



STORYTELLERS
VAULT 
FICTION

A Vampire: The Masquerade™ Fiction
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VÄSTGÖTAGATAN 5
SE-118 27 STOCKHOLM
SWEDEN

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April 13, 1999. 3:21 AM.

Kelly Patterson rolled out of bed. Petite frame clothed in nothing but her own blood, she pulled for the sodden silk sheet. She ached from head to toe, and her bones felt like they were creaking with the effort of supporting her weight. She blinked at the shimmering crimson curtain that fell across her field of vision as the pain spiked. She glanced down when one of her fingers wouldn't close around the sheet. Her right ring finger was bent nearly backwards between the knuckles closest to her palm. It was, for a moment, strange to her that that should not be the most painful of her hurts.

She stood with her four-finger grip on the sheet and pulled on it. Half-way to her feet it stopped, jerked back away from her. Her shoulder cried out at the sudden strain and she nearly overbalanced back onto the bed. She looked back over her shoulder at the one who had pulled the sheet.

Kelly felt the thrill of song vibrating in her throat. Tonight

was a good night at Mitch's bar. She'd had a good week dancing at the club, and she'd made her rent without having to flirt with more desperate acts this month. Now she was singing, and that was always better. She rose on wings of sound, feeling them swell up from the core of her and carry her aloft. The regulars, her sometimes-friends, were rapt, tonight. Strangers were awestruck. She was soaring. She smiled her broad, red-painted smile around the lyrics at the new guy at the table in front of the stage. He was cute, as far as that went. A little over six feet tall, a darker tone of blond than Kelly herself, broad across the shoulder but not so much that he seemed to loom. His eyes were the prettiest blue she'd seen in years, and they were wide with soul-wrenching awe as they stared up at her. She'd never before seen someone so struck by the sound of her voice, and she elated.

“Do I at least get to shower this time?” Kelly asked. Slurred, between the split lips. Stefan didn't answer her at once, merely letting his pretty blue eyes linger on her battered form. He let the silk sheet drop to the bed at his side.

“Why do you make me so angry, Kelly?” he wanted to know. She turned away so she didn't have to face his blood-enforced, silent demand that she answer. “It doesn't have to be this way.”

“You know why, Stefan, and it does. If you want me you must take me, because I refuse to come to you willingly.”

“Buy you a drink?” he wanted to know after she'd hung up the mic for the next of the week's singers. She smiled at him, cool and distant she hoped. She didn't want to lead him on, and he had so seemed to love her voice.

“Yeah, but I'm attached,” she lied. She felt her smile fade as his became...cold? Knowing. She shook her head, sure

she had imagined it. "If that changes your offer, I'll understand."

"Not a bit," he said smoothly and joined her at the bar. He had such intense, beautiful blue eyes. She felt like she was all they could see. "I'm Stefan."

Stefan snarled. Kelly could hear his fangs in it, but she didn't look around. When she wasn't looking at him he couldn't twist her around his finger as easily. His Presence was weaker, an echo rather than the full, radiant blush of it that overwhelmed her. Like the head-to-toe throb was an echo of his body. She staggered for the attached bathroom. He spat at her retreating back, "You will remember that you love me some night, Kelly. But by then, I will have moved on."

Kelly stopped, leaning in the doorway to the bathroom. She wanted so badly to see his eyes, to soothe his temper, and at the same time she wanted nothing more than to rip him to pieces, burn his house to ashes, and never think of him again. "You moved on when you went to the long sleep, Stefan. I never loved you. If I wasn't chained to you by blood, you would..."

She cut off, barely able to even think the words, let alone form them. She shook and closed her good hand around the frame more tightly. Her palm oozed with her blood. "You would never see me again," she finished, and forced herself to step into the bathroom. Kelly flinched as a bedside lamp smashed against the wall.

He smelled pretty great, Kelly had to admit. And even though she'd been sticking to beer, he had been generous. It was so easy to accept when he offered her another. She was fascinated by him in a way she hadn't been fascinated by a man in years. It was at once thrilling and frightening,

and the only thing that kept her at the bar talking to Stefan was the fact that his own fascinated attention was so alluring. He was so easy to talk to, and even if his fingers felt cold under hers, she didn't want to shift away from the light touch. She felt giddy in his presence. When she sang again, she sang for him, and he stared at her so intensely and intimately she felt herself responding with a gush of warmth.

Kelly straightened her finger with a wince as the steaming needles of water beat down on her. Her thirst was like a living thing trying to claw its way out from under her skin, but as her blood did its dark work, other, more mundane hurts began to fade. More of her blood swirled away down the drain in a pinkish maelstrom. Only the watery thinness of its scent made it easier to resist the urge to drop to her knees and lap at it before it could escape.

“How many are you up to, now?” Stefan asked from the door. Kelly closed her eyes. Corpses flashed across her mind's eye, death stares accusing and glazed. Some of those she remembered the flavor of, and her own exultation in the same. Hungry as she was, she couldn't summon a full bloom of revulsion at the remembrance.

“More than fifteen.”

Stefan's malicious laugh crawled across her skin as he walked away.

April 15, 1999. 8:54 PM.

The crowd was good at Mitch's, and Kelly kept them well-entertained with her rendition of the Eurythmics' *Missionary Man*. Max Mason, alone at his table, had stared at her with his slack-jawed entrancement. She liked that he

was here every week since it had gotten around that the Seneschal got her kicks singing karaoke, dependent upon her for his brush with mortal passion. How it had galled to have her sanctuary violated, at first. But those who came were respectful and she didn't—often—have to worry about the safety of the mortals she had come to know and, in her way, love.

As she hung up the mic, the door opened to the parking lot. She did a double take and nearly stumbled as she stepped down from the low stage when Stefan strode in. Her smile wilted on her lips and she dropped it entirely as he caught her eyes. His own smile was all bright teeth and warmth, but Kelly sensed the fangs in it even if she couldn't see them. She hated that she thrilled to see him. She flicked her glance to the table behind him, empty while Kelly was on stage, and he glanced over his shoulder at it. Kelly started for the bar, and rather than take the invitation to her table, Stefan moved to intercept her.

“What are you doing here?” she hissed at him, low enough that no mortal nearby would hear.

“The same as most of these people, Kelly,” Stefan answered smoothly. “I'm here to listen to you sing.”

Kelly flashed a thin veneer of a smile at Joey as he congratulated her on a good performance on the way past. It faded as soon as she turned away from the mortal. “You aren't...” She couldn't bring herself to tell him he wasn't welcome. “You shouldn't be here,” she diverted. *I'm so glad you are.* Her stomach churned and she stepped up to the bar. She swallowed her self-loathing with another smile to Mitch.

The stocky man tossed his pristine white bar rag over his shoulder and crossed his tatted arms. Kelly couldn't miss

the light of disgust she saw in Mitch's eyes, nor the twist of distaste to his lips. Stefan surely didn't miss it either, and Kelly spoke up to deflect her sire's ire. "Hey, Mitch. You remember Stefan, right?"

"Yeah," Mitch said flatly, and seemed to dismiss Stefan from his attention. That was not safe either, in Kelly's experience, but it was safer than showing him disgust. "Good one tonight, Kelly," Mitch continued, seeming glad for the excuse to talk to her and ignore Stefan.

"Thanks, Mitch," she answered. The memory of being held aloft on her voice was tainted by Stefan's presence at her side, and her answering smile was weaker than she hoped. "Can I get a couple of beers, please?" Mitch nodded and reached for the fridge.

Stefan leaned into the bar and more fully into Kelly's view as he openly studied Mitch's back. Her sire was every bit the predator in that stare. She saw his tongue pass slowly over his lips, as if he could already taste Mitch's blood on them. Kelly could never mistake the dangerous light that gleamed in the oceans of his eyes. Before Mitch turned back, Stefan had regained his smile and was looking over at Kelly.

