recoiled as if she'd just ripped chunks of flesh from her arm, her own teeth shredding through her skin.

She had to have some kind of parasite, one that felt cold and dark, hallucination being one of the its symptoms. A human being could not transform into another species. That, she felt certain, was impossible. Mercedes returned to her desk to work, upset by

what she'd just realized. There were only two people who could help her. Now she understood why they hadn't chased her. They knew she'd come back for help.

The harmlessly abstract image of a half-formed company logo with a white background glowed before her. The cursor, set to erase, was poised to wipe away her latest addition when the screen began to fade. The blue light cast on her hands, keyboard, and desk stayed full while the image greyed out. A shadowed face pressed forth as if through a grey cloth, the crevices and crooks of its features darkened in relief. Its eyes were empty, but she knew who it was. It was her.

She could hear it breathing, the sound of air rushing soft and steady. Its breath was timed oppositely as hers. While her breath let out, it pulled breath in as if they were tugging air between them. Mercedes tried to reach for it, but her hands stayed in place, her body fixed.

The face sunk back into the screen, as if slipping under water.

She had to see a doctor or someone. This had to be eradicated, but she was afraid. What if she was the first instance of this disease and they couldn't cure her? What if they tried to experiment on her? Or offered her a miracle drug, saying they'd seen a lot of this before?

Or said they knew of someone who could cure her, handing her a card?

For all she knew, this could be part of some kind of outbreak. She'd not been out much since the change and she hated watching tv. A health emergency could be

happening at the very moment and she'd have no idea. Then again, wouldn't Jade have mentioned it?

She hadn't dismissed the idea that he was involved and not just as her prey. The thought ached. She wanted to trust him. She wanted a friend in this, but he could only be one of two things in this, both of them horrible. In a way, she hoped he was an enemy. It would make taking him out, along with the other two, a whole lot easier to stomach. After she got her cure, she'd make sure no one else was taken by them again.

The screen blinked back to its original brightness, her dull project bubbling up into place. Shoving her fears aside, she worked for a few more hours until she couldn't stand it anymore and shut off the machine. The faint outline of her window reflected on the blackened screen. The light was coming and she was fading at the edges.

The next evening brought more messages. Seven, to be exact, all phone messages and none from Jade. Melany, who'd once been her closest friend, had apparently been trying to reach her. Mercedes had kept a landline for her business and it was her only phone, yet she'd not heard it at all. Her daytime sleep must be incredibly strong. Maybe she did need an alarm.

Melany had drifted away in recent years. She'd been an artist like Mercedes, but when her clientele stopped growing, she'd turned to the beige and grey pastures of business management. She'd roamed the rows of cubicles at a few different offices, watching her wards, who started as equals and quickly became underlings. Now she held

an upper management position in the stratosphere of high-rise buildings and wide-windowed offices, a bird perched and ever-ready for flight to the next floor up.

She couldn't understand why Mercedes left the office for home, and had not kept this opinion to herself.

"Mercy, where have you been?" Melany's voice sparkled clean as new snow, even when she was angry. "Your mother called me. She said she hasn't been able to get a hold of you for almost a week."

Mercedes didn't remember hearing the phone at all since the change and her mother refused to leave messages. She was afraid of a message being the last thing one of them said to the other. Mercedes had picked up the habit, too, which few others in her life understood.

Melany had once understood.

"Sorry. I must have missed her."

"Missed her? She must have called twenty times. You of all people would be home to pick up a landline."

"I'll call her."

"Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, it's fine." She wanted to be off the phone, but knew she couldn't get away without a little catching up. Melany still worried over her, even if it was from a distance.

"A guy moved next door. From school."

"Oh?" Now Melany lightened again, her clean voice shimmering.

“Jade. He got kicked out.”

“I don’t remember him. What’s he like?” It almost felt like they were friends again.

“He’s sweet. He—” She almost let it out that she’d fainted. Melany would tell Mercedes’s mother, who did not need to know such a thing. It strained a friendship when one person took on the role of older sister.

It had been better when there’d been three of them in the group. Mercedes wished she could say they’d all just gotten older, but only two of them had, as far as they knew.

“He invited me over to say hello. I helped him unpack.”

“Oh.” Mercedes could almost hear the sparks firing. Melany had a habit of collecting and over-analyzing all information provided to her. She was probably already forming an elaborate prediction about what would happen between Mercedes and Jade.

“You’re over Lucas already?”

“I wouldn’t say over, no. Not at all. But it was long dead. And I’ve already had my miserable day. It’s nothing much different than before.”

“Really? What did you do this time?”

Mercedes had broken one of each dish and cup in the kitchen, bent one fork, spoon, and knife after things had disintegrated with Melany. Mercedes had figured with another friend gone, she wouldn’t need that many. Melany, of course, did not know of that particular incident, but had been there at the times when other people had walked out on Mercedes.

She stayed silent. The answer was something neither Melany nor her mother needed to know.

“Mercy, what was it? Did you shave your head or something?”

“That’s cliché.”

“You’re right. You probably did something even I’d never think of.”

Mercedes sighed. “I did the worst thing. I broke our promise.”

Melany’s breath rushed in. Their friend, Sarah Belle, had walked out alone one night, for a reason no one had ever figured out, and never came back. “What? Why?” Melany’s voice was tarnished silver. “It’s not safe for any woman, but...but we know more than anyone else what can happen.”

Yes, she thought. I *wanted* it to. And what’s this “we” all of a sudden?

“Don’t ever do it again,” Melany said. They argued briefly about whether Mercedes’s mother should know. Melany pushed for honesty, while Mercedes supported keeping her mother calm. Mercedes had inherited her tendency towards erratic behavior under stress from her mother.

“I’m over it.”

“Sure.”

Mercedes changed the subject and got Melany going on about her life, how her career was progressing, how she was still dating, but nobody impressed her recently. Mercedes had a feeling this was an excuse. She’d long figured out that Melany’s pickiness about men was an evasion. She’d only ever seen Melany truly risk it once and

that had ended with Melany in utter misery, though she didn't walk outside in the cold to escape it. Her crying was enough to break anyone who cared for her, that crystal voice strained and shattered. Mercedes had barely made it through herself.

The conversation was fast and short, both of them becoming uncomfortable, not ready to mend their torn connection yet, if ever. Mercedes was glad to be off the phone and headed to her desk, ears perked for Jade's movements next door.

She paused only for a moment to contemplate whether she wanted to talk to Melany anymore. A knot ached in her stomach. They'd changed so much, she felt like she was talking to a gravestone each time they spoke, though it wasn't quite the same, Mercedes knew from experience. In the years after her disappearance, Sarah Belle's family buried an empty casket, trying to say goodbye to a girl they could only assume to be dead. As suggested by her mother, Mercedes had visited the stone often to talk to Sarah Bell. Even though they can't hear you, she was told, it will still help you work out how you feel. But even as she spoke, all Mercedes could picture was the empty coffin below. What use was it, if she couldn't even pretend someone was listening?

Jade's apartment was silent. Her stomach turned as the effects of yesterday's blood wore off. She went to the kitchen, took out a small glass and knife. She stood before the counter, arm poised.

It's not my arm. It's not my arm, she thought. The shadow coaxed her. This was good enough for now. The prey wasn't fully primed yet, still too self-conscious to let go

in front of her, it said, reminding her of his apology. He doesn't want to discomfort you. He will keep his walls up, but not much longer now, so *cut your skin*.

She lifted the knife. Her skin looked pale even in the darkened room.

"It's not your arm," she said aloud and sliced.

What came out was not blood, not quite. It was red, some of it, though it seemed watery and pale like her skin, only a few shades darker than the blood milk. It still smelled like sidewalk chalk and daisies. In this quantity she detected a chemical scent as well. Not like the fleshy, iron-intense blood she'd been hoping for. Nonetheless it was something she could drink straight to get more blood. But this wasn't her blood. Not like it had been before, at least. She heated the glass as high as she could. As it poured into her stomach, the nausea vanished, warmth radiating through her body.

Another bite in her own flesh. A small hit of the cheap stuff that flushed out of her body before she could feel like herself again. It tasted bitter and dry, but it would get her through the night.

Talking to Melany had a way of making her feel alone. With the blood in her stomach, she thought it might be safe to spend time with her new neighbor.

She heard him, his soft steps padding from the entrance to the elevator floors below. His steps were slow and uneven, accompanied by a clunk every two strides. The elevator buzzed and clanked as it rose. Soon, his footsteps and thunk were coming down the hall.

He dropped his keys when she opened her door, a crutch crashing to the floor as he tried to retrieve them.

“What happened to you?”

Jade’s foot was wrapped in beige support bandages and white medical tape.

“Got pushed over at a show,” he said as she helped him up. “The crowd was a little crazy. How’re you feeling today?”

“A show?” She reached down and handed him his crutch.

“Thanks. I’m in a band. Well, used to be. I still go see them, though. Those kids sure get rowdy.” He smiled. “Or I’m finally getting too old for it all. You gonna be up tonight? I’m not even remotely tired. You wanna watch a movie with me?”

Was he reading her mind? No. It was only the changed ones who could detect what was going on in a human’s heart. They could read it in the blood-scent. That’s what Soren meant by “a very accurate use of inference.” That was how Mercedes picked up on the problems her old neighbors were having.

Xyza must have lied about what Mercedes’s blood smelled like. Xyza was a thief casing her target. No, an accomplice gathering intelligence for the real thief. The one with all the gear, ready to cut away the glass around the diamond and take it, leaving the case transparent where something precious used to be.

She nodded. “Just give me a few minutes.”

He smiled. The light in his eyes needed glowed faintly for a moment. She wanted to bring it back, though she feared she might take it away forever instead.

Mercedes drank more blood just in case, careful to cover her arm with a long-sleeve shirt and sweatshirt. She didn't want to make him suspicious.

Chapter 4

Jade had two cell phones. One was a souped-up looking smartphone with a sleek black case that looked like smoked glass. It was perfect and clean, glinting even in the dim blue glow of the living room. The other was a worn flip phone with a piece of fraying duct tape holding the battery case on. It was midnight blue with a sticker covering the external screen, blocking anyone from viewing the caller's name without opening the phone. The sticker was a perfect white square with a swirling, abstract image of forest green and pale lilac, the colors spiraling and twirling around one another without touching.

Seeing the two phones made Mercedes feel isolated. Even though she did not like to socialize, she always wondered what she was missing out on.

"I have one for work and one for everything else," he said, sitting beside her and placing two clear glass mugs of coffee on the table in front of him. She was getting the impression hardly a glance or shift in expression went unnoticed under Jade's gaze. She made a mental note to stay vigilant about staring, no matter what captured her attention. "The old one's for work, of course. We're a non-profit, so we take donor phones for our emergency line. You know, just in case someone needs help. You okay with having caffeine this late?"

She shook her head. She didn't think she would have a problem with caffeine at any hour anymore. The light dragged her down no matter how awake she'd felt the rest of the night.

Shrugging with the girlish shyness she often felt around men, Mercedes agreed to whatever movie he suggested first. Her body tensed up at his proximity to her. It made her feel vulnerable, like she had to fold herself up to stay protected, though she was learning more each moment that she wasn't the one who should be afraid. Her parasite theory was starting to feel more like a delusion.

The salt-and-sweat scented heat rose off Jade like a mist. She wanted to curl herself in it and drink it through her breath, pressing her body to his damp skin.

Jade sat a full foot away from her, crutch propped against the couch to his left. She could reach over and push it just out of his reach, leaving him helpless against her. Though he would try to get away, she'd trap him with ease, a thought that disgusted and bored her at the same time. She wanted his blood, but not so cheaply.

She picked up her mug and held it under her nose. The coffee smell merely mixed with the salt-and-sweat.

Mercedes watched Jade, the flashing colors of the TV making him look thinner and more boyish. The corner of his lips curled up at something on the screen and she thought she saw a little spark in his eyes.

Without thinking, she leaned closer to him, letting his heat coax her along. It wrapped around her and she could feel herself pulling it in, already collecting what seemed rightly hers. She wondered if there would be a memory in his blood, some little charm she could steal.

She inhaled the coffee. It was no use, so she put it down. He looked at her through the corner of his eye, a sliver of glowing green that she couldn't help but find beautiful. Mercedes turned his face towards hers, fingers gentle under his chin.

Pressing her lips to his warm cheek, she pulled in the smell of lingering smoke and dried blood from his skin, seeking out more of the salt-and-sweat. Whatever it was, she wanted to drink it. It was a scent from a memory she couldn't conjure on her own. The blood would know. It could tell her once she had it in her mouth. Her fingers slid behind his head, tingling under the softness of his hair.

Jade gripped her left hand, which still rested on her thigh. His palm was damp with sweat and she could feel the vibration in his nerves. He was scared and trying to bury it. He feared dragging someone into a life still haunted by self-injury, an urge that lingered in his shadow.

She could detect all of this from his scent alone.

As if on queue, they pulled back from each other and smiled, laughed in the abrupt and breathy way of nascent lovers. It's always like you've never done this before, she thought. Every time we pretend it's new.

Her heart filled with dread and she could have sworn she was frowning, but he smiled at her. She was supposed to be in that moment when they accept what will happen next and do their best to shove nervousness aside.

He leaned in as if this was exactly what was happening and it made her teeth ache.

Her heart swelled, distended from lack of real blood. Her emotions blurred, warmth flooding into her cheeks and lower abdomen, while the rest of her body hurt, demanding blood as the salve.

They pulled each other close. She pressed her cheek to his and opened her mouth, breathing in his warmth. It flared to an unbearable degree, like standing too close to an open fire and staying put for fear of the darkness and cold. She wanted to swallow this fire, but how could she ignite it only to snuff it out?

“Wait.”

She ignored him, squeezing his shoulders so tight he had to shove her to get away.

“Just hold on.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve been dumped recently, haven’t you?”

She didn’t respond.

“You can’t hide from me. You’re not happy. Someone’s left you. Maybe not a boyfriend, but someone. I can tell. I can see how you feel all over your face.”

Mercedes sighed.

“Thought so.”

“Yeah, but it’s okay. What we had was long dead when we ended it.” She smiled, but he only frowned back at her. What did her face look like now? She couldn’t be sure.

This was why she’d never seen a therapist. She wanted to hide. Jade was breaking her heart, tearing away the only feeling keeping her under control.

Jade sighed. “Let’s just give it some time, okay? We basically just met, considering we weren’t friends in school.” He didn’t sound convinced, though it still stung to hear it.

They watched the rest of the movie in silence. He stayed close to her, their thighs touching. His heat was all she would have for now, the scent of his blood better than nothing at all.

She left quickly, their goodnight awkward, ending with a hesitant, light hug. In that split second of their hearts being close together, she could feel his pulse shake through her body, vibrating in her ribs.

She was still shaking, standing alone in her kitchen.

A few hours passed before she caved in and took another sip from her arm, then crawled into bed just as dawn broke. She’d spent most of the night fixed on her couch, thinking, looking out the window. Could there be someone else? Someone she wouldn’t care for?

Someone who would just give in to her?

Mercedes did not leave her apartment for the next few days. Jade checked on her every evening and, though he never said it, she could tell he was worried about her nocturnal habits. After his foot felt better, he convinced her to come with him to see his old band play.

Their apartment complex was at the foot of a hill just outside the city a few blocks from the community center. Jade held Mercedes’ mitten-covered hand as they walked,

warning her each time he spotted ice, his eyes jetting back and forth from their path to her face as he spoke, barely taking a breath between thoughts. He talked almost the whole way, but she didn't mind. The night was surprisingly warm, though winter still clung to the sidewalks and trees in the form of ice patches and snow drifts. Mercedes smelled more than the fresh dry air. The musty, damp scent of snow gathering in the clouds told her they'd see another storm soon.

Once over the hill, Mercedes looked up as she always did to admire the only thing she consistently liked about the city: the full view of it at night, dark grey sky mottled with clouds. The black buildings jutting unevenly across the horizon with yellow, blue, and white lights blinking on and off. It shimmered as if it were wet or behind reflective glass.

It also seemed just out of reach, which added to its beauty.

Once at the bottom of the hill, they were a short stretch from one of its many business districts where they'd easily be swallowed up and lost, wandering through its organized but endless streets. The city had no central hub, no point of connection between all areas. Everything was linked evenly, every borough with a business district, residential area, a few schools, and an entertainment district with restaurants, shops, bars, and clubs.

Mercedes breathed in the faint scent of exhaust and the rich scent of food from a restaurant. She could smell garbage, too, and a woman's expensive perfume, among dozens of other scents she couldn't identify. There was one that caught her attention in

particular: The human smell of flesh and sweat. And blood of all different sorts. Some smelled sweet and ripe, others bitter and blackened as dying fruit. A woman and her small daughter passed by, bringing the scent of sunburned skin and ocean salt mixed with cane sugar and dandelions, both with the underlying smell of muscle, tendon, and bone. Fascination and confusion swirled inside her. These blood-scents were so strong and yet she only wanted Jade. Only his blood enticed her, gave her true pause. There was something the others lacked.

The community center was the only well-lit building on its block this time of night. Closed stores and restaurants surrounded it, as well as a few wayward offices. A couple of vans and trailers were parked out front. No music could be heard yet. Dozens of high school kids stood in clusters on the side walk, while others lined up along the wall, some smoking and nearly all of them talking, a few hunched over cell phones clicking away text messages or chattering to friends who couldn't make it.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. It's all-ages. Hope you don't mind," Jade said, running his hand through his hair uncomfortably.

"I'll try not to feel too old."

Most of the crowd was bundled up for the cold in thick coats, hats, and scarves. Others only wore sweatshirts, their faces flushed and sweat drying on their foreheads.

"It's packed tonight. That room's gonna be a furnace," Jade said. They nudged their way inside. To the left of the door was a snack stand that also served as a ticket booth. The man behind it smiled when he saw Jade and tried to wave them in for free, but

Jade stepped up and handed him a twenty. Tonight's flyer was posted to the wall right by the booth: Punk show, 3 bands, \$3.00.

"Jade, why'd you do that?" She whispered, gesturing towards the flyer.

"They always need the money."

Jade lead Mercedes to a corner piled with winter coats, leather jackets, and worn sweatshirts. "You just have to trust nobody will take it," he said when she seemed hesitant to leave her jacket behind. "Besides, the ticket guy is always watching."

The center was one large room with a high ceiling that had exposed beams and piping. The interior was a light colored wood, giving it a bright look under the multitude of hanging lights. There was no stage, only an area marked off with tape on the floor towards the back. The first band was setting up, plugging in cords and arranging numerous pieces of equipment. Some kids huddled close already, ignoring the signs urging them to keep a three foot distance from the band. A disco ball was in the middle of the ceiling. She looked behind her for a moment as they approached the stage. About ten feet away from the stand, a basketball net was nailed to one of the beams. A few arcade games and a pool table lined the walls.

Mercedes combed the faces around her, half hoping to find someone else. Someone other than Jade that she could have.

An older-looking girl with wavy orange hair caught her eye. She was leaning on her shoulder against one of the support beams in the middle of the room, watching Mercedes, her eyes narrow. A guy with orange hair came up behind her and wrapped his

arms around her. Once they were closer, Mercedes realized they were about her and Jade's age.

She looked right back at the woman, meeting her gaze for a second or two. The woman's mouth fell open and her eyes widened.

Who are you? Mercedes thought. A strange ululating energy rolled over her and vanished as soon as they were past the two.

The drummer started to sound-check, snapping her back into reality.

Mercedes had been to few concerts in her life. She loved music but her anti-social nature kept her from enjoying any kind of big gathering. In fact, she hated being out in general, only going when the guilt of letting others down got to her and she couldn't help but say yes.

Today was only a little different.

They stayed close to the stage, letting people collect around them. Their blood-scents mingled in the air like a cloying fog. None drew her attention or her pleasure like Jade's. She could smell his blood over all the others even when the room was packed end to end.

With the eyes surrounding her, she wouldn't dare to try and take any.

Besides, she had a feeling the orange-haired woman was watching. That woman knew something, she was sure.

Also, all the pleasure of it would be missed. She wanted closeness in the assault. His consent to the setup. She wanted him completely in her focus, no distractions, his attention fixed on her.

Would she kill him, even with a small taste? Was her condition poisonous or even contagious to others?

She didn't want to know, so she tolerated the ache in her stomach and her teeth, trained her eyes to the stage.

The first band was loud and fast, all of their songs no more than a minute or two long, a style she found a bit irritating. She might have liked it years ago when she still had the energy for its frenetic speed. Lately, Mercedes preferred slower, moodier music that shifted in tone from one song to the next. Dark, mellow music. The kind that dragged her down in a way she couldn't resist.

With hardly a break between songs, the band blazed through their set, sweeping the audience into a near constant frenzy. When she was a teenager, Mercedes had watched this kind of chaos at concerts from the safe perch of a balcony. She'd feigned disdain for such behavior, when she was, in truth, afraid of getting hurt or seeming out of character in front of her friends who knew her as a quiet, withdrawn girl. She followed Jade's lead, shoving people who'd stumbled a bit too close to the "stage" back into the fray.

Mercedes could hear every note, along with sounds she'd never noticed before. The static hum of the amplifiers. The sound of the musicians' fingers touching the strings

and the clap of their shoes on the floor when they jumped. Shoes smacked and scraped across the floor behind her. Someone's hand slapped on the hard wood. Another person yelled, "Are you okay?" the words clear and loud to her.

The vibrations of the music rattled her insides, a dull, fatigue-like hurt flooding her body. Yet, all of her strength was still there. More than before, she thought. Even the tallest, heaviest teenager felt light under her palms when she pushed him back into the crowd.

She and Jade helped a fallen girl back up. She saluted them and leapt back into the jumbled mass of the crowd, a wild, blissful grin on her face.

As soon as the girl's back was turned, Mercedes felt a gaze on her, flashing like a light being blocked and unblocked. She tried to ignore it.

Her watered-down blood pulsed hard under her skin, building a warmth she hadn't felt since her body was changed. Beads of sweat collected on her neck and when she wiped them away, there was red on her hands. She looked around. Everyone seemed absorbed in the show, unconcerned that a woman was sweating blood in their midst.

Or maybe her blood was too faint to notice.

The band's set ended with a final blaring guitar riff over feedback, the singer's strained and passionate scream echoing in the air. The crowd dispersed. A few arcade games fired up and hands typed furiously into phones, the excited din of dozens of conversations filling the air.

"You want a soda or something?" Jade asked.

She shook her head, trying to mask her disgust at the thought of such a cold, watery drink.

The feeling of being watched was absent. Mercedes caught a flash of orange as the woman and her boyfriend left, hands clutched together.

Jade and Mercedes settled on the floor near the coat pile. Nearby, the tables were filled with kids digging into salted popcorn and greasy pizza. Mercedes hugged her knees to her chest and tried to discretely bury her nose into her jeans, the nauseatingly rich scent of food almost more than she could take. The blood-scent was still there, too, which helped keep her stomach from turning too hard.

Jade slid closer to her, causing the ache in her body to sharpen. His blood still rose above all the other scents. She put her head on his shoulder and pressed her forehead against his neck, trying to bury herself in his blood-scent.

“You sure you don’t want any?” He lifted a cup towards her. She shook her head.

Jade watched the people milling about and Mercedes tried to tune them out. She was feeling overwhelmed.

He touched her cheek softly. “You know, I’ve never seen you eat anything.”

Mercedes’s mind went blank, unable to conjure up a response that sounded sane.

“Then again, we always meet late, I guess” he added. “My band is next.”

She sat up. He was looking down, eyes overcast again and staring past the floor. She put an arm around him and squeezed.

“I mean, I’d feel bad if they broke up ’cause I left, but it always makes me a little sad. To not be up there with them.” He paused. “And they’re playing a song I wrote tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s okay. I told them they could.”

“What’s it about?”

Jade frowned and tensed up a little, as if a cold hand had just touched his skin.

“Maybe later. When we’re someplace quiet. And alone.”

The steady drumbeat of the sound-check started. Jade stood and offered Mercedes his hand.

Jade’s band was sadder and slower than the last with strained, lilting guitar loops and echoing breakdowns. It was loud, though, enough to drown out the singer’s high voice.

Loud enough to drown out Jade’s lyrics. At least, for everyone else.

She kept eyeing him throughout the set. He barely moved except for a subtle nod to the beat. His head was tilted down, blond hair covering most of his face.

A song ended and the band paused.

“So, some of you might remember Jade,” the lead singer said. He was hispanic with shaggy black hair. He wore tight blue jeans and a Saves the Day t-shirt that exposed several tattoos on both arms. Mercedes couldn’t pick out which blood-scent was his.

Eyes turned to Jade, who gave a half smile as people clapped and cheered.

“A while ago, Jade had to leave us, but he gave us this song anyways. And we really appreciate that.”

Someone shouted, “We miss you, Jade” from the back of the crowd.