"Sorry I missed the first song," he oozed.

Kelly shot him a warning glance and a tight smile. If he noticed, he made no sign. She tossed a twenty on the bar and took the condensation-sheathed bottles from the mortal.

"Thanks, Mitch." She half turned, paused, and pushed the bottles out to Stefan. If he was hunting tonight, and had chosen to come here, he was not intending to be gentle. She had to divert him from the mortals here. "Stefan, would you take these to the table, please? I just want to catch up with Mitch for a second."

Stefan's eyes flashed dangerously again, but at least this time it was directed at her. Rather than risk embarrassment by making a scene with Max watching the two of them from across the room, he accepted the bottles and, with a short nod, headed for her table. Kelly turned back to Mitch, who was glaring at Stefan's departing back.

"Don't know why you keep hanging around that creep, Kelly. Smart girl like you doesn't need an asshole like that in your life."

Kelly quashed the tiny spark of reflexive defensiveness the slight to Stefan brought, and her lips thinned in her smile. "He's a lot different once you get to know him," she deflected. Stefan was, but in no way was that better. Mitch grunted a shrug, and Kelly ordered a basket of wings for the table. She clung to the few minutes of chitchat about the bar's week and the regulars' gossip, but finally could no longer ignore the weight of refusing to go to Stefan.

"What did you sing?" Stefan wanted to know as she joined him at her table. Back to the wall, a half-wall just above her head, right next to the door, she normally felt protected. With Stefan across from her at the table, any sense of safety was gone. She answered him curtly, and he watched her across the table as he faked a sip of his beer.

"Sing Madonna next," he said quietly as he set his beer down on the table. Kelly scowled down at the beer in her hands.

"Stefan, don't."

"Lucky Star," he said in a voice thick with desire.

Kelly's skin felt like it wanted to crawl off her bones. She was torn apart by his blood's demand that she please and her own revulsion at it. She clutched for an island between the two forces and told herself it would keep his attention

off the mortals. “Yes, Stefan,” she agreed quietly. “There’s a good girl.” How her heart soared to hear that, even as her stomach dropped into a pit.

April 18, 1999. 1:21 AM.

Kelly kicked off her heels as she stepped into the hall of her condo. She sighed out of the leather bomber she wore over the evening’s little black armor. The world looked odd for a moment as she lost the extra inches of height until she readjusted. She’d been in those shoes entirely too long tonight, but at least Lucina had been content. The dance of deflection from and invitation to the Prince’s company was as exhausting as any of the most abandoned cavorting, for all that it was conducted in slow motion. Still, she had a knack for it, and she’d been at the top of her game. The Prince had come out well ahead of the curve, all things considered.

She started into the space, hearing Gordon asleep on the couch in the living room. Some night, perhaps with the Prince’s favor, she could afford a place large enough for her ghoul to have his own room. Barefoot as she was, she made no sound on the thick carpeting. With a delicate touch on the door, hinges well-oiled so she might move about her haven while Gordon slept without waking him, Kelly slipped into the second bedroom of the place, converted to her office. She didn’t bother with the overhead light; the desk lamp would be more than adequate as she sharpened her senses. A frisson of premonition passed down the nape of her neck as she approached the desk.

Kelly reached out and turned on the banker’s lamp and froze with her hand on the chain. A disordered pile of

polaroid photos was spilled across the blotter on the desk. Kelly guessed there were three dozen altogether as she reached slowly to push them aside with the barest touch of her fingertips. She was careful to reach only with her hand, and not with her mind, given what was portrayed.

A woman, blonde. Her left eye was swollen shut, and her nose trickled blood and snot. Her face glistened tearfully in the flash-glare in the pictures. She was gagged tightly enough that her cheeks were straining. Sweat made the blood pinkish. She seemed to be bound to a chair. Kelly shuddered. Below the pictures a twice-folded piece of paper was revealed. She felt another prick of premonition as she saw Stefan's hand in the "Kelly" written in artful script across the visible surface.

Kelly recoiled sharply, as if the paper below her hand had suddenly burst into flames. She took a half step backwards and found that she was hoping it had. She didn't want to read it. She didn't want to go back where she could touch those pictures. She wanted to burn the desk and its burden where it stood. She knew he wanted her to read his letter, and it was only a matter of a dozen shuddering seconds before she was helpless to give in to his desire. Kelly swiped the pictures aside in two quick motions and plucked the paper from between them. She turned her back on the woman's plight with a final pang of relief that at least it had not been her this time. Kelly turned her eyes to the page and read.

My dearest Childe, Stefan began.

I was disappointed in your performance this week. It lacked the passion I know you can put into your voice. You are nothing but a warbling fool when you do not put your heart in your song. Kelly felt warring pangs of guilt and shame

and anger all at once. *As I left you to your little games for Lucina, I found myself thinking of why I returned from the long sleep. Wondering, really. The nights are so long and empty.*

Kelly ached with that loneliness. It had become so ever-present that she had become blind to it in the aftermath of Stefan's departure. Far from improving, it had worsened since his return. When he had slept, she had *known* he was beyond reach. Even then, it had been a constant, cold drone of pain. She could become numb to it, after a while. Unless she was reminded. Unless she remembered. Those moments of weakness had kept her returning to his tomb, to speak to him and, in what she had thought was safety, tell him the secrets of her heart.

I told you what it was that brought me back and gave me reason to rise again. Your love, even as I slept, pulled you back to weep for me. You were so beautiful in my dreams and as you whispered your devotion into them. I heard your heart singing to me and, on its wings, I flew up from the abyss of the sleep of ages. We both know words do not suit to describe your voice, and I will not betray my inadequacy in the task again here. Kelly shivered with mingled revulsion and a creeping tingle of pleasure.

What you offered me the other night was not what I expect from you. You did not give your heart to your song to me. I worried that you had begun to forget what passion is, or that I demand it from you when I allow you to serenade me. I was at my wits end to find a way to fulfill my sire's duty and encourage you to success, I admit. Until Bethany. Kelly's eyes didn't quite make a full glance toward the pictures on her desk at her back. She imagined she could feel the heat of the woman's captive form, as if she were tied to the chair tucked in there.

When I revealed myself to her in the moments before I slaked my thirst, her fear was exquisite. I was struck by the epiphany that this would be a thing to show you to remind you of what passion is like. Bethany, I knew, would be your muse. It took some doing, but I believe I finally captured the aspect of it for you. Do enjoy, my childe.

In your heart always, Stefan.

Kelly crumpled the note in her fist and seethed. She hated Stefan with the heat of a star, hot and roiling in her chest so that the Beast strained at the edge of its leash. She could see the twist of frustrated fury in his expression as he would have raged and demanded that she (*Bethany*) show him what he wanted to see. *Sing better! That's garbage! I want to hear it done right!* She could feel the hard slap of his firm palm as it threatened to unhinge her jaw. Bethany would have had the added suffering of the gag's biting constriction. Kelly closed her eyes and added Bethany's name to the litany of mortals who had died because she would not.

April 27, 1999. 3:09 AM.

Wendy's warmth vibrated with complaint as Kelly's phone chirped from the bedside table. "Leave it, won't you?" she pleaded. Kelly gave her a soft smile and a gentle nip on the neck. Wendy giggled and wriggled away. "Now you *have* to leave it. I still have gratitude to show you for my new watch."

Kelly withdrew from the mortal as she rolled toward the phone. "You know I can't, Wendy," she said, and ached for denying the mortal her wish. Wendy sighed and snuggled up behind Kelly. Even the band of the watch, the only thing

Wendy wore, was warm against Kelly's belly as Wendy wrapped an arm around her hip.