“And you guys are going to be the first to hear it live, so here goes.”

The music was just as mercilessly loud as it had been before, but she could still hear the words.

They were about his cutting habit. Mercedes wondered how Jade could tolerate hearing someone else sing his words, especially about something like that.

The singer’s voice screamed and cracked on certain notes, as if the words were too difficult to bear and she didn’t blame him. Other times, his voice was clean and melodious, though stained with melancholy.

Jade barely moved for the rest of the set, often shutting his eyes. She caught him taking a deep breath a few times. He held her hand, squeezing it tight.

He was quiet on the way home.

He held the door open for her when they got back to his apartment and sat close to her on the couch, putting his arm around her. She closed her eyes.

“I just need a moment,” he said.

Jade was surrendering to her.

“Hold on.” He left the room. She heard him rummaging through boxes and closed her eyes to picture the apartment. The sound placed him down the hall in the bedroom,

first door on the right. The boxes were against the back wall, so he was probably facing away from the open door, absorbed in searching. Mercedes made herself stay in place.

He returned with a worn composition notebook, torn pages and scraps of paper hanging out from between the covers. A dirty rubber band struggled to hold it all together.

“I’m guessing you probably couldn’t understand the lyrics too well.”

She shrugged.

Jade sat down about a foot from her, dropping the notebook on the table. Hunched over, he started flipping through the pages. “Sorry it’s such a mess. I’ve learned it’s best to let my creative stuff get out of control. It works better that way.”

He pulled out a jagged piece of thick, shiny paper that looked like it had been torn off a box or a postcard.

“I wrote this in the waiting room at the hospital. Good thing ’cause we’re not allowed to have stuff to write with in there except crayons. They were nice enough to save it for me, though.” He handed it to her and leaned back onto the couch crossing his arms, tugging down his sleeves. She looked at him. He stared at the floor. “Go head.”

Mercedes swallowed hard and read the words even though she’d already heard them. It would have been so much easier if he was just a stranger she wanted.

“It was originally acoustic, just me and the singer. He has a better voice than me, so I let him take the reins there. I told them they could keep it, but they had to do it differently.”

Her heart flinched at the words, but she pushed through, taking them in a second time. Such brutal, practical words. She sensed a distance in them, as if he was trying to separate himself from their meaning, which only made her feel even more fractured. His experience was more than a sad rumor from school now. More than just wide-eyed students whispering and pretending to be disgusted when really all they felt was the rush of gossip. Her disdain for them boiled.

And the ache in her jaw came back.

When she turned to him, he had tucked his knees to his chest and was hiding his face behind them, picking at a hole in one of his socks.

He stared ahead, hardly blinking.

“Jade.” Her voice was soft, slightly breathy. She was trying to stay gentle.

Jade looked at her, a shaded light behind his eyes. “You don’t think I’m a bad person, do you?”

Mercedes shook her head, her thoughts bungled. She felt like her heart was in pieces and floating apart.

In one fluid and thoughtless motion, she placed her fingers on his chin and turned his face towards hers. His eyes were glossy with restrained tears, the light in them like a reflection on water at night.

He unfolded his body, letting her pull him close and wrapping an arm around her waist.

Mercedes pressed both hands to his face, feeling the throb of his blood under his skin. Jade's blood-scent filled her nose, making her veins feel empty and starved.

The ache in her teeth pulsed. She could feel them emerge, long and sharp, under cover of her lips.

Jade shivered.

When she kissed him, his mouth was soft and wet. He moved slowly and she followed, unsure if she was stalking him or letting him take the lead. The cloying, chemical smell of fear mingled with his blood-scent and coaxed her along. He was afraid and that made it better.

In that moment, she knew he would not die the first time. That it would take many tries.

She ran her lips along his skin, already tasting blood. At the soft spot between his jaw and his neck, the softest part of the throat, she opened her mouth wide and started to press her teeth to his skin.

He pushed her away.

"What?" She feigned ignorance.

He opened his mouth as if to speak and looked away from her.

"Jade?"

"You can't do anything that might hurt. That might leave a mark. Do you know what I meant by the word 'trigger' in the song?"

She nodded. Jade wasn't the only self-destructive person she knew. "Triggering" is when an image or sensation makes a self-injurer want to hurt themselves.

"If I get hurt, it can trigger me. Even the smallest thing. It's been almost a year and a half since the last time, but I still get scared. I'm sorry."

Mercedes wanted to stop. To comfort him even though she had no idea how. What does anyone say to such a thing? The hunger pushed back at her hesitation. Ignore this. This is part of the plan.

The torture is half the fun.

—

She hugged him before she left. Though it seemed unnecessary, he walked her to her door as if he didn't want to leave her. She turned to him just before shutting it, sensing that he had something to say. That he felt guilty and embarrassed for how an otherwise pleasant night had ended. But the words escaped him. Instead, his dull-lit eyes confirmed all she had already detected.

Jade kissed her lightly, enough to frustrate and inflame her hunger, which she swallowed like a burning coal.

Once he was gone, her mind immediately set to tracing his steps back to his apartment. She was restless, sitting on her couch with her fists clenching the cushion seat then getting up to curl in her bed, biting her nails, pressing her ear to the wall so she could hear his breath slow as he fell asleep. There was something delicious in the knowledge that she could know his movements without his awareness. She had another

sip of her own blood and listened to his slowing breath, allowing it to soothe her. It helped shove aside the thought that this was only a stay.

But once Jade had fallen asleep, the thought re-emerged and leaned over her in the dark, an intruder whispering in her ear, mocking her weakness.

Just before dawn, Mercedes looked in the mirror. The stark white of her eyes no longer shocked her. She remembered how Jade reacted to certain expressions on her face. How he'd smile when she thought she was frowning or how he thought he'd offended her when she was feeling neutral.

Her eyes must look brown to him, another trick of her kind, like Xyza had mentioned.

As she was drifting into sleep, she remembered the orange-haired couple and the woman's shocked expression when she'd seen Mercedes' eyes.

It dawned on her that they could see her eyes as they really were, staring at her as they did. Maybe they were like her. Maybe she wasn't the only one who was changed.

Blood Twins: An Interlude

Selene and Jeordie sat on their couch together, fingers neatly inter-laced, palms pressed flesh-to-flesh like open mouths. They'd just fed off each other, so they were feeling much alike. Their eyes were fixed on the photograph on their mantle, the one from when they were two humans who looked nothing like one another, but were still deeply in love.

Not that they had fallen out of love. It had become a much different love. The kind a couple gets after they change and became one.

Well, after they change and became mostly one of the two. In this case, the primary was Selene.

They were shocked by what they'd seen, especially her. It was mostly her soul that sustained them. Selene had managed to find her three and killed them, drinking herself back into herself. Jeordie had only found one and could not bear to kill her, taking barely enough blood to awaken the smear of soul left in his body. It was enough for him to *live* but not enough for him to *be*. Thus he could not go a day without Selene's blood. It was better to have him as a shred of himself than none of himself.

Selene, on the other hand, was always her full self, though she still took blood of the inferiors, the humans whose blood did not stay in her veins. It was out of habit, from the time when she desperately killed anything that contained blood, hoping for a cure. It wasn't until a strong blood-scent hit her that she found one that stayed.

In the photograph, Selene had short hair dyed orange. His was brown. He'd been much taller than her, too.

The man beside her had permanently orange hair and had shrunk to almost her height. Jeordie's self was in there somewhere. Sometimes the light in his eyes, the one that was fully his, came back and he remembered he loved her. Most of the time, he simply followed her like a shadow, touches and kisses done from muscle memory.

The condition took the soul, but the soul left trace marks. Selene knew because hers did, too.

What mystified them was the woman at the show, older than most of the audience. Early twenties, like themselves. Dark-haired and pale. She was one of them, they could tell. But she was strong and seemed whole. Not a shell like Selene had been before her three had been caught and properly killed. Not like Jeordie after twenty-four hours without blood. The puzzle was that this woman had not killed from one of her three—the iris-less eyes gave that away. If her true eye color was there, she'd be whole and blend in more easily, protecting her from any recognition. It was essential to hide from their own kind, who could turn on anyone in a heartbeat and tell one of the unchanged.

It was a risk that they'd gone out. Recently, someone who knew what they were had been following them cloaked like a monk or a witch.

"How is she so strong?" Jeordie asked.

He didn't actually have to say it aloud, but did so to make it seem more natural. A recent blood exchange put their minds together.

“She must be holding it in. Like a coward.” Selene said, flinching. The strain of their blood that was Jeordie’s always gave her an ache. It contained the glimpse of the woman he could not kill. The single drink felt like infidelity to her, but then she remembered what she did. Jeordie squeezed her hand.

Selene lived on for her love. It pained her to see how little was left of him. He clung to life, loving her with the smear of soul he had left. She’d once offered him death and he refused. “You’d be all alone,” he reminded her.

“Except for this woman,” said Selene.

Until the night before, they’d assumed they were the only ones left with the condition, Selene having waged a rather successful campaign against others of their kind. They trusted no one, having no knowledge of what they could do to each other and not wanting to find anything out the hard way. The one that changed them died on site. She’d found them while they were camping, a girl with blue-pale skin who called herself Xyza. She let them drain her. She said she wouldn’t die, but her heart stopped. They hid her petite, teenaged body in a cooler.

Something was different about this woman. She was pale, but not blue-pale. She didn’t approach them and instead avoided them. She was able to walk about and talk excitedly to her blond friend, a man as unchanged as the rest.

“Maybe she was made a different way,” Jeordie said.

Selene was already nodding when he began to speak. She knew what he was going to say.

“We should find her. Maybe she knows how to fix me.” Their blood was beginning to divide.

“You would have been fixed if you’d learned to kill.”

“But they were people.”

“And they had your blood. You deserved to take it back. Their bodies should be back their with mine.” She had turned to him, eyes glowering. She missed the man he was. Her hand was pointed towards the hall. At the end, her three rested in a room they never opened. The only reason she kept them was to preserve her secret condition. Someone was sure to find the bodies and raise a fuss. The last thing they needed was undue attention. It was sheer luck that no one had found the girl in the cooler. They combed the news for weeks after, worried someone would find her and any overlooked clue they’d left behind. Forensics seemed quite advanced to them, so even with their finger prints meticulously scrubbed away, a trace of them had to be somewhere on her. After all, they had latched onto her wrists, pulling her blood away and all they’d had were paper towels to wipe away the saliva.

“People, Selene.”

The woman Jeordie drank from was a humanitarian aid worker home from the war on leave. When she went back into the fray, Jeordie’s excuse was his fear of violent battle. Much as Selene admired his compassion for the woman, she was disappointed to learn of his cowardice. But love always forgives.

“That’s how you’re fooled. You have to see through it.”

“I just don’t see how our blood gets into them. Even if they are made just for us. And who makes them anyways?” Selene insisted the three were not real people. They were made especially to house stolen blood. Jeordie didn’t believe her theory.

“Who cares?”

They were severed again. A heated conversation could speed up the dissolution of blood. Selene was once again feeling merciless and Jeordie would go worrying about others with no regard for logic.

“I think they are the true husks. Not you. You are the priority.”

“They seemed so real.”

He would never let it go, which annoyed her. It gave her doubts that fanned her smoldering guilt. It had once been a fire burning her body with pain when she was around any one of her three. She gave in. Only then did the pain and guilt subside enough for her to touch her three without blacking out. Only then could she make the decision to kill. And to take care of Jeordie, the compassionate fool. She stood, easing her hand out of his and went to the photograph. She held it in her hands, looking for a hint. An answer to her doubts. In the photo, they were walking down a path in the park, dead trees overhead and snow on the ground. Ruddy cheeks and plumes of breath like smoke. Though it was a melancholy day for both of them, a faint light was in their eyes. An acquaintance of theirs had gone missing and was declared dead that day. They felt ashamed for not knowing her better. For not being close to her and protecting her.

Xyza had lured them with the idea of having such protective abilities. She said they could defend anyone in battle, which piqued Selene's interest in a different way than it did Jeordie's.

Her three came back to her. They stood up in her mind, as if rising from the blood tunneling through her veins. Blood clung to their cheeks, dim lights gleaming in their eyes. The one on the left and towards the back held the sword he carried in a world of guns. He looked archaic as always. She tried not to smile, but when he did, she did.

Selene turned back to Jeordie. His eyes looked dark with a glint of worry. His body was slumping.

She sat down next to him and lifted his chin with her left hand, offering her right wrist. His shaking hands touched her arm faintly, squeezing tighter and tighter as he drank. Once his grip was firm, she let her left hand drop and rested her head on his shoulder.