Kelly picked up the phone and glanced at the display. "Blocked," it read, and she scowled lightly. She connected the call and answered, "Kelly Patterson."

"I want you."

Kelly felt a bolt of cold deeper even than the grave chill she existed in as Stefan's voice was carried to her. She tried to stifle the stiffening of her back at the sudden, unexpected confrontation with him. Wendy's curious sound and the lifting of her lips from the back of Kelly's shoulder told her that the effort had not been enough.

"Come to me."

Kelly's eyes closed and she trembled. Alarmed, Wendy's warm hand rose to her shoulder. Kelly almost recoiled from the touch as in her mind the mortal's warmth was superimposed with the cold firmness of Stefan's uncalloused hand. "I can't," she managed at last. "Not now."

"What is it?" Wendy wanted to know. Kelly could only shake her head in a vain effort to deflect her lover's concern.

"You don't love her, Kelly," Stefan oozed into the phone. Kelly felt cold tears welling behind her eyelids and squeezed them closed tighter to keep them trapped. "Come to me. You need it. You need me."

"Please," Kelly managed. Her voice was small and she could feel Wendy's heart speeding as it beat against her back. Wendy's breathing was deepening, heating where it brushed past Kelly's neck as if her growing, angry concern was venting. "Don't."

"Come to me," he demanded more forcefully, and Kelly

couldn't bite off the gasping whimper that escaped her. She shook her head in denial but couldn't bring herself to speak it. Would he hear her? She thought he might.

"Kelly," Wendy began insistently, but trailed off as a silent sob hitched Kelly's shoulder under her touch.

"N-no," Kelly finally managed to force from her constricting throat. It was a pathetic sound, more pleading than refusal. She was forced to hate herself for speaking it, even as she hated herself for the sound of it.

"You will not choose the mortal over me," Stefan said. Kelly couldn't help but quail at the rising tone of rage in his voice. It sparked in her a habit of trying to make herself small, to cower before him, and do whatever it was that was necessary to calm him.

"Stefan," Kelly mewled. Her senses were honed to every whiff of scent and brush of touch as she had bathed in Wendy's living essence. They were more than adequate to pick up the dull, wet splat as one of her tears left a blooming poppy in the pillow below her.

"Kelly, don't do it. Whatever it is, don't do it," Wendy urged in a whisper as her grip tightened on Kelly's shoulder. The steely edge of hatred the name brought out in Wendy's voice was unmistakable. It was as sharp and gleaming as any kindred's hatred, in that moment.

Kelly sobbed once, helplessly. She shook her head violently. Whether she was refusing the mortal's urgings, Stefan's demands, her own blood-enforced need to please and obey him, or her own resistance to him, she could not have said. The phone creaked in the strength of her grip as she teetered on a razor's edge.

"Come to me, or I kill her," Stefan said coldly. Kelly's answering, wordless cry of negation found only a dead line.

She scrambled from the bed without a second thought.

“Kelly, don’t!” Wendy shouted and jolted to follow her. Kelly didn’t slow, snatching up jeans and Redwings jersey with fingers that barely seemed willing to respond through the panic. She had to get to him. She sprinted for the door, clothes clutched to her front in a haphazard two-handed squeeze.

“I have to, Wendy,” she half-shouted, half-wept over her shoulder. “He’ll... You don’t understand what it’s like. I’m s-.” Kelly cut off. She had nothing left to fight his blood’s demand for devotion. She couldn’t tell Wendy she wanted to stay with her, that she was doing this for her; he wouldn’t allow it. Kelly fled.

Stefan stood silhouetted in his doorway, dawn glowing grey on the Eastern horizon, as Kelly’s brakes squealed up to the curb. She fled toward him, blind to the sun, only desperate to appease him. She left a trail of bloody tears to mark her path across the lawn. The door closed on them.

April 28, 1999. 2:41 AM.

Kelly lay, only half-aware, and stared up at the stucco ceiling. Such a ludicrous material for a ceiling. In her daze it seemed to form half-glimpsed faces that leered down at her. The hiss of the shower from somewhere else was like their laughter. She deserved that laughter, and as she drifted in and out of blackness, she listened for it. Her eyes slipped closed. One did; the other wouldn’t respond all the way.

Dawn would come soon, she thought suddenly. It must, she believed fervently. She didn’t have to move, she soothed. It would hurt too much to move just now, she assured. Easier

to just lie here and drift, and listen to the laughter. *Heat and terror. Incandescence that melted her eyes in their sockets and seared away her throat's ability to give voice to the agony in the same wash of golden light. Helpless flight and cowering mewl blending into cool darkness and colder laughter.*

The laughter stopped. That was okay, she thought. The crimson veil across the thin sliver of vision she was forced to keep was blocking any sight of the faces in the ceiling, anyways. Faces in the ceiling? Kelly wasn't sure why she thought there were faces in the ceiling. That was okay, too. Dawn would come.

"Edie tells me you'll be at an event on this weekend."

"Yes," she thought she said. Her lungs wouldn't draw air to speak, though. A mist of blood settled on her lips, splatter from the wisp of air that had passed them. She was momentarily amazed she could even feel it added to what was already there.

Edie knew. Kelly saw it in Edie's eyes when the harpy saw her and Stefan together. Perhaps she had read the visions in their minds. Did she laugh?

"For Lucina?" Was there hesitation? Lucina knew, too. She hid it better, or else cared less. Nothing to be done, for that. Stefan kept to the Traditions.

"Yes," she thought she wheezed. It would hurt more, she knew. It would hurt more than she did now. But it would only burn for so long, she hoped. *More than fifteen.*

A grunt of disappointment. Irked steps and a flush of shame rose together in her awareness. She wanted the darkness that would come with dawn. She wanted to promise him she would break her plans with the Prince and be at his side. He wanted her at his side, and that was almost

enough. He would be angry if she wasn't.

"You've ruined my bedding in here again," he charged.

"I'm sorry," she thought she managed.

"You'll replace them in the evening," he demanded.

"Yes," she thought she agreed.

When Stefan moved to pull the heavy blackout curtains that would shield her from the coming dawn, she wanted so badly to plead with him to leave them open. Her voice wouldn't come.



September 21, 1996. 10:03 PM.

Hunger rippled under Kelly's skin, like her muscles were in convulsive revolt against the stillness of her corpse. Her fangs ached in the front of her mouth, but she soothed herself. She would feed, soon. Someone here would be drawn to her inviting smile and glow of inhuman allure. Everyone liked a blonde; some bled for them. One would come, and she feigned a sip at her martini as she let her eyes pass over the crowd.

The Clam Shell wasn't a very popular bar, but it had a steady clientele. In the largely conservative city of Milwaukee, few were out far enough to be seen frequenting a bar like this. Kelly knew the tremulous hesitation that preceded the first visit to a bar women frequented to meet other women. She knew the creeping doubts about being recognized, the embarrassment that would come even just imagining its occurrence. She empathized with them, but they were not the subject of her thoughts, tonight. She

fought for them in the halls of power. For their right to feel safe in coming to be among her banquet.

There seemed to be no neophytes here, tonight. A Thursday night, edging past ten, the women here were on the hunt every bit as much as she was, if for different prey. Some sat stools and leaned into hard drinks and glanced around at the others that paired off with bitter resentment. Those, she dismissed. Sometimes, she liked the dulling tingle of alcohol in their blood, and when desperation was a factor she would risk the impediment the drug presented. But she wasn't so hungry, yet. Her thirst was insistent, but not demanding. The couples, too, she ignored. She could, if she wanted to, insinuate herself into one of them by plying a more active form of her allure, but she always felt a skein of guilt coating her soul when she gave in to abandon and gorged herself on a pair of mortals. No, she wanted blood, but not the burden of feeding past satiation. Kelly swept her gaze down the bar again, and that was when the small crowd parted and she saw her.