He stopped. She knew right when he would and what he would say next.

"We should find her," he said.

"Yes. We will."

Chapter 5

Her blood was working less and less each day, the sickness and pain returning within an hour of each dose. It was worsened by Jade's almost constant presence, which made her teeth ache. If he couldn't get her to come over, he'd bring his laptop or a guitar and sit on her couch while she worked until late at night when he'd finally leave her alone. She learned, much to her dismay, that he smoked from time to time. He'd open the window and sit on the ledge with a cigarette between his lips, mostly keeping his mouth shut, save for a few words here and there.

He would have been the perfect companion for her under any other circumstance. Spending time with her quietly. Leaving when he was too tired to stay up, giving her some time alone. Jade hadn't yet asked if she wanted to go to another show. She hoped she hadn't looked sad when she was there. She'd actually enjoyed herself, except for the torturous blood scents and seeing the orange-haired girl. It especially worried her how Jade's blood-scent rose above all the others.

It made Mercedes afraid to go outside and afraid to be in Jade's apartment.

Every night he'd do something to get close to her and touch her, sometimes putting his arms around her shoulders or running his fingers on her skin as he pushed her hair behind her ear.

Three nights after the concert, she was sitting at her desk with her back to Jade, who was at his perch on the windowsill. Mercedes could feel his eyes on her, feel them slacken in the way of a man who wants to take someone now.

Only she knew well who would do the taking and of what. Her stomach was nauseated with dread.

He must have known he'd gotten to her. In the next moment, he was behind her, lips on the back of her neck. The sting of her teeth emerging made her flinch, but she still wanted him, her body swirling with her desire for both him and his blood. She reached back for his hand and he took it as she rose. She turned to him and he took her other hand, pulling her to the center of the living room. She put her arms around his neck, kissing him as softly as she could, pouring all her strength into resisting the urge to clamp down on his lip with her teeth.

Jade's hands rested distractedly on her hips, then slipped under her shirt, stopping on the small of her back. After a few moments, he took her hand and she followed slightly behind. Since their apartments were designed similarly, he knew where her bedroom was.

As soon as they passed through the door frame, Jade released her and laid down on the bed, leaning on his elbows. She stalked behind, hesitating by the door though she shut it behind her.

He was smiling at her, though his eyes looked worried.

Her eyes felt narrow, though she was sure that's not how they looked to him.

"Come here."

She crawled on top of him and they kissed. When she went for his shirt, he gently grabbed her hands.

“I have a lot of scars.”

She nodded. Her eyes must have looked compassionate and brave because he let go. Inside, she was mortified, but beyond the point of turning back.

The scars covered his arms and stomach. Straight slashes, side to side.

Mercedes remembered how her mother said cutters only want to hurt. They don't want to die.

Any sign of happiness on his face was drowned away. “You don't hate me now, do you?”

“Jade, you're not a bad person.” She put her hands on his stomach, felt the tiny fleshy bumps under her fingers. “I told you that before.”

With terror, she realized she believed what she said as much as she believed he would be gone soon. She kissed him and let him pull her close. Her fingers traveled over the scars on his arms. The soft spot under his neck tempted her, but she passed over it with her lips, hoping the blood hunger would let go, but it didn't. Instead, she opened her mouth and ran her tongue on his shoulder and arms.

Before she could stop herself, her jaw was clamped over the crook of his elbow, his blood, tasting of salt and sweat, filled her mouth. Jade moaned in pain, grabbing the collar of her shirt, but was unable to pull her back.

His heartbeat pounded in her ears, her head. Her bones rattled with it, her muscles and organs shaking under its rhythm.

And the memory, the one she couldn't detect with the blood-scent alone, flashed in her mind. Seaside. A hot day. Her feet dashing through burning sand as she ran towards two people she couldn't make out.

Whoever they were, they filled her body with hurt. With guilt. Guilt over something she could not help, but still felt she needed to be punished for.

Mercedes pulled back, blood dripping down her mouth. She felt shocked and disgraceful. It took her a moment to look at Jade's face. His eyes were wide with something she'd never seen before. It wasn't terror and that's what worried her the most. He slipped out from under her and ran out of the room.

She panicked. "Jade! Jade, come back!"

He was in the bathroom, blood streaming down his arm and his fists clamped over the edge of the sink. His breath was deliberate and deep, eye wide and fixed on the reflection of the wound on his elbow.

She froze in the doorway.

As if it was being lifted by an unseen force, Jade lifted his uninjured arm and touched the wound, staring raptly at the blood. His eyes relaxed and he looked fascinated, as if seeing an old friend. He waved his fingers, watching the blood glimmer in the light. His next deep breath was almost a sigh.

"Jade." She grabbed his wrist. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

He looked at her as if nothing was wrong.

Jade didn't settle back into himself until she'd washed all the blood off his arm and bandaged the wound. He was in a daze, as if someplace else. She feared he was falling back into his past, the one where he punished himself for anything perceived as a misdeed, any hurt against himself or another he couldn't fix.

His blood was settling into her veins. She felt stronger, more present. She hadn't even noticed how out of it she'd been. In spite of this, she could still feel that something was missing.

A small bit of something was back inside her. The memory flashed for a moment and was gone before another detail could be revealed.

"What are you?" Jade asked.

"I don't know. Are you okay? Jade, I ruined it."

"Ruined what?"

"Your streak. You said you hadn't cut in over a year."

He looked away for a moment. "I think I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" Her eyes were getting teary.

"I'm sure."

He kissed her and his lips felt drier by degrees. He looked paler, though he smiled through it. "I think I need some orange juice."

"I don't have any."

"I'll go home then."

“No, wait. Give me your keys. I’ll get it for you. Just rest.”

When she came back, glass in hand, he looked distant. The light in his eyes was dimmer. After he’d downed the orange juice and fallen asleep in her bed on fresh sheets, she stood in front of her window, fists balled tightly. Mercedes stared outside, a tight, searching glare fixed on her face.

There had to be someone. Someone better suited for this. For her.

Someone who could fill her right up without being missed.

Chapter 6

Mercedes went out only a few hours before dawn not knowing how long her mission would take or if it was even possible. She'd scour the whole city, all its neatly laid streets and perfect districts, pulling in the smells and waiting for that one blood-scent to find her. The right one. Strong, but from an unimportant container.

Someone dispensable.

Jade's blood clung inside her body, filling her with light and dread. Her heart shivered with a cautious contentment. The sun was far from touching the sky. Nonetheless, she could already feel it slithering its way towards her, carrying torture.

She followed her will as well as the scents. Something was leading her. She knew he was somewhere. After all, if there was more than one of her, there had to be more than one of them, right?

Them, as in victims. People whose blood-scent would catch her and not let her go.

The word scratched her mind. A deep breath of revulsion overtook her, causing her to pause. She had victims.

The sense of him, the new one, became tangible, a cold ghost reaching under her skin and pulling her. It threatened to tear her apart if she didn't follow. The city was quiet in most places, the blood-scents sparse. The smell of dust and yellowed paper as she passed an older man with a beard and a hat. A young couple, the reek of alcohol and candy mingling in a sickened cloud where they stood giggling and kissing like school children. But no one whose blood rose above and called to her. She concentrated. She

wasn't focused enough, the distress of her selfish act gnawing at her. Jade's insistence that nothing was wrong only worsened this. Mercedes had to find a substitute before Jade woke up.

He'd warned her. And she'd warned herself. She should have rejected him and stayed away. A man like Jade would attend to a woman he cared for even if he was in danger. He'd still be in her apartment when she returned. The only uncertainty was in what state.

She needed blood that stayed. Blood that wasn't her own. To save Jade and herself. Soren and Xyza spared her for now. In fact, she wondered if they were hoping she'd kill. Maybe that's why they let her go. To see what she'd do. And if Jade was involved, what kind of lie did they tell so he'd get close to her? Maybe they told him Mercedes was a friend of theirs and in deep emotional trouble. It would be hard for Jade to resist that. His whole life revolved around helping other people, no matter the cost.

Unless she had him totally wrong. Her mother did say it was "unlikely" for Jade's type to commit suicide. That didn't eliminate the possibility. What if Jade went to them, just like she had, hoping for death?

Another revulsed breath and she moved on. The scent was taunting her. It was out there somewhere and it was meaner, she could already tell. Jade's blood strengthened her—she felt more awake and aware than she had before, her improved senses now overwhelming. When she stopped in front of a building, she could sense where there were people in it up several stories high. She could feel their movements and guess where

they were going. A window was open a few stories above her head. The scent of damp earth and freshly chopped wood drifted down, the blood-scent of another country person trapped in the city, forced here because of the war. She felt pity, but no desire. It was an interesting and sad scent that made her heart tingle for a moment, then relax as she walked on.

Finally, she hit one of the city's largest, most active entertainment districts. She wandered looking for a club that might host a band like Jade's. A place where men like him would be. Mercedes needed someone she could relate to but not too much. They had to have a connection for the blood to work, she figured that much. It was risky. She had to make her decision quickly. No attachment, no second thoughts.

She thought of Jade's scars as tight stitches holding him together and how she'd tried to break them with her teeth.

The blood that stayed would save him. She felt certain of this walking the streets, stride brisk and smooth. It might save her, too. It might be her a cure.

A dark building sandwiched between beige and brown brick work attracted her attention. It had a sign that read "Serpentine" in swirling, smoke-like letters, white on black, a green snake entwined in the words. It seemed right because she could smell something. Blood-scents tangled together with one twisting its way out and rising above: clove oil and clean steel, with an undertone of alcohol. Perfect and sinister.

It wasn't what she was expecting, but it would do. It had to.

Two glass doors lead into a vestibule with red walls, ceiling, and floor. Bright red like a mouth and tongue. In the center of the wall directly in front of her were two heavy doors made of a darkly stained wood. A muffled four-on-the-floor beat pounded from above. The sound burst in volume when someone opened the door and walked past Mercedes. Several feet left of the doors was a ticket window, a real one with a cash register and coat check behind it. A thin woman in a black tank top with short choppy hair chewed blue bubble gum, snapping bubbles between her teeth. Her lipstick was an impossibly dark red, her eyes lined neatly in black with silver glitter. Mercedes approached her, eyes wandering to a wall of concert posters. She scanned the names looking for Jade's band. Most of the shows appeared to be industrial or goth rock with only a few metal and punk bands. No emo, as far as she could tell. It was just a guess, though. Mercedes had long stopped following music.

"There's no show tonight, sorry about that. Cover's \$5.00. Just need to check your ID," the ticket girl said.

After paying and receiving a glowing green "21 and over" bracelet, Mercedes yanked open the doors and walked up the stairs, the clean chemical blood scent luring her along. Red and silver lounge chairs lit by soft purple and white light took up the right half of the room, which was about the size of a basketball court. A small dim bar was directly to her right against the front wall. To the left, an open dance floor crowded with people. The music was loud and aggressive for dance music, with growling vocals and factory-like beats. It was industrial, which she hadn't heard in years.

It didn't match her taste in music at all, but today she almost liked it.

Almost.

The scent faded. Whoever she was looking for had left the room. Feeling frustrated and a little vulnerable in the club, Mercedes quickly ordered a drink (naming the first thing that came to mind—a cranberry vodka she had no intention of drinking) and found a corner she could see the whole floor and the entrance from.

Mercedes felt like she was being watched, so she sat with her back to the wall and scanned the crowd. No one stood out to her. Blood-scents mixed with flesh and heat, artificial and organic smells intertwined with memories, wishes, and dreams. An air of throbbing melancholy rumbled through the air. The darkness seemed to tremble with the people as they danced and mingled, excitement and commiseration infusing their blood-scents. She was beginning to think she finally understood this scene. *Gothic* they called it, a word that conjured tall black buildings with dramatic spikes and poets leaning over graves of beautiful women. But this was different. There was something modern and cold about it, which made her want to go home and cry in Jade's arms. His scene was full of light and warmth.

Though it had its own misery, too.

Orange flashed in the corner of her eye just as the clove-and-steal scent descended over her again.

She looked left and right too fast. The orange was gone and scent fell on her like a net.

“You look new. I’ve never seen you before,” a rich tenor voice said.

Mercedes felt sick and her teeth ached. The pain was rising in her again.

He was slender and looked like he should be taller than he was, though he seemed regal, above her in some way. Fine black hair brushed his shoulders, half hiding a deathly pale, chiseled face. His build was small but imposing. Even in the dark, she could see his deep blue eyes.

He was reaching out to shake her hand. The touch of it was surprisingly warm and sent a shock through her body.

“My name is Adrian. May I have a seat?”

She nodded.

“May I hear your voice.”

“Yes.” Her voice was shamefully small, mouse-like. “I’m Mercedes.”

He sat next to her. “Mercy. It’s Spanish, yes?”

She nodded again.

“So, where have all your friends gone?” he asked, studying her, legs crossed and fingers rubbing his immaculate chin. He affected perfection with a neatly put together outfit of all black except for a peculiar set of aqua-colored beads around his wrist. It took her a moment to recognize them as Buddhist prayer beads. A black tattoo curled out from under his sleeve and slithered beneath the bracelet onto his hand. She couldn’t discern what the image was.

“My friends didn’t come. I’m by myself.”

She'd already walked out a night alone and been lured into her current state. Nothing worse could happen from here.

At least, not to her.

Mercedes was appalled by how easily she thought of killing him.

"I bet you think I should make some new ones, right?" She'd heard that one before. From Melany. From her mother. All she wanted these days were memories, though. Things she could leave behind easily, like photos falling out of a small, overstuffed album.

She thought of Sarah Belle. One of their last moments together started to emerge from the murky water of her mind. She shoved it back down, along with the empty coffin.

Why did she get so close to Jade? Now she'd have to kill just to have him around.

"No need. I opened this place so people could come here to do what they want. If you want to sit in a corner looking lost and alone with an unsipped drink, by all means. But don't expect me to overlook you. I take any chance to meet a new regular."

His voice was even and calm, pulling her along. With these few words, she knew he was not a man who was told "no" very often. Adrian knew how to state his wishes with an air of inevitability. Anyone under his shadow would follow without question.

"Pardon me. Do you mind?" He reached over for her glass. Her body was burning, aching. "I'd hate to see my alcohol go to waste. You're not the drinking type either. You just felt like you needed to buy it. I've seen that before."

He drank the glass down without a drip, though he licked his lips anyways.

Another one, tempting her. This time, she had to be fast, no matter what the voice that was really hers would say. Torture was not half of the fun.

“I’d like to take you on a tour, just to show you where everything is. Somehow people find this place rather...daunting,” he said.

Mercedes followed him, already feeling like a predator. He was making himself prey. It made her suspicious. Even if she killed him quickly, she might still be playing into their game. Adrian could be another pawn, someone Soren and Xyza laid out to torment her. Adrian, however, didn’t seem suicidal or even sad. The steel part of his blood-scent told her that. It made her think of swords, which made her think he was a fighter. The clove marked his sophistication. He was someone who worked hard to be seen a certain way. Suicide wouldn’t become him.

Now, it seemed more likely that he and Jade knew nothing of the change. That they’d been lied to or were not involved at all.

“This is the main lounge area. There’s more upstairs.” He gestured towards the mezzanine. Black railing caged in tables and chairs. Several doors lined the walls behind them. He didn’t point them out, instead showing her the bar, the dance floor, the DJ booth, and the narrow hall to the back door. Her eyes kept returning to the doors when she wasn’t focused on the steel-and-clove scent.

The pain uncurled inside her but this time she felt less debilitated by it. Jade’s blood made her body stronger in spite of the frailty it instilled in her heart.

Adrian introduced her to several patrons. Mercedes smiled kindly, though she was certain she would not be welcome back here when the night was done. It was clear Adrian was admired, if not also feared for his ability to dominate a crowd. Whenever they approached a new group, everyone looked to him as if he were the sun or a god bringing gifts. Several people offered to buy him drinks, which he gently refused, stating he had a new guest he needed to attend to, not to mention his “usual concerns” as it put he more than once.

What unsettled her was how some of them refused to look at her, a few giving sidelong glances that told her they knew something. One girl looked at her imploringly. Mercedes knew that look. It was the don’t-go-with-him look that Melany had given her when she met Lucas. He’s no good, it said. Well, neither am I.

The blood-scent would not let her go, even if she wanted it to. So, she followed, eyes vigilant for signs of trouble.

“I have one more person you must meet. The most important person here. *My* most important person,” Adrian said, gesturing like a lord leading a lady at a Victorian ball, placing his arm on her shoulder as they took the stairs to the mezzanine.

He guided her to the left at the top and down the dimly lit hallway past a few of the red doors. After squinting for a moment, Mercedes realized they were painted with red glitter that shimmered in the pulsing lights. They stopped at the last door to the right.

“My lady, may I present my personal suite,” he said, smiling at his own hyperbole. He opened the door and bowed slightly.

It was a vast, dark apartment painted in grey and black. A long ebony table stretched in front of them. It was lined with black high-backed chairs and gleamed under a warm silver chandelier. A living room area with an artificial fireplace was to the right. “I do wish we had accommodations for a real one, but it’s not possible now.”

To the left was a study with a desk and ebony book cases stocked full with neatly lined hardbound books. The floor was black marble save for a plush red carpet in the living room area.

The back wall was solid except for a grey curtain which led to what Mercedes could only assume was a bedroom.

“Please, have a seat. He must be asleep.” Adrian smiled. “I tend to exhaust him.”

Mercedes looked around. She sensed she would need to escape or lead him away as soon as possible. Whoever this second man was would interfere with her plans for Adrian.

His blood scent dulled when he swept the curtain aside and went into the back. She sat at the table in the middle so as to be close to the door but not appear too afraid to be here.

Then she remembered the tricks her expression could pull. Did it look different to him as it did to Jade? Did she look meek and afraid or naive?

“Not to worry, dear. It’ll only be a moment,” Adrian shouted from the back room.

Her fear was hiding inside her, drowning under dread and remorse.

The swoosh of the curtain would've startled her except she heard his feet and felt him getting closer.

He waved her back.

"It's alright."

She didn't feel worried.

Another man, stockier and with more muscle, was tying a long black silk robe around his body. He had spiky hair streaked with blue. He looked as if he had not slept in days. Red impressions adorned his wrists like bracelets.

"Mercedes, this is Kohl, my love of loves."

Kohl eyed her coldly. She shook his hand, his jealousy making her skin bristle with fear. Yet, there was something frail under the quiet rage. The shiver of a broken heart rippled in his blood. She felt it under his skin in the brief pulse that coursed through her body when their hands met. His blood smelled of paint and red wine.

She felt herself getting too close to kill. This was more information than she'd hoped for.

"I hope you two become friends. Kohl is a good man once you get to know him," Adrian said. Kohl glared at him for a moment. Adrian continued. "Mercedes, I'd like to show you something."

He gestured for her to follow, arm stretched out in a perfect arc, his fingers barely touching her shoulder. She held her breath. Not yet, not yet.

They glided into the living room. He lifted his other arm in a manner that seemed weightless and effortless. An unsheathed broadsword and katana were displayed on the wall above the fireplace on tiny black hooks that were barely visible. They were laid out so the broadsword's hilt was to the left and the katana's to the right.

The broadsword's hilt was silver with a spill of black that formed a shape almost like a diamond that had been stretched by each of its points. It surprised her, how simple it was. She'd seen pictures of swords from medieval times and most were ornately decorated, with lines and patterns, sometimes vines or animals. The katana, though even more simple, struck her in a way she couldn't place. The hilt was wrapped in black with red underneath. The threads formed little diamonds that looked like bleeding eyes from a distance. It made her shudder inside.

"Our only weapons. Things of such morbid beauty. I can't help but think of what they might have been used for in another era. Sometimes they seem so useless there on the wall." Adrian looked pensive for a moment, then his face relaxed.

They both looked cold to the touch. Yet she wanted to steal one, the broadsword in particular. It looked heavy. She wanted to feel it weigh down her hands and find out if she could swing it.

"They are spellbinding. We've never had to use them, thankfully." Adrian smirked. "My security staff is impeccable." He winked at Kohl, who actually smiled for a second.

"Do you know how to sword fight?" Mercedes asked.

“I do,” said Kohl, spite hardly hidden.

The room was suddenly oppressed with silence and tension.

Mercedes turned around. Adrian and Kohl were locked in a stare that was far from loving. Kohl pursed his lips and relaxed.

“I’ll go downstairs for a bit. Your sister said she’d meet me. Said it was important.” The words were forced. “Though I’ll be early. She’s not getting here for another hour.”

“You’ll find something to do,” Adrian said.

Kohl shook his head and went into the back room.

Adrian turned to her. “Don’t mind him. So, tell me what do you do?”

“I’m a graphic artist.”

“Oh, you’ll have to show me some of your work. I might be looking to hire someone to make a poster or two.”

It took all her strength not to roll her eyes. The number of times people have asked to see her portfolio while feigning interest in paying her for work. What followed was the usual awkward explanation of what she did and how she did it. It always made her want to curl up on the inside. How she’d sacrificed her art for her business.

Then again, a poster for a goth club might be different. At least she could make it dark, give it some emotion.

The curtain flapped and Kohl blazed out in a black fishnet shirt and leather pants with a d-ring choker and gauntlets. He paused to tie his boots, his expression cold and closed off.

“You’re trying too hard to ignore me,” Adrian said.

Kohl walked out without looking at Adrian.

Mercedes shifted uncomfortably. The tension deflated only by degrees when Kohl shut the door. She listened to him go down the stairs and walk in the direction of the bar. She couldn’t feel him as well as she could Jade. None of them were as vivid as Jade.

Except, maybe, for Adrian.

“Lost in thought?”

Adrian smiled at her. It would charm anyone. The slight upwards curve of his lips and the confident glow in his eyes.

“Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. Sorry you had to see that. Please, have a seat.”

“I think I’ll stand.”

“But why? Stay a while.”

He grinned now and her blood boiled. It was a strange moment of emotional agony, like she was looking at herself from the outside. Something about Adrian made her look inwards. Her heart sank when she saw what he’d done. Pushing Kohl away like that. He reminded Mercedes of herself at her worst. Telling Lucas she was fine when she wasn’t. Just leave me alone today. I just need to be alone today.

Her boyfriend who loved her. And one of her last friends besides Melany.

She didn't blame him for leaving. She didn't blame her friends for leaving, either. Or Melany for only calling. Mercedes couldn't remember the last time she came over.

"Please, sit." Adrian's voice sounded smothered in her mind. She was racing through her memories looking for something she'd missed. Nothing came back to her.

Except Jade. The thought of him waiting at home made her furious with herself.

"Miss Mercy, please sit down."

He was trying hard to hid his frustration, but the clove-and-steel scent flourished with his anger and it infected her. Made her want to rage out and grip Adrian by the neck to pull out all the blood she could. But there was no way she was that strong. She'd have to play the game, much to her chagrin.

"I suppose I could." Mercedes sat down on the grey couch to the left of the fireplace. Adrian took one of the two black chairs across from it. A red glass table was between them.

"You should relax a little more. It'll bring out your elegance. I can tell you have it." His voice was softer. "Lots of it." For a moment she couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic. But his eyes said differently. They said he meant it, to some degree.

Mercedes tried to look calm, resisting the anger that pulled at her muscles. She could feel herself losing the fight against it. She learned this was the sign of her trick. The one she did without meaning to. Inside her face felt one way. Outside it looked another.

Not yet.

“That’s better. Now you look so beautiful I could have a statue made of you.” He had both hands positioned firmly on the armrests of the chair, his back straight and head held high.

She tapped her fingers on the seat of the couch.

Adrian took a deep breath. “Is there a problem?”

With her new strength she could hold the lie in her expression.

“Why me? Why not Kohl?”

Adrian looked surprised. “Well.” He looked off to the side and placed both his hands in his lap. She was looking for the twitch, the hesitation that would give him away, but there wasn’t one.

“Kohl wouldn’t allow it.” His voice was firmer and deeper than before. “And it would discourage potential friends, such as yourself. He looks so miserable these days. You’d think he could tolerate more after being with me for so long. Oh, don’t look at me like that. I live a free life and I invite others into it. Kohl knew that from the start. He just has these...moods.”

Mercedes assumed she was giving a skeptical look. On the inside, she still felt a grimace on her face. It took all her strength to stay in her seat. She wanted to taste his blood. As much of it as possible.

“I can’t be all that bad. After all, I would never let a woman sit alone in my club. It’s not civil.”

Mercedes shook her head and tried to look away. The blood hunger wouldn't let her. Keep your eyes on the prey.

"You're not easily flattered. That means you're much stronger than you look. You haven't thanked me for any of my compliments. You don't need them."

"I don't mean to be rude."

"No, no. Don't worry. I'm all the more interested now."

"Is that so?" The scent was filling her again. She could already feel its strength. How it would feel pushing through her veins.

He leaned forward and studied her for a moment. "Absolutely."