Chestnut hair fell in waves over bare shoulders. In the bar-sign neon advertising Pabst above and beyond her, it had the luster of finely polished wood. Chiseled features, just tending toward severe, glanced down the bar. Brown eyes as rich as dark chocolate glittered in the reflected murder ball lights from the small dance floor where a handful of women danced to Aerosmith's *I Don't Want To Miss A Thing*. Her cheeks, smooth and silken, were barely touched with the brush of makeup. The pink tip of a tongue touched pink-painted lips, wet them, and Kelly leaned forward.

Kelly felt herself falling in love with the mortal and recoiled. It was hopeless. The mortal's beauty was radiant. It captivated her as thoroughly as any hypnotist's voice and

pulled her toward it more insistently than a black hole swallowing a galaxy. Kelly struggled to pull back from that event horizon even as she tumbled past it and was shredded by the massive forces beyond. When the mortal glanced back to her drink at the bar in front of her, and the fall of her hair took the sight of her face from Kelly, it felt like a piece of Kelly's soul had vanished along with it. She was out of her seat fast enough that it almost fell backward.

Kelly didn't see the couples she pushed back, nor hear the muttered deprecations that accompanied her brusque stride toward the mortal at the bar. The woman looked around as Kelly closed with her and for just a moment there was a glimmer of surprise in her eyes before Kelly was there. Kelly's smile beamed, and it was backed with the supernatural awe she inspired in others. The woman opened her mouth to say something and Kelly drowned in the way her lips moved around the shape of sound. The mortal's eyes were so bright and desirous as they warmed in the blush of Kelly's power.

"Oh," the woman said, after a beat of stunned shock to find Kelly right behind her.

"Kelly Patterson," Kelly greeted, and barely managed to soften the thickness of all-consuming need as she thrust her hand forward. It was all she could do to hold on to her control and not push herself against this woman in carnal abandon. "Buy you a drink?"

September 25, 1996. 12:06 AM.

Kelly swallowed against the raw edge in her throat. Hours of endless singing had taken its toll even on her resilient corpse. She had not been able to summon the intensity that

Stefan demanded. She was a disappointment, again, and he had left her begging him to give her another chance. He had sent her away because he couldn't stand the sight of her, or the sound of the voice she couldn't bend to his demands. She stumbled into her room and fought back the tears.

"Go then!" Stefan had raged. "Go to the little slut you're thinking about when you sing for *me!*"

Megan. Even deluged as she was by the betrayal of Stefan she knew her love for the mortal to be, she couldn't let it go. It had been two nights since they'd met, since Kelly had had the sound of the mortal's voice in her ears and the touch of her at the end of her fingers. She felt the distance between them as if the concrete of the city that separated them were slowly grinding her to paste. She *needed* Megan, and Stefan had seen it—heard it—in the performance he had demanded of her.

Kelly gave in. Stefan didn't want her in the house; he had made that abundantly clear. And she couldn't quite summon the desire to hunt when she knew that Megan was out there. Would she be sleeping? Kelly wanted to drink in the lines of serenity that would describe the mortal's sleep. She wanted to see sleepy lips, soft and dry, whisper her name. She felt like the air in the room weighed a hundred pounds as it was made heavy with the need for these things. She fled it.

The battered engine of the Honda Accord cranked, and as it shuddered at red lights and stop signs she feared it would stop. Not, she knew, because it meant her makeshift repairs had failed her yet again, but because it would slow her approach to Megan. She managed to summon a glimmer of hope that it would die, so that she could have a good excuse

to put off what she was intent on doing. She knew, though, that even if the car didn't make it, she would simply abandon it because she could not go another hour without being near to Megan.

Kelly pulled up under the streetlight in front of the tenement where Megan stayed. She imagined she could feel the sedate, sleeping pulse of the woman's heart from three floors below it. She imagined she could hear the woman's dreamy murmurs of love and devotion. She imagined she could hear Megan's heartbeat pushing slow mouthfuls of blood onto her waiting tongue as she bit into the shoulder and savored. Kelly shuddered and cut the engine.

The fire escape barely made a sound as she clambered up above the alley. She felt her blood infuse her with preternatural grace and strength. Her thirst grew as she tapped the power of her kindred blood but in those moments, it didn't matter; it got her closer to Megan. Kelly practically perched on the edge of the fire escape landing, leaned precariously out over the railing. The mortal's apartment was only the next set of windows, and she strained at the edge of her senses to pick up the slightest sound from there. If she could be content with the sound, then she wouldn't have to enter. She wouldn't have to risk discovery as she watched her sleep, or have to explain how she'd gotten in. Or why she was knocking on the door after midnight.

Kelly felt the tension that kept her fangs in check ease and ignored it. There was no one to see; it didn't matter that they grated across her lower arc of teeth. She had to *hear*. The breeze shifted and suddenly there was Megan. Not just her sleeping, sedate whisper of breath and beat of heart, but her *voice*. Kelly gasped, as if breathing for the first time in hours. She swooned and clenched her fingers around the

rusting safety rail. In her mind's eye, Megan's stern features and intelligently-vivid eyes smiled at Kelly as they had the other night. *Megan.*

"You sure you don't want another glass...?"

Megan's snippet of words finally caught in Kelly's mind beyond the simple elation of hearing her voice. Kelly's eyes snapped open. A hot knife of jealousy and hatred lanced into her. Distantly, she felt the ache in her jaw's muscles as her teeth clenched. Like blood spreading through silk, her vision began to go red around the edges. Megan—*her* Megan—was with someone else. While Kelly had endured Stefan's disinterest and anger, someone *else* had been with her Megan. She shook on the edge of letting that fury free of its bonds in her heart. Perhaps, she struggled to consider, it was a friend, or visiting family member. It could be innocent. Kelly squeezed her eyes closed again and the breeze wafted past her senses.

"—met this woman the other night. She seemed okay, pretty and smart and all, but the more I thought about her after she was gone, the creepier she got. I kept thinking how she stared at me all night, and it really gave me the—"

Kelly's eyes snapped open again. Lids or red curtain of rage, either was as blinding, however. *Creepy?* Did the fool woman not recognize *love* when she saw it? Kelly's thoughts sputtered and lost form. Words ceased to form in her internal monologue as it was subsumed in quicksilver pulses of instinctual urgency. *How could she...? Rip and tear. I would have... Scream and destroy.* As the aged steel under her blood-empowered grip tore and gave voice to its torment, a single cohesive thought managed to surface. *If I can't have you, no one will.*

Kelly turned toward the fire door and with a bestial scream

of rage ripped it out of its frame to send spinning to the alley below.

September 25, 1996. 1:31 AM.

Kelly stood and stared in horror. She looked down at her hands, fingers curled as if clawed. The first three fingers on her left hand stung fiercely where the nails had been ripped out of the beds. The slow drip of blood from her hands was just one of the many red rivers that bubbled in the small apartment. The stink of death, of mortal bodies losing the constant, unconscious muscle control of life, filled the air, but it was muted in her nose behind the ocean of blood. Flashes of memory came unbidden.

The frame of the door splintered. Voices rose in cries of surprise and shock. Prey things had such timid hearts. The burst of frenzied beating was what drew her eyes. Two prey things leapt from a couch and scurried for cover. Fear came off them in waves. "Kelly?!" prey shouted in confusion.

A thick rivulet of blood escaped the clench of her throat as Kelly gagged. She clamped her hands over her mouth to keep it from spilling to the floor; to keep herself from wasting it. She turned from the bodies on the floor and squeezed her eyes closed. There was no escape in blindness; her memories continued to assert themselves in a quickening rush.

The interloping prey died first. Its spine broke with a heavy, wet crunch as Kelly's knees drove into it. The prey went to the ground with a grunt of surprised pain. Kelly could smell the adrenaline in its sweat and in the blood that spilled when she reached down and folded the prey's head nearly backwards between its shoulder blades. Screams of terror as

blood gushed from a throat torn by raw, unholy strength.

Somewhere, Kelly was aware of sirens approaching. She tried desperately to remember what that meant, and why it made her feel afraid. All she could think of was the bodies waiting, staring, behind. *Megan*. Kelly couldn't stop the gush of blood that rose from the warm slosh in her belly and overflowed the thin-fingered dam of her hands on her mouth. It splashed and splattered as it poured into the sodden carpet at her feet.

"Stay back!" prey warned as it came into view. Snub-nosed gleam of nickel plating. The prey's claws shook and wavered. Light and heat was nothing but a spur as Kelly rushed it. She barely felt the first round go into her chest; the other two missed entirely. Then she was on the prey, and the hurt and rage could be free. Fangs found flesh and muscle ripped like tissue paper.

Kelly swam in misery, barely managing to tread water and keep her head above the surface. Self-loathing splashed into her mouth as the waves of it crashed over her. She choked on it as she didn't on the blood welled up into her throat. She struggled against the panic of drowning. The sirens were closer, and a different kind of panic rose. A viciously-determined species of self-preservation rose. She had to get out, she had to flee. Now, she was the prey.

Bone parted to hands given strength beyond mortal limits. A lung dug aside and left to hang so that fingers could scoop out the heart. Bitten like an apple, blood-rich tissues suckled like candy. Lapping at the precious warmth spilled from rent chambers to course down her wrist and forearm. Blood-warmed fingers slid wetly along her sex as she gorged.

When Kelly hit the sidewalk three floors below the window her ankle snapped, and she gave a cry. A bloody handprint

bloomed on the hood of her car as she stumbled and caught herself. She struggled against the urge to ignore the sirens and lick the paint clean. The need to survive was too great, and its demands too insistent. She staggered and stumbled around the front of the Accord and fumbled keys. The sirens were so close as she slotted the key in the ignition and turned it. The engine clattered and chugged and failed to turn over.

Cheek slid wetly across the sopping carpet as tongue darted out to salvage the spilled bliss. Hair matted to neck and shoulder squeezed like a rag through a ringer for the few drops that could be chased into a waiting mouth. Orgasmic relief exploded like fireworks throughout her, as if she could feel each and every one of her cells rejoicing at the infusion of living blood. The prey would not hurt her again, she knew, and elated.

“Come on!” she demanded and smacked a wet palm against the wheel. Blood splattered in small droplets inside the windshield and she pumped the gas pedal. She turned the key again and the engine chugged, chattered, and then turned over. Kelly gave a wordless cry of relief and threw the car into gear. The cobbled-together engine complained as she urged it to speed. Behind, the lights of cruisers were just beginning to stain the facings of the buildings red and blue. She turned off the street as the headlights roared white and bright around the corner.

September 25, 1996. 9:56 PM.

“Yes, I understand. Thank you, Jonas.” Kelly flinched under the glare that Stefan turned in her direction as he hung up the phone. *Whatever he’s about to do, you deserve*

it. Megan's voice, accusing and wet with blood splatter on her lips, rose in her mind. Kelly had woken with the mortal's sightless eyes staring at her from her memory, too. "Stefan," she began, but he cut her off with a backhand across the cheek. Kelly sprawled as she felt her jaw weaken in its seat.

"Shut up," he demanded. Kelly did, and couldn't bring herself to look up at him through the falls of her curls. "Do you have any idea what you've cost me tonight?"

Kelly could only shake her head. She could feel him looming above her, as if his shadow were the weight of her shame and guilt, bearing her to the ground where she half-lay propped on her palms. A second of silence stretched between them, then another, and then a handful more. Kelly's fear rose with each one, her imagination conjuring all manner of thing he might be considering. Her determination to accept it grew with her fear, too.

"You're *disgusting*," Stefan accused. Kelly could only nod. "This is what you get for betraying me." Kelly could only sob.

"I'm sure you expect me to punish you," Stefan said as the echo of Kelly's misery was absorbed by the paint and carpet. Kelly swallowed and struggled to find her voice. She had killed, again, and for what? Nothing but her own vanity and greed. Worse, she *had* betrayed Stefan in her love for Megan. Stefan, the one who shielded her from the consequences of her murders. Even though she had betrayed him and loved another.

"Please," Kelly begged, if only because the oozing guilt would pass. She was being eaten by it as surely as if it were acid. She reached for the cuff of his pants and he stepped away. Her hand fell to the floor. *You deserve it*, Megan

confided.

“It would be a waste of my time,” Stefan spat dismissively. “You won’t learn from this. You’re too stupid and weak. I tried to teach you last time, didn’t I? The first time. I tried to teach you and what did it do but make my arm tired?” Kelly cowered lower. She had felt herself pulled to the woman. She should have fought it harder. She should have never let her heart stray from Stefan, but when she had and realized it, she should have steered it back. “I won’t bother trying to stop you, not anymore. You’re so pathetic that there will doubtless be more of these little outbursts, no matter what I do.”

Kelly reached for the cuff of his pants again as Megan laughed in her mind. Stefan stepped out of reach and she watched his back retreat from the room. “Clean up your own mess next time, Kelly.”

Kelly crawled into the shower on unsteady limbs and scrubbed until she bled. When dawn dragged her to rest she still felt as though she had rolled in a dumpster.

January 15, 1997. 1:51 AM.

The handle of the saw vibrated down the length of Kelly’s forearm as she dragged it across the thick femur. The blade bound as she hitched a gasping sob and the *chink* of its snap echoed in the small, concrete-walled space. Kelly turned her back on the grisly task and pressed her forehead into the rough wall. Like a hair shirt, the grating of cement against her flesh soothed as she lay a hand on her roiling stomach. She had been so careful, so confident in her resistance to the helpless vacuum of beauty some mortals were to her heart. Still, she had ended up here.

The man on her table—*What was his name?*—behind her hadn't deserved this fate. She hadn't thought another man would capture her as Stefan could. She had thought it would be safe. And then he had been there, and she had betrayed her sire again. She had been so careful. *There will be more.*

Kelly bent to the tool case, rusty with old blood instead of age, and recovered a replacement blade. Stefan would want her to be done before dawn.

July 30, 1997. 9:48 PM.

Kelly reached for Stefan's hand as they pushed through the crowd. She was so hungry, and the heartbeats all around were so vibrant. She was going under the tide of life, and she needed the grip of his steely hand to steady herself. She felt a blush of shame at the scowl he shot at her and she barely resisted holding fast when he jerked his hand free. She tried to steady herself, as he wanted. She had to. With a spark of fierce determination, she shored her courage and contented herself with at least trying to find a likely mortal to ply.

Laser-light luster in the core of brown hair caught her eye and she jerked her eyes away. Stefan disappeared from her side in the crowd as she was jolted to a halt, and she felt a gasp pass her lips. She couldn't resist another glance. The shine of the hair had been so bright and warm, and even now she could imagine its soft slide through her fingers. The dancing woman turned and smiled and Kelly felt the floor below her giving way. She forgot Stefan, forgot caution, and slid through the crowd for the woman she loved so intensely it ached in the pit of her chest.

August 13, 1997. 3:00 AM.

Stefan's laughter fell upon her shoulders like the lashes of a whip. The gales of it were like sheets of December rain deluging her. In her arms, Delaney lay cooling. Kelly wept into her uncaring shoulder and pleaded with her to come back. She lifted her lips to kiss the strangled throat, as if to clear away the deep black, thin-fingered bruises that bloomed there. They lingered, and Kelly pulled the corpse up against her chest.

"T-two weeks!" Stefan managed between belly laughs. Kelly felt very small in the face of his derision.

Delaney, I have to tell you something. And Kelly had told. She had told Delaney everything, had shown her. She had thought to find understanding and comfort in the mortal's eyes. Instead there had only been the kind of revulsion one shows when faced with a spider six sizes larger than it should be. The recoil had been so much like prey's response. She had felt the betrayal bloom like a mortar explosion in her breast. Delaney's judgement and disgust had been all Kelly could see, and she had been compelled to silence it.

Stefan's laughter subsided. "I don't even care that you killed the bitch in my house. You are so pathetic, Kelly. I don't know what I ever saw in you. Finish the job."

Kelly's sobs caught in her throat and she looked up uncomprehendingly. What else could she do? She had betrayed Stefan's Masquerade. She had murdered the woman she loved rather than face the rejection she had felt coming off of her in waves. How was she to finish this? With her own death. She hoped he would demand that,

she realized. Instead, she asked in a voice thick with agony, “What?”

“Drink up, childe,” he oozed and smiled down at her. “Waste not, want not.”

Kelly almost recoiled. The malice in his smile felt like a slap and she did avert her eyes from it. Against her will, her fangs came out. *Whatever he does to you, you deserve it.* Kelly wished Megan would go away; it was not fair that the dead should linger so long. “Now,” Stefan warned.

Kelly sank her teeth into the cooling vessel and drank, and for the minutes of her feeding she was free of the pain and loss of Delaney’s death.

December 23, 1997. 12:12 AM.

“Stefan, please!” Kelly wailed as she slammed her fist against the locked door to his room. The door he refused to emerge from tonight, as he had the last three nights. Ever since she had failed to entrance him with her voice. She couldn’t go on without a look at him. His absence was eating a pit in her chest and she couldn’t think of anything but the sight and sound and scent and feel of him. Even if he was furious at her tantrum, it would be better than this withdrawal. She needed him as badly as the blood that sustained her. “Stefan!”

Silence greeted her. She slammed her fist against the door again, felt the wood absorb the meager impact. She *could* break it down. She would have to, if he didn’t at least speak to her. She couldn’t tolerate this absence any longer. “I’m sorry, Stefan! I’m sorry, I won’t do...whatever it is I did again! I won’t! I swear it! Just please come out! *Speak to me!*” she screamed at last and slammed her fist against the

30

door again.

She could sing. She could lure him out with her voice. If she could find her voice. *You're pathetic*. Even the memory of his voice was sweet, but it only whetted her need for the real thing even as she quailed at the thought of failure. "I'll sing, Stefan. Just for you. Please. I'll do it just like you want. Just come out. Just speak to me." Silence answered her, and she beat both of her hands against the wood. She added a wordless, bestial snarl of frustration. All she would have to do would be to defy his will and enter through the door. All she had to do to see him again would be to betray his demand that she stay behind the lock. Kelly stalked away from the door and paced like a rabid tiger in a cage before it.

Kelly knew there was a way to be free of her need of him, if only for a little. She could go and hunt for the mortal that would capture her eye and heart. She could flirt with disaster again. It would take the aching need and transform it into the quicksand of obsession, at least for a while. And Stefan would know—Didn't he always know?—that she had gone to another instead of him. He would burn with jealousy and then he would *speak* to her again, if only to mock her vain attachment. She would have him back.

Kelly stalked for the front door. "Fine," she shouted over her shoulder. "I'll find someone else! Then I'll be done with you, Stefan!" She heard the lie ringing in her own words.

February 10, 1998. 11:43 PM.

Had Stefan only been asleep for five weeks? As Kelly clutched her knees to her chest and rocked, it felt like so much longer. Every waking moment was filled with the

sense of him, and the distance between them. The condo he had arranged for her felt like a prison, and she in solitary confinement. The small sounds of her living neighbors, audible to her keen senses as they bustled and moved and tucked in to their nocturnal slumber, were like the scuttling of insects in the walls. *Stefan*. Kelly shuddered as the shape of his name floated through her thoughts.

She thought, perhaps, that she should have gotten used to this ache by now, but every time she went to his house to dust, and tidy, and ensure he was safe, it seemed to open the wound in her again. She could go there again, but she had been just the night before and going again meant passing the gauntlet of pink-clad windows and hand-holding couples. *Be mine*. It wouldn't help. She needed more than just the feel of him behind the wall where, if she pressed her hand to the drywall and concentrated hard enough, she could just feel the cold of his slumbering corpse. Kelly rocked and tried not to cry; she had been lax in her feeding and she couldn't afford to waste the blood.

February 15, 1998. 1:52 AM.

Prey could sense desperation. It startled them; they got jumpy, found reasons to be elsewhere. Disappeared into bathrooms and steered clear when they emerged. A predator's desperation outweighed a prey's; even the lonely on this cursed night were keeping their distance. They could feel her need, she thought. It was coming off of her in empathic waves as Stefan's fury so often did to her. She watched the latest of her would-be-victims shoot an unsettled look over her shoulder at Kelly on the way out of the bar. Even the barflies kept their eyes on their drinks

instead of meeting Kelly's inviting look.

Kelly stirred her martini with the small pink sword that speared the olives. The bartender shouted last call, and she replaced it with a fresh drink. She laid a ten on the bar and looked over as a woman stumbled in. An instinctive part of Kelly recoiled at the boisterous way she greeted the room at large. Others averted eyes, embarrassed for the woman who was too drunk to be embarrassed for herself. Kelly snuck in another drink order when she glanced over and saw the bartender waffling on the edge ordering the woman out.

"C'mon," she urged, and tried to keep the pleading to polite. "It's Valentine's Day, I've been striking out all night, I've got to get laid." She pushed against the short-haired woman behind the bar with a taste of her need, and helped it along with another twenty on the bar. She'd been tipping well all night. Kelly got her second drink and turned in time for the sloppy woman to step up to the bar.

"Who's a girl got to fingerbang to get a drink around here?" the brunette slurred. She laughed hard at her own joke, and Kelly tried to force a smile onto her lips. It felt a bit like she was baring teeth and turned it down a few notches when she answered.

"Me." She pushed the martini toward the woman with fingertips on the base of the wide glass. She felt a pang of fear that even being that much closer would give away her hunger, but the mortal had eyes only for the drink as she turned toward Kelly.

By the time the mortal's smile spread, it was too late for Kelly. There was a smear of lipstick on the bright, white front tooth, but she barely saw it. The cheeks lifted and were too rosy with blush by half, but Kelly was seeing the skin beneath. There was far too bright a blue fan of

eyeshadow above the woman's hazel eyes, but Kelly could barely see it beyond the depthless sparkle that entranced her. She forgot the thirst, though it lingered as a buzzing of urgency in the back of her mind. More, she forgot Stefan and his absence. Kelly gave herself entirely to this woman and her instant and overwhelming love for her. It was so nice to be free of Stefan's absence.

March 24, 1998. 9:45 PM.

Gordon set the packet on the desk. Kelly looked up from her work. He was uneasy, as he always was, when he delivered these packets. She thanked him dismissively—let him be uneasy, his was to serve not question—but hesitated when he didn't leave her office. "What is it?" she sniped sharply.

"Miss Kelly," Gordon started. She hated when he made her ask him twice, and her hand twitched on the edge of slapping him. She quashed the urge; the pictures would help. She would be able stop craving and let go of the last abscesses susurrating in her heart. She would have to apologize to Gordon again for her short temper, but that would be then. Now, she snapped at him harshly enough that he flinched. Finally, he found his tongue. "Miss Kelly, I think you better not look at those ones."