Her shoulders sank.

The pain and weakness still clung to her, though it was fainter than before. Jade's blood only filled her part way up. She closed her eyes and tried to evoke more of its strength. Adrian stood and walked behind her. He touched her lightly on the back of her neck. She had to deepen her breath to look inward and see the work Jade's blood had done on her body. The world around her vanished, even Adrian's touch. The only thing that stayed was the clove-and-steel scent. It wouldn't leave her alone. In her mind, Mercedes was looking inside a vast cavity of pink tissue. An empty space she knew was somewhere in her. In the center, a white light coiled from below to above. She could sense that it stretched beyond what she was looking at. The longer she looked at it, the more intensely she could feel Jade's blood and smell Adrian's. The white coil glowed until it burned her vision and she opened her eyes.

She looked at Adrian. He smiled. “Do I have a hold on you yet?”

As fast as she could, she read whatever else she could from his blood-scent. “You love Kohl, but you’re scared of him so you’re constantly running away from him. He tolerates it but he’d rather have you all to himself and you know that.”

Adrian pulled his hand away as if her skin burned him.

He narrowed his eyes and sat beside her, leaning in close. The clove-and-steel scent spilled over her. She breathed it in this time. The pain subsided at last, leaving only the emptiness that begged to be filled.

“I think you’re afraid,” he said, touching her leg. “You don’t trust me. It’s so obvious when women don’t trust me. Yet you came up here with me anyways. Now why would you do that?” His fingers tightened.

Mercedes shoved his hand aside and stood.

Adrian looked shocked.

Without hesitation she grabbed his shoulders and pulled him to his feet. He was shaking and his mouth gaped open, eyes shining with sudden fear.

Something warm and wet was spilling over her hands.

Her nails had gone through his shirt and into his skin. She pulled one hand away and Adrian cried out. Her nails were long and sharp, thick like the talons of a hawk. With her freed hand she grabbed his chin and twisted his head to the side. She pushed up, stretching his neck until he cried out again. The pale skin hid the blood. The scent was so

utterly overwhelming she had to give in and bit him right under his neck where she felt the flesh would be weakest. Her teeth settled in so far he couldn't scream.

As with Jade's blood, the taste of Adrian's matched his blood-scent. It felt dry and sultry like smoke as it went down her throat, followed by the taste of metal. The small amount of alcohol he'd had that evening gave his blood a bitterness that she found oddly appealing.

She could feel it hit her veins and fill her up just a little more than before. Adrian grabbed her arm in futile attempt to unlatch her from him. The feel of his hand brought her back and she realized what she was doing in a sudden bolt of thought. She panicked and pushed him. He fell on the couch sliding it back a few feet.

Mercedes was frozen. She heard a drop of blood as it hit the floor. All of the drops.

Kohl burst into the room, nearly tripping over himself. He looked up and swayed a bit then dropped a glass to the floor. His stare made her shift from the discomfort of it.

Mercedes touched her lips and her chin. Her fingers came back covered in red.

Adrian gasped suddenly, holding himself up by the armrest. Kohl, as if switched on, rushed to his side, pushing Mercedes out of his way.

"What kind of play is this?" He looked back at her, eyes furious.

She backed away, keeping her eyes fixed on Kohl. The swords were mere feet from him. Whatever she had become it would not resist a blade. She was certain of that.

The glass crunched under her feet. Kohl stood, chest heaving. "Get out."

She ran, not bothering to cover her face and pushing aside anyone in her way. Under the music, she could hear the shouts and whispers alike. The curses that someone would be so rude.

Once out in the night air she paused, mortified. No one inside had noticed the blood on her face, but out here, she might not be so lucky. Look for safety. A dark space. She turned down a dark alleyway. There was little time before sunrise, so she stayed in the shadows.

She may as well get used to it.

Chapter 7

She walked with the most deliberate ease, concentrating on how she placed her feet on the ground with every step. She had to keep her pace up. Her body shook if she went too slow. Adrian's blood welled inside her fighting for space in her veins. She could feel its force pressing against Jade's. The left side of her body tingled and made her dizzy.

The feeling started out intense, almost unbearable, but faded as she moved. Their blood was starting to mingle, the salty-and-sweat blood of Jade and the steel-and-clove blood of Adrian.

Running back to Jade didn't feel right. Even though there was no love in her taking of Adrian's blood, it somehow felt like cheating. She'd nearly killed him, her movements so fast even she was surprised. She couldn't remember the last time she felt that angry.

Her body felt settled again as if she was starting to recover from something she'd had for so long she couldn't recall what it was like to feel well. It was a disturbing feeling, the sense that she could be jerked back into sickness at any moment persisting in her mind. A sound was nagging her as well. Footsteps. Two people were following her. She stopped suddenly under a burned out lamp only blocks away from her neighborhood.

The night was turning pale and the sound of the footsteps ceased.

They weren't too far behind her. She could hear them breathing.

She turned around. Two orange-haired figures stood still in the dying darkness. Their faces were obscured, but she knew it was the same two she'd seen at the concert

with Jade. Two smudges of grey and black. They moved closer together. They were holding each other, heads pressed together.

“What do you want?” Mercedes yelled

They stopped moving. Their breath went away. One by one, the sounds around her disappeared. A conversation she could hear in one of the houses ceased. The rustle of leaves and trash on the concrete vanished. A barking dog was cut off.

“Stay where you are,” they whispered at the same time. “We’re coming to get you. Then you’ll come with us. We’ll show you what to do.”

They moved towards her as if gliding above the ground, their bodies unnaturally steady. When they were close enough for her to see their eyes, she realized she’d been locked in a stare with them the whole time.

“We’ll show you exactly what you need to do.”

A creeping feeling spread over her back. Someone was behind her. Whoever it was made the orange-haired couple stop. They blinked and Mercedes could move her body again.

“Go away,” a firm, older female voice said.

“Jeordie, now!” the orange-haired woman said and they ran away as if stung.

A bony hand gripped her shoulder enough to cause pain.

“Stay away from them. And go to your man. He’s going to finish what you started.”

Mercedes turned. “Who are you?”

An elderly woman in a long brown skirt and a shirt with wide sleeves bent towards her. The woman backed away slightly. Her body didn't straighten. She must have been in her eighties. "You don't need to know who I am. Your man is going to finish what you started and you can't let him do that. I've never seen it happen this way. I'm worried if you don't do it the right way you'll become like those two."

"What's wrong with them?"

"Same as you. Only they were changed in the usual way. Don't waste time. You don't have much of it. Go finish what you started." The woman squinted at her for moment as if she was reading something in Mercedes's eyes. "With both of them. You have to finish what you started with both of them." Her shoulder ached when the woman let go.

"Both of them?"

The woman shook her head. "You know. You've known this whole time. One bite and you can't go back. You have to finish them off. Go! The first one's doing it for you and I'm telling you, I don't know if it'll work."

The creeping feeling came back, drawn out by her mother's voice echoing in her mind.

Cutters only want to hurt. They don't want to die.

The woman's eyes widened and softened. For a second or two, Mercedes felt like someone had crawled into her mind and was feeling her way around. "Go. Now. I will find you later and help you. I know a lot about your kind," the old woman said, her voice

gentle now, almost pleased. Or relieved. Mercedes had no time to decide. She ran without a thank you.

Chapter 8

A block away from her apartment, a voice commanded her to stop. It came from an alleyway to her right.

“No,” Mercedes said.

“You don’t need to get defensive. I’m just here to check in on you.” It was Xyza. “Isn’t that a nice thing to do?”

Like metal filings moving towards a magnet, Mercedes’s blood shifted to the right side of her body, pulling her into the alleyway. She grit her teeth to trap a shriek of pain before it could get out. After being dragged several feet, she was yanked down hard and smacked onto the concrete, blacking out on contact.

Mercedes opened her eyes to find Xyza’s face next to hers. The blue-pale girl was laying down, imitating Mercedes’s exact pose with her shoulder shoved into the concrete and arms limp. Xyza’s eyes were narrow and searching. She raised her hand as if it was disconnected from her body. Mercedes couldn’t move. Her blood still pushed against the side of her body with a strong enough force to keep her clamped down. Xyza’s hand hovered for a moment and shot forward, clenching Mercedes’s throat with cold, hard fingers. Her nails sunk into Mercedes’s soft skin. Mercedes felt a sting of something pointed entering her chest above her heart. Paralyzed with fear, she watched what appeared to be soft, tube-like appendages emerging from Xyza’s fingers slid into her flesh. They were blue. The color of veins. Xyza’s veins slithering into her body. Mercedes retched when the veins wrapped around her heart and stopped moving. Her flesh burned.

She couldn't scream. Her whole body was unmoving under the heat and the grip of Xyza's veins.

Xyza's voice was in her head now. *We're connected now. My blood-paths and yours. I can hear their blood in you. They're still alive. Hardly anyone lets them live. Soren will be disappointed. You're showing a defect, though you're still much better than Taurin, the first one.* She rambled, speeding up until Mercedes couldn't understand what she was saying. It sounded like a recording being played backwards on high speed. It stopped. *That's enough.*

Xyza stood, pulling her veins out of Mercedes. Blood trickled down Mercedes' chest and stomach from five open wounds.

"What are you doing this for?"

"Soren wants me to see how you're doing. To see how far along you are. This is your first check up."

"Check up? I'm his patient?"

"Not really."

"What do you mean."

"Can't say. It'll make you mad." Xyza stood up and leaned against the wall, crossing her arms. A smug smile was on her face. "I'm done anyways. You're free to go. Hurry up. You have killing to do. I'd better see progress the next time I come back."

"Oh, no. I'm not killing anyone."

Xyza's smile turned into a mad grin, the kind of look someone gets when they know they're about to win.

Mercedes's blood shifted to her back, shoving her against the wall and pressing against her skin as if to get out. Before she could look up, she was being bitten right where the puncture wounds already were. Her blood lurched back forward with burning pain. It felt as if her veins were being pulled out like string. After drinking deeply, Xyza stepped back, her black eyes sparkling in the dark.

Something about her face looked strange. Her lips were pursed shut. She smiled slyly and spit a mouthful of hot blood into Mercedes's face. Xyza kicked Mercedes in the stomach, knocking what was left of her blood back into place, and then ran away.

Mercedes struggled to her feet trying to ignore wounds in her neck. More hot blood ran down her chest. She stepped out of the alleyway and scanned the area. Xyza was gone.

She stumbled back to her apartment, mind half-gone and unable to process what had just happened. Her efforts to protect herself from Xyza and Soren were pathetic, not to mention that she'd let herself get so pre-occupied that she let her guard down. For the first time, she felt ashamed of her inexperience. Now she knew there was no way she could stop it. She had to become a better predator.

The only problem was how empty she felt again. Very little of Jade and Adrian's blood was left in her body and the dark ache from deep inside her had returned. She didn't know whether to turn back or go home. It would be easy enough to stay away from

Serpentine. There were plenty of other places to hide. But what if she found another person, another one with a blood-scent as tempting as Jade's and Adrian's? The only other option was to go home where she'd kill Jade for sure.

Unless she ended it, whatever was between the two of them, and banished Jade from her apartment. She could blockade the door and drink her own blood any time she felt the urge to break down his door. Or she could torment him and make him leave. But how could she do that? Break a man who was already broken?

And what did that old woman mean when she said Jade was going to finish what Mercedes started? He was the only person the woman could have been referring to. An ache hit her heart. It was so obvious.

Mercedes had triggered Jade as she feared. Images of razor blades and bloody arms filled her head. She had to get back and stop him.

As soon as she was home, she went to the bathroom to wash the wounds. Stripping off her shirt, she leaned close to the mirror to see the damage. Five deep punctures and a ragged ring of teeth marks were on the right side of her neck. The look of them made her feel sick and she wrapped them with a whole roll of gauze she had under the sink.

She leaned towards the mirror to tuck in the end of the gauze when she noticed something was different about her eyes. They were now black and white like shining mottled crystals. Mercedes sank to the floor, her mind blank with shock.

Minutes passed and she fell asleep. The sun must have come up.

—

When she woke up, she was in her bed and Jade was watching her, a cigarette poised patiently above his ear.

“You left your door unlocked,” he said. There was a smile in his voice. “Some strange guy might come in and creep on you while you’re sleeping.”

She turned to him and smiled. He immediately frowned. That light in his eyes. It didn’t stand a chance. “So, what’s with your neck?”

“It’s nothing.”

“I’m sure.” He turned on the bedside lamp.

Mercedes flinched at the light.

“Sorry. Jesus you look pale. Well, paler than usual.” He reached over and tugged at the end of the gauze.