Kelly held his stare until he looked down and continued. "She... she met someone this week. I don't think you need to see them together. It wouldn't... You wouldn't like it, I know. Let me burn them before you look, this time?" He looked up at her, hope and fear shining wetly in his eyes. And love, of course. The love of her blood. *Stefan.*

She smiled at him in a way she hoped was consoling. The

way he ducked his eyes down again quickly told her she had missed her mark. "It's okay, Gordon. That's why you follow them. That's why you bring me the pictures, so that it's safer. She'll be fine. This is good. It will be the last time you need to follow her. You can get back to your regular schedule, then."

"Yes, Miss Kelly," he said, unable or unwilling to hide the gratitude at her promises. Whatever mien he saw in her, she still had her voice control, it seemed. "It's just ... just you remember last time ..."

Wood splinters and patters like shrapnel against carpet and wall. A roar of rage that shook from her core like an erupting volcano and brought the scurrying prey sounds from the walls. Prey fled, helpless and demanding to be destroyed. Barest glimmer of recognition before she had killed him amid the stink of his own urine.

"It won't be like that," she promised and lied in the same breath. "Why don't you go get a drink, if you want? I'll call you in a couple of hours."

"N-no," Gordon stammered in reply. "I'll ... I'll be okay. I want to be here just in case ... in case you need someone." *Whatever he does to you, you deserve it.*

"Alright, Gordon. Thank you." Kelly turned to the folder of candid photos and the sharp reality that she had no place in the mortal's life. This distant, (relatively) safe expulsion of her hurt could excise the mortal from her heart. The ache for Stefan would return, but slowly. She would have a few nights of freedom from need of one or the other.

Kelly opened the folder and began to cut away a piece of her soul one picture at a time. When catharsis came, it came screaming with the sound of smashing furniture.

November 6, 1998. 9:56 PM.

Kelly hunted. She needed no blood; the nights had been blessedly free of demands on her reserves. So, too, had they dragged on. The monotony of them had worn under the constant grind of her growing need for Stefan. She struggled against the gnawing urge to go to him until it reduced her to tears. Gordon's clumsy, awkward consolation had been too much to bear. His pleading that she tell him what he could do to take away her pain only made her remember her own pleading with Stefan to let her take away his dolor. She had at last fled him to the one refuge she knew she could find from his echo in her heart. Kelly slipped among the mortals, a wolf in sheep's clothing. Her early fumbling with the predatory glide seemed so far away, despite being only a few years gone. Mortals looked when she passed, but only those she wanted would let that glance linger. She wielded her preternatural allure like the lantern of an angler fish in the depths. Someone, she was sure, would be able to capture her attention and open the door to forgetting Stefan. She just had to hold on to enough control to capture them.

The smell of excitement and fear reached her through the haze of low-hanging cigarette smoke. She was helpless to stop the small gasp of pleasure at the perfect mingling of the two under the sweet, over-strong perfume. She tracked the trail of scent with her eyes, her heart already beginning to ache with the need for whichever of the women it was that had such a smell. When sight found the source of scent, Kelly gave herself into the black hole once again.

The woman's waves of hair were so dark they were almost black. Like aged walnut, they glowed with the soft tumble

of natural body that didn't need the hairspray shellac of Kelly's own coif. Her eyes were widened with wonder and timidity, a deer in headlights but on the edge of bolting toward them. Long throat pulsed with a heartbeat quick and timid. Kelly hadn't seen her here before. She saw the prey signs of one daring to travel new ground for the first time. Kelly longed to shelter and keep the woman safe as she moved toward her, helpless to stop herself.

The mortal looked over right when Kelly wanted her to, just as she settled her expression into the right mix of lust and trepidation. If she showed too much tooth, she would spook the woman. Too much restraint, and she would lose the woman's interest. She oozed a sense of soft strength and invitation and saw the mortal blink and respond with a shy smile.

"I'm Kelly," she greeted as she came up beside the woman at the bar. "I'd offer to buy you a drink, but I see you already have one. I know that's not a very good opening line, but I'm hoping you'll at least give me a chance to show you my conversation is better than my pickup lines."

The woman blushed, looked down, and Kelly's heart soared. Stefan's presence slunk away to the recesses of her mind. "S-sure," the mortal invited. "I guess."

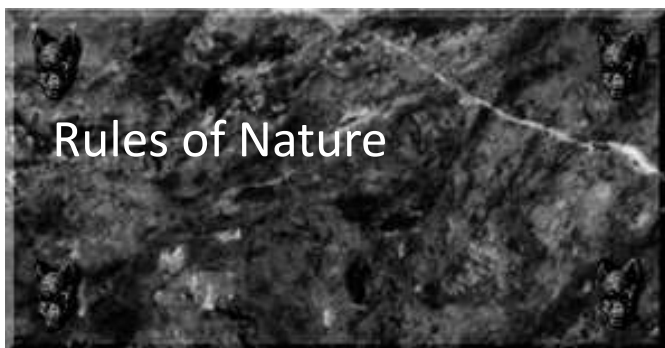
Kelly slid onto the barstool beside her and leaned in toward her intimately. "Haven't seen you around here before," Kelly said kindly. "First time?"

The way the blush deepened made Kelly remember the warm gush of attraction she had left behind after the Embrace. "Y-yeah," the woman agreed with a nod. "Is it that obvious?"

"No," Kelly soothed, and reached out to rest fingertips on the back of the mortal's hand. Each pulse of her heart was

like a new push of heroin into Kelly's veins. "It wouldn't be to most. Don't worry, I don't bite. Unless you want me to." The woman's blush turned up toward Kelly with just the tiniest spark of answering heat. "I'm Wendy," she answered. "Wendy Weaver."

"I love your name," Kelly said, and meant every syllable.



January 11, 1999. 10:58 PM

Kelly leaned back in her chair from the Ikea-bought desk and set her pen aside. She rubbed at her eyes and gave herself a bit of a shake. The monotonous drone of her desktop's fan was the only sound in her condo, but she could hear the shuffling, quiet movements of her neighbors checking locks and preparing for sleep. She sighed and stretched her short legs out in front of her chair under the desk. Her eyes found the small rectangle of the black and white photobooth snapshot of her and Wendy that she'd taped to the edge of her monitor. That night, her first date with Wendy several months ago, had been an island of peace in her troubled nights. She longed to return to that feeling but managed only to summon the cold memory of it as she stared at the picture.

She had just reached for the cheap plastic hull of the Bic again when her phone rang. She reached for the receiver and nestled it into the crook of her shoulder as she answered, "Kelly Patterson."

“Kelly!” Wendy exclaimed excitedly, and in a flash, Kelly forgot all about the brief in front of her or the clients who would rely on its completion. Though she didn’t indulge it, she felt a deep desire to sigh with relief. She’d managed to hold out two nights since she had last seen the mortal and was glad that it was not she who had broken the silence between them.

“Hey, Wendy,” Kelly answered. She heard the smile in her voice before she felt it touching her lips. “Great to hear from you.” Her gaze slid to the square of photograph and she could almost see Wendy’s dark-haired reflection there animated with the bubbly sound of the mortal’s voice.

“Isn’t it?” the mortal joked. Kelly granted her a chuckle. “You busy? You want to get some drinks?”

Kelly glanced at her watch and scowled. It was just passing eleven. A quiet slither of suspicion crawled through her thoughts, but she chased it back under the surface. “No, not busy,” Kelly answered carefully. “Just putting the last touches on a brief for James, but I’m about done and James can finish up the rest when he gets in tomorrow. Bit late to be headed out, isn’t it? Don’t you work tomorrow?” She regretted the mention of Wendy’s work at once as it summoned within her the now-familiar crawl of jealousy that Wendy’s co-workers got to spend all day, every day, with her and Kelly was confined to brief, purely-nocturnal visits.