She smacked his hand away.

“Woah, I’m just checking it out. What’s wrong with you?”

She had to do it. She had to break his heart. It was better for him to be alive than dead, no matter how he felt.

“I...I went to this club and met this guy...”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No.” She looked down. “I hurt him. This was someone else.”

“What?” A thin wire of tension cut through his voice.

He moved towards her and touched her face. “You’re so cold.” The tenderness in his voice stabbed her in the heart.

He was offering his arm to her now.

“No, Jade. No. I can’t mess you up again.”

“It’s okay...”

“No. It’s not.”

“Mercy, you look like you’re dying. Give yourself a break. I know that you need this.”

“Jade. Jade, it’s okay. I can take care of it.” She clamped her mouth shut. “How do you know I need blood? Your blood.”

“Mercedes, you didn’t just bite me. You actually swallowed my blood. I guess that makes you some kind of, I don’t know, creature? Or maybe you’re like, evolved or something.”

“I don’t know what I am. All I know is this can’t go on. Between us.”

He backed away from her, a hurt look on his face. He knew exactly what was coming. “So, this guy. At the club. You...bit him also?”

Mercedes nodded.

“And now you want to be with him instead?”

Right now, she should lie. Lie and tell him that she needed to be with someone else. That she was sorry and she’d made a mistake by leading him on. How could she?

His eyes were so dark except for the light reflecting off nascent tears.

And if she made him leave, she'd be alone again.

"Jade, I don't want to hurt you."

"Save it."

He stormed out of the room and down the hallway towards the bathroom. No, no. I've done it this time. He's going to bleed no matter what, she thought and ran after him. It might as well be for something.

The door was shut and locked before she could get to him.

This was supposed to be the moment where she felt relieved. Relieved that she'd made her decision. Relieved that he had gotten away just as her blood hunger flared up.

But he was behind a closed door in a room where it was Jade versus himself and whatever sharp object he could find.

—

Jade's blood moistened the air inside the apartment. She could hear a sound, like paper being torn. With each cut the smell of Jade's blood burst into the air with a new intensity.

"Jade..."

The emptiness inside her called out. Break down the door. Break it.

Mercedes went to the kitchen and reached for the knife drawer. She sliced her arm and drank her watery blood, once again tasting salt-and-sweat tinged with steal-and-clove. It tasted too good to her. She dropped the knife and retreated into the living room where she curled up on the couch determined to wait it out. The ache in her body spread

and her jaw started to hurt. Jade's blood infected the air and no matter where she went, it followed her, as well as the sound of skin splitting apart.

A good person would go back to the door and yell until he opened it. But she wasn't a good person. She went outside to die and came back with a need that would never let her go and now she was being punished for it. If she went to him, she'd kill him. If she didn't, he might kill himself. She buried her head into the couch cushion and shook.

The cutting sounds stopped.

"Jade?"

The sound of flesh smacking on the tile. The thud of a body falling.

Mercedes got up. The smell of his salt-and-sweat blood was overpowering. The emptiness in her needed it. She took a few steps and paused. Was it too late?

The bathroom door clicked. He unlocked it for her. She started walking again.

Maybe. Maybe someone was better off dead. It wasn't up to her anymore. She'd lost that power the moment she broke his heart.

The white sink was full of blood, red hand prints and smears on the front thick enough to look like a waterfall. Jade lay on the floor, arms shredded with cuts. His face was ashen and he was staring off into the ceiling. His lips were moving as if to speak.

She couldn't move and instead just let herself fall to her knees, ignoring the pain of them hitting the tile. She cradled his head and put her ear next to his lips, trying to make out what he was saying.

“I think I got...a little carried away,” he said, then became harder to understand. Something like “It’s for you.”

It’s mine.

She pulled back. “Jade, look at me.”

He kept staring off, green eyes shining. The bathroom was dim, so this light was all his. He’d gotten what he wanted at last. For him, the struggle was over. No more guilt. No more hiding. No more running away. His breath became ragged and stopped. She touched his still, silent chest, her body stiff with shock.

He’d offered her his arm.

He’d known the whole time.

She dropped his body and backed away. She looked behind her. The hall was empty. The only sounds were of neighbors shuffling about their apartments, turning on TVs, turning them off, clinking glasses, vacuuming. Going on as if nothing in the world was wrong.

Jade’s blood-scent swirled around her. Under the sadness the familiar ache emerged. An empty space that still needed to be filled.

She started on Jade’s wrists, licking the wounds clean. So it would feel like love, she drained him through the neck, her nose and cheek pressed into his still-warm flesh as she had the first night they kissed. The first night she nearly killed him. She stroked his hair. Tears welled, but didn’t fall yet. Her grief could wait. The emptiness would not. Mercedes dragged her tongue across the floor and the bloody waterfall, licking away his

handprints. She got every spot on the counter and mirror then stepped back to see if anything else was on the floor or walls.

All that was left was a sink full of blood. She put her hand over it and felt the heat rise like a fading fire. She glanced up at the mirror. The white crystals in her eyes had swollen so the black ones were barely pinpricks. Her face was smeared with Jade's blood. She watched herself wipe some of it away with her fingers and lick them clean.

Mercedes leaned over and touched the surface of the blood pool with her tongue. Her mind flashed with memory, the smell of sweat-and-salt. She was at the beach. She was small and innocent. She was showing her friend Sarah Belle how to make a sand castle. Melany was there, too, and jumped into the scene with seashells. They decorated Sarah Belle's castle for her. She had been afraid to touch the shells. They looked sharp, she said.

Sarah Belle's mom was angry when her daughter came back inside covered in sand. She yelled and yelled until Sarah Belle cried. *It made no sense. She'd told us to go outside and play.*

Mercedes watched feeling powerless. She squeezed a shell in her hand hard enough to draw blood and then the scent hit her again. The salt and sweat.

She wanted more of the memory. She wanted to go back and start over, remember every scene. She wanted it more than the blood, the taste of it, the feel of it filling the empty places inside her. Mercedes leaned in until the bottom half of her face was submerged, pulling in gulps of it until it was gone and she was left licking the white

marble until it shined like the inside of a sea shell. She cleaned her fingers with her tongue and wiped her face with her hands, licking her palms.

A different ache took hold in her heart, one that was hot and angry. She slammed her open palm into the mirror.

It shattered, the pieces falling like glitter.

Mercedes looked at her palm. The bleeding was already slowing and the scrapes disappearing like they were being erased. She reached for the gauze around her neck and pulled it away. The skin only showed scars. Another trick of her kind.

She picked up Jade and took him to the bedroom. He weighed about as much as papier mache to her. She laid him on her bed and pulled the covers over him as if he was asleep. She knelt beside him and stroked his hair and arms feeling the scars and still-open wounds. The scab on his elbow where she'd first taken blood. The place on his neck.

She didn't kiss him. She didn't want to be that close to him again. A part of her saw him as empty and useless to her. No blood-scent to keep her attention. Another part told her not to be so cold, so she put her hand over his. Something was still in there, she thought. Mercedes felt something move like electricity, like he was thinking or dreaming. Or remembering.

Mercedes looked at her hand. The scrapes from the mirror had disappeared, leaving the ones from the shell behind. They were old and faint, tiny, vein-like lines she couldn't feel when she touched them. So small she'd forgotten they were there.

Chapter 9

The next evening, Jade's skin felt dry and looked like it was stretched tightly over his bones as if flesh had already disintegrated. His color had started to fade, turning his skin an ashen white and his lips a faint pink. The bright green of his eyes was darkening to grey. His gaze was still fixed on the ceiling exactly as it had been when she first found him.

Mercedes touched his cheek and his lips. They felt like paper and she pulled away, afraid even a little brush would rip his skin. Keeping her head as still as possible, she pressed her ear to his chest, hoping to hear something.

A loud crack coming from the living room startled her.

The door to the bedroom was wide open, exposing the perfect darkness of the hallway. She watched it for a moment expecting for something to jump out. She stood and reached into the black, her hands and arms shaking. Finally, her hand found the wall and she used it as a guide while she crept towards the living room. Mercedes stopped at the corner and took a moment to breathe, hoping her heart would slow down. The utter silence unsettled her and made her feel like someone was stalking her. She thought she could hear whispers in the blood tumbling through her veins, like the ones she heard when Xyza attacked her, except no words were clear. Heart pounding, she crept down the hall and peeked around the corner into the living room. The window had slammed shut, yet the curtains tossed and twisted as if the cold wind of the night could still enter the

room. Yellow light from the street lamps cast a weak glow. Aside from the curtains, nothing moved.

A hand grabbed her ankle and another turned on the light.

“Jeordie!” a voice cried out.

The orange-haired woman stood by the dim lamp, a furious glare on her face. On the floor at her feet, the orange-haired man clasped Mercedes’s ankle tight enough to hurt. She cried out and shook her leg to try to loosen his grip.

“That’s enough!” the woman shouted.

He let go and reached up to Mercedes, clawing at her clothes. She backed away and swatted his hand every time it came near her. He opened his mouth to speak and nothing but hoarse sounds came out.

“You’re all dried out are you,” the woman said to the man. She was wearing an old-fashioned white nightgown. The frizzy waves of her long hair obscured her face and made her look small. She looked at Mercedes. “Please, don’t be afraid. My name is Selene. This is Jeordie. If you’ll excuse us for a moment.”

Selene lifted Jeordie as if he was a pillow and carried him to the couch.

“We’ll do our best not to spill a drop,” she said to Mercedes. Jeordie was pawing for her wrist. “Hold on now. Hold still and open up. We’re not going to mess up her couch.” Jeordie laid his head in her lap facing up and opened his mouth. Selene reached into her pocket and pulled out a knife. She sliced her wrist and let the blood drip into

Jeordie's mouth. "Control now, love. Control." Slowly, she let him take hold of her wrist and he drank without letting any escape.

Mercedes felt the pain of her hunger and she turned away. The two had given her an idea.

"Is this...is he human?"

"No, he's just like us," Selene said. "Only weak."

"Drinking blood doesn't save a human," Jeordie said, sitting up and wiping his face with his sleeve. "Believe me, I've tried. I'm afraid your man is gone for good, poor innocent soul. Used just like a paper cup."

"Oh, really? What does that make me?" Selene said.

"You're a well, love. An endless well." He smiled and licked the blood off his teeth.

Selene kissed him. "Always had a way with words, this one. Could sucker me into anything." They laughed together.

"What are you doing here?"

"We're here for you. You've finally made your first kill. We could smell it," Selene said.

"All the way across the city," Jeordie said. "We must be getting strong, Selene."

"Or I am, at least," Selene said. "Tonight, we'll celebrate the first of three kills. Three that will take you to your full strength," Selene said.

"Or you'll be like me," Jeordie said. "Dependent."

“I don’t want to celebrate anything,” Mercedes said.

“I wouldn’t either,” Jeordie said.

Selene’s expression went sour. “Oh, you sensitive types. I guess we’ll just talk then. I can tell you’re very confused, Mercedes. We can help you.”

“But, the old woman. She said...”

“Judith. The seer—” Jeordie said.

“The woman who *says* she’s a seer,” Judith said.

“She told me to stay away from you two.”

Jeordie looked confused. “Why would she say that?”

“Because the old woman is a liar, Jeordie,” said Selene, placing her hand on his thigh as if to reassure him. “Just like all the unchanged. Liars.”

Mercedes blinked. Suspicion burned in her. Everyone was against her, even Jade had been, though in his last moments he probably didn’t see it that way. A brutal sense of loneliness grew in her heart. It would be hard not to trust anyone.

“So, what can we do for you?,” Selene said, sounding a bit like a waitress taking a patron’s order.

“How do I undo it?”

Selene shook her head and stated it was impossible. “We made so many attempts. First, we tried to act like we had not been changed—we ate food and drank coffee to stay awake in the day. But every night, we’d feel charged and starving. So, we tried different sorts of blood, ones we didn’t find attractive. We suspected the smells were traps and if

we only drank from a few people we'd be like this forever. When that failed, we deprived ourselves of blood entirely and became ravenous. That's what lead us to exchange blood and that seemed to do something."

"Of course, it wasn't enough and we killed."

"*I* killed," Selene said bitterly. "We thought we were alone until we saw you. It's a great relief to know there's one as alone as we are. We should stick together."

Jeordie handed Mercedes a piece of paper. "Here's our phone number and address."

Mercedes turned the paper over in her hands. It was just normal paper torn from a lined notebook. The words were printed in capital letters with a thick, black marker. They stayed in place when she read them and when she looked up, she was still in her living room.