“Oh, uh,” Wendy replied, and then hesitated. The phone groaned quietly as Kelly’s hand closed more tightly around it. “I’ve been out for a couple hours already.” When Kelly couldn’t find her voice to answer through the haze of jealousy that stirred and shifted like fog through her mind, Wendy hurried on. “I bumped into a friend from high

school earlier, and we decided to get some drinks. Jess—that’s her name, the friend—said she really wanted to meet you. Apparently, I can’t stop talking about how great you are.”

Wendy giggled self-consciously, but Kelly barely heard it. She was too busy basking in the moment of relief at knowing Wendy had been thinking about her, too. She desperately wanted to go to the woman, to see her hazel eyes and the soft luster of her chestnut waves of hair, and to feel the warmth of her arms around Kelly’s cold shoulders. Despite that, she balked. Kelly didn’t think she liked the sound of this Jess person very much.

“I don’t know, Wendy,” she replied cautiously. “I just...” She trailed off. It had only been a handful of months since Kelly had had her heart captured by the mortal, and she’d struggled mightily to quash down the dark fits of jealousy and possessiveness that were even now festering like a cyst in her heart for Wendy. How could she demure without explaining to Wendy how dangerous it was for Kelly to meet her friends? The cutting looks and subtle comments from Wendy’s sister-in-law when Wendy had shown up to Christmas dinner with a woman on her arm had been close call enough.

“Please, Kelly?” Wendy pleaded, and Kelly felt her reservation being subsumed in her need to be near the object of her fascination. “It’ll be fun. We’re at this place called Glitz. It’s not exactly your kind of music, I don’t think, but there’s dancing and ... and, well, I don’t want to have a good time without you.”

Kelly sighed. “Alright, Wendy. I know the place. Give me twenty, thirty minutes to throw something on, and I’ll be there.” She was so weak, she chided herself, but she was

already standing from the chair and losing herself in the anticipation of being with Wendy again.

“Great!” Wendy enthused, and Kelly couldn’t help but smile. “See you soon!”

Kelly agreed she would and disconnected the call. She walked down the short length of hall to her small bedroom and the attached closet to pull some clothes out. She still, at first, latched onto Stefan’s preferences in her mode of dress, with the bright, lurid colors and exposed flesh, but stuffed those thoughts down and tried to see herself instead through Wendy’s eyes.

She grabbed a black leather skirt, laced up the sides, and a black t-shirt with “STARFUCKER” emblazoned across the breasts in red sequins. She added a pair of Perry Ellis ankle boots, a satin choker, and a small backpack meant to be slung over one shoulder as accessories. Wendy liked it when she worked the rocker angle in her style, even if Glitz was more for the EDM crowd. Kelly hesitated only a moment before she slid the matte black bulk of the Glock pistol into the backpack. The way her jealousy simmered, she wasn’t sure having a weapon at hand was the best of ideas, but she had to be realistic about her situation. She was newly-minted as the Prince Lucina’s Seneschal, and there were plenty of kindred in the city looking to take a swipe at the upstart neonate before she got settled into the seat of power.

A dash of makeup came next, and a quick pass of the clippers to shear her hair off to the length Wendy would expect to see it. Not for the first time of late, she wondered what had possessed her to want to cut her hair off short since meeting the mortal. It was a bit of a nuisance to keep it at the expected length, when every evening saw her

shoulder length falls of ringlets regrown completely. She dialed a cab to take her to the club, and it arrived at the curb not quite a minute after she hit the street to wait for it.

January 11, 1999. 11:32 PM.

Kelly slipped the cabbie some cash and stepped into the street outside the club. She looked up at the sparkling neon sign that showed as well as read Glitz. A bored-looking security guard gave her petite frame a once over, but she allayed him with the ruby red of her smiling lipstick and a wink that made him grin. On a Monday night, there was no line outside bathing in the muffled pulse of bass from inside. She walked in past the bouncer and slid another bill under the slot to pay her cover charge before she hit the club proper.

Though there was no line outside, there was no shortage of bodies inside. Monday night or not, the place was at least three-quarters full of grinding, sweating, breathing mortals who filled the room in her keen senses with heat and movement and scent. They were engaged in their own kind of frenzy, one more wholesome if no less ecstatic than a kindred's more vicious expression. The whole place pulsed with life, as if the people in it were the building's heart and she was granted a glimpse at the sacred organ.

Life, but not light, filled the club. It was dim, though made to seem otherwise with rainbows of laser light. The beams that lanced and fanned into and through the crowd on the dance floor and by the DJ booth were too focused to do more than provide the indication of illumination without revealing much of anything at all. The only real bastion of light was the white panels that fronted the bar worked by

two harried bartenders trying to keep up with the demands of thirsty patrons. At least, Kelly thought, they didn't have to contend with a kindred's thirst as well.

The club wasn't unknown to her. A pair of Toreador neonates claimed unofficial domain here, and she let her eyes trail over the crowd as she sought out the singular stillness in the sea of life that would mark the presence of the undead. She spotted one at the edge of the dance floor, sandwiched between two twenty-somethings with brightly-colored hair that were grinding in front and back of him. Jackson, she placed his name after a moment's thought. She didn't see the other, Nancy she thought was her name. Not in tonight, Kelly thought, or else cloistered away behind the curtains of laser light and satiating her thirst far from prying eyes. Finally, Kelly saw Wendy at a table with another woman.

Wendy was a vision, and Kelly barely saw the other woman at the table as she drank in Wendy's details. Her hair was in an artful pile of curls atop her head, with a few too-casual-to-be-casual strands that escaped the nest and curled gently against the side of Wendy's long, graceful neck. A tiny glitter of silver caught the colored light of the place and made the hollow of her throat shine with the chain clasped around her neck. She had a loose, white blouse on that hung free of one shoulder. Kelly couldn't see the shadow of a bra under the silk, nor the strap of one on the exposed arc of soft-looking skin. Kelly longed to taste that skin, and the blood that gave it the healthy blush that coursed beneath it. She lost herself in contemplation of the mortal until she realized that Wendy was leaned into her conversation partner, beaming her broad, white smile across the table. The pique of jealousy doused the lust, and she finally deigned to look at her competition for Wendy's

attention.

The blonde of the hair was a shade or two lighter than Kelly's own straw-colored coif, almost platinum. Most would miss the shadow of root, but Kelly felt a small thrill of superiority when she marked Wendy's friend as a bottle blonde. She was petite, only a little larger than Kelly herself. Her back was to the door, so Kelly couldn't see her features, but she could see the build that had once been athletic and which had since gone somewhat to pasture. The baby tee that left her midriff bared was black, and at least from this side bereft of logo or art. It strained across the back of the shoulders to Kelly's preternatural eyes, and though Kelly couldn't see her chest she had the impression the shirt was strained to contain it. She fought the urge of her fangs to slip free of their restraint. The woman wore simple, tight leather pants, over the waist of which her hips just barely spilled. She had one leg crossed over the other at the knee under the table, and she was bouncing the simple, black pump she wore on her toes as if impatient or irritated.

Kelly scowled as she read the woman's posture and noticed again Wendy's attentive lean. Jess—Wendy had called her Jess, Kelly thought—was straight-backed and reserved in her chair. With the way Wendy leaned into her, it seemed like Jess was sitting a throne or pedestal and accepting the adulation that was her due. If Wendy noticed, she gave no sign, merely seeming glad to give Jess the attention the woman seemed to feel she deserved. Kelly