"Is something wrong?" Selene asked.

"Nothing."

Selene studied Mercedes. "It's only a piece of paper. We promise we haven't bewitched it in any way. Only the oldest of us can do tricks like that."

Mercedes went into the kitchen and pinned the paper to the cork board by the phone. A wrinkled, faded piece of paper listed her mother, Melany, and Sarah Belle's numbers. Luke's was crossed out. Jade's wasn't listed. She had both of his numbers memorized.

"What are we?" Mercedes said, touching Sarah Belle's name.

“Not sure. I can only tell you what we’ve figured out so far. The one who changed us died before she could tell us much,” said Selene. “Poor thing. So fair you could see her veins. Her skin almost looked blue.”

Mercedes started at this. Xyza.

“You’re like a little rabbit. Everything I say scares you,” Selene said with a smile, her voice more condescending than Mercedes liked.

“It’s nothing.”

“Of course not,” said Selene. They stayed for a few more minutes before it became clear that Mercedes wanted to be by herself. When they left, Selene switched off the light. The window opened and shut. Mercedes was alone.

...

Mercedes lay with her head on Jade’s chest.

I should have looked in his eyes more. I should have made the light come back and stay there. I should have just starved for him. I should have said that I loved him...

She sat up and looked down at him, remembering how he used to look at her. It already seemed distant, as if he’d been alive a hundred years ago or in a dream. It wasn’t real, his life or his death. She tried looking into his eyes to see if anything was there. He stared past her. Looking away, she reached out and closed his eyes.

Mercedes got up to call Melany. The dead heaviness seeped back into her body, colder and darker than ever, dragging her down. She craved her bed, wanting to curl up in the covers and block out everything. But Jade would be right beside her. She dialed the

number. Her hand looked far away and her fingers moved so slowly they looked like tuberous sea plants swaying underwater. When Melany picked up, she couldn't speak. Nothing she said would make sense, so she hung up feeling guilty and isolated.

The twins still disturbed her, invading her home like that. Plus they mentioned Xyza or someone who looked like her. Could her kind fake death? Was it the same girl?

Not to mention the woman's warning.

When she cried, no tears came. She drank a whole glass of water in spite of how repulsive it was to her. Still, no tears. Without tears, crying didn't feel like crying. Before when the dead heaviness hit her, a good cry made her feel like she'd done something. Like something had left her, at least for a little while. She could never figure out what it was, though it returned to her often. A nameless sadness. A tiny bit of fear. But of what?

Now, she knew exactly what was wrong and she couldn't get rid of it. The mug she used to drink her own blood sat in the middle of the counter. She approached it. The inside was stained a milky red. It smelled better to her than she wanted it to. She threw it against the wall and let the shattered pieces stay where they were and went into her room for as long as she could tolerate.

It only took a few days for the hunger and its accompanying sickness to return. Mercedes found herself standing at her door, resisting the urge to go where her body was taking her. She wanted, more than anything else, to see Adrian.

—

Mercedes sat at the bar, forcing herself to sip her third cranberry vodka. The alcohol had no effect on her at all. It seemed to slip right through her body, a light rain on a desert. At the very least she was keeping herself occupied with something other than Adrian's blood. It was foolish of her to come to Serpentine and total luck that she couldn't smell the steel-and-clove. She happened to pick the night he wasn't here. Mercedes felt so stupid. There was no way she could beat this thing alone. Clearly, killing someone had no effect on her cravings. It was her decision that led to Jade's suicide, though she honestly couldn't tell if he meant for it to go that far. From what Selene and Jeordie said, she had Adrian and another to kill before she'd reach her full strength. But she didn't want her full strength. She wanted to reverse the change and go back to being a weak, lonely human. Judith might know. Selene and Jeordie admitted to being largely clueless, which gave her a marginal amount of hope. Mercedes had to keep trying. It was too late for Jade, but there was still time to save Adrian and keep Kohl as happy as he could be with such a man.

"Do you really think he'll have you a second time?" a familiar voice asked. She turned and saw Kohl, this time in black leather pants, a black button-down shirt. He wore the same choker as before and sat down next to her, folding his hands in front of him. "He rarely takes anyone a second time. His attempt to make me feel important."

"He didn't have me," Mercedes said.

"Then what was all the biting about? You know, I almost forced him to get rabies shots. I thought you'd gone crazy with some disease. But, he convinced me things just

got out of hand and now here you are, looking completely calm and stable over a fourth drink,” he said, as the bartender placed a new glass before her. “You’re so tiny I’m surprised you’re able to sit up straight. Ethan here makes them strong.”

The bartender, who was wearing sunglasses in the dark club, nodded and poured Kohl a glass of brandy.

“He also knows me very well.” Kohl smiled and downed half of it in a few seconds.

“It’s hopeless,” Mercedes said. “I’m trying to get drunk and for your information it has nothing to do with Adrian. It’s someone else.”

“Oh? Well, that’s what happens when you run off to ‘visit’ someone else,” he said bitterly and without apology.

“He died. And I told you, Adrian didn’t have me.”

“I’m sorry. Please forgive my manner. Things have been quite different since you came here,” Kohl said, finally looking at her. He was trying to maintain a rigid expression, but she could see pity in his eyes. “I came over here to show you something.” Kohl pulled his sleeves up and his collar down exposing bruises and scratches. It was then she noticed his split lip and a mostly faded black eye. Mercedes stomach turned.

This is all my fault.

“I think he felt a little violated by you, which is impressive,” Kohl said. “Adrian always makes like he’s in control, which he usually is.” Kohl rolled his sleeves back up and looked around. The crowd was sparse. Numerous men and women in black shirts

with the words “crew” written on the back were carrying equipment to the stage beyond the dance floor. “This place is going to be in a panic soon. Big show tonight. Why don’t we get out while we still can?”

Mercedes eyed him curiously.

“Oh, forget what I said earlier. I need your help. You got to him and I think you’re the only one who can fix it,” Kohl said. “Please, my apologies for anything...uncouth that’s happened here.”

She gave a small smile. “You’re both so formal.”

“I like to think of myself as a gentleman to women, though that’s as far as it goes,” he smiled. “My tastes aren’t quite so diverse as Adrian’s.”

Mercedes downed the cranberry vodka as quickly as she could. She could feel herself drying up as it traveled down her throat and settled into her stomach. The hunger was still in control. She stood and paused to search the air for Adrian’s blood-scent. Kohl grabbed her arm and pulled her along. They had to dodge a few crew members and eager fans with backstage passes to get outside where a long line was starting to wrap around the building. People were in costume from full Victorian ball gowns to burlesque outfits to dandy suits with bowler hats. Nearly everyone wore a mask. Glitter covered exposed skin. Almost every bright unnatural hair color could be seen. Mercedes found herself searching for orange. Surely those strange twins would be at an event like this. They were twins, right? They looked so much alike, yet they behaved a bit like lovers. It sent a

shiver down her spine, though part of her envied Selene. The one she loved and her victims were separate people.

“I met Adrian at one of these masquerades. He teased me for not wearing a mask. I hadn’t known about it, just came out looking for an escape,” Kohl said. “He told me, ‘Now, I can’t have a guest at my masquerade without a mask.’ So he gave me his.”

Mercedes shook her head, remembering Adrian downing her untouched drink. *I’d hate to see my alcohol go to waste.*

“He used a line on you, too, didn’t he?” Kohl looked away with a frown. “That night was over five years ago. So much for our promise.”

“Your promise?”

“That after five years, if he still felt passion for me, he’d let all of his other lovers go and I’d be his only one at last.”

They crossed the street at the end of the block. The sounds of the revelers and music grew distant. The streets were still damp from a rain that must have happened during the day. There was a chill in the air, though Kohl seemed not to mind and Mercedes’s body adjusted perfectly within moments. Kohl tried to keep a conversation going and ended up carrying most of it reminiscing about his relationship with Adrian. Sometimes he’d start telling her about something else and then circle back to Adrian without finishing his other line of thought. The spiraling thoughts of the heartbroken. Mercedes’ thoughts all circled back to Jade, but she would not speak of him and Kohl tactfully avoided the subject.

“So, I think now you should tell me the real reason you came to the club today,” Kohl asked suddenly. They had wandered to an empty street. No other pedestrians were in sight. A homeless man wandered across the street and into an alley in front of them. He looked up in fear at Mercedes as he went by, eyes wide with more than just the madness of a lost person. His blood smelled of damp and dust. Emptiness. For the first time, she could tell that there used to be more to it than that. A new trick she’d gotten, perhaps from Jade’s blood. It reminded her of when they first met and he knew without asking that Lucas had left her. It made her feel like she’d stolen so much from him. It was more than just his life that was gone. “There are dozens of places to go,” Kohl said. “Why Serpentine?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Kohl raised an eyebrow at her. She could see the blue of his eyes in the dark, a deep shade that was almost purple. It seemed to suit him. “Try me.”

Mercedes explained her situation, faltering here and there, about the changes that had happened to her, including the sickness that took over her body when she was around certain people. “It doesn’t go away until they’re gone.”

“Gone?”

She stopped in her tracks and squeezed her hands into fists. “Dead.”

“Was the man you miss one of them?” Kohl asked hesitantly.

Mercedes nodded, unable to say the word.

“And you’re disquieted that his death brought you relief from the sickness and pain?”

Mercedes could feel her heart crack. Kohl was right. “Not only that,” she said. “but his death was my fault and now there’s another...”

“Adrian. I’m not sure about everything you’ve told me, but I do believe that you have something about you,” Kohl said. “Nobody gets to Adrian like you did.”

Mercedes nodded, knowing he was just trying to humor her.

“You’re not the first to want to kill him. That man shatters hearts left and right,” Kohl said. “Yet, I still want him and do my best to protect him. I should warn you that I have hurt people for him, though never without evidence. Believe it or not, I’m getting to like you, which is not something I say about many. Please, don’t do anything that would force me to hurt you. I would rather be your friend.”

Her heart fluttered in confusion. She could not remember the last time she made a new friend and she wished deeply that this was under different circumstances. If she did not keep herself under control, she’d lose another person.

Mercedes told him about Jade’s cutting and how he’d killed himself after she bit him. “I think Adrian’s going to kill you. I think that whatever sort of hurting a person does, after I bite them, it gets worse.”

“But, you broke up with him, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know. We barely talked about it. And I have a hard time believing he’d relapse that hard that quickly.”

Kohl shifted uncomfortably, but didn't disagree. A sudden tension stiffened between them and the conversation cut off. They kept walking. Mercedes glanced at Kohl from time to time. His gaze was fixed on the ground. His eyes were darker than before. His paint-and-wine of his blood-scent was strong, yet didn't tempt her at all. Like with the old man, she could tell it hadn't always been this way. The paint used to be accompanied by something that suited him more.

"I want to tell you something I've never told anyone," Kohl said suddenly. "I do think Adrian could kill someone, but it wouldn't be me. He needs me, even if he doesn't want me."

They walked for a few more blocks and continued talking, discovering that they had much in common. Kohl was also a graphic designer and had designed the club's current logo. He also preferred to be alone with the exception of Serpentine's crowds, which he always found entertaining and easy to escape with their apartment being upstairs.

Over the years, he'd grown so attached to Adrian that everything Kohl did related back to his love in some way. He stopped designing, except at Adrian's request, and became head of security and Adrian's personal guard, a change he welcomed since the martial arts had always been a passion of his. Once they returned to Serpentine, the crowd had crammed inside and Kohl did not look eager to navigate his way to the suite. "I hope he's calmed down by now. I need another drink. Maybe more."

Standing at the door, Mercedes could smell the clove-and-steel scent of Adrian's blood. A moment of pain lit through her body. Kohl said goodnight and went inside, leaving Mercedes alone except for a few smokers and the bouncers. The door shut, a sound that always brought her loneliness. Aside from the twins, no other living person knew about how Mercedes had changed. She longed to run in after Kohl, ask if it was alright to come by again. No matter what, she couldn't be alone. Someone had to keep her under control.

She ran through the door. "Kohl!"

The lobby was quiet. The thick wooden doors leading into the main room were shut, dulling the sound of live music and the cheering crowd. Kohl was leaning on the ticket window talking to the same bubble-gum chewing girl who'd been there before.

"Kohl! We should hang out again."

"Of course," he said "I'll be here."

She nodded and left for home

Mercedes smiled for the first time in months, though it was tenuous. She knew the hunger drove her as much as the loneliness and she would be back at the club, following the steel-and- clove scent. The thought of Kohl standing in her way brought her comfort. She wondered how long it would be this way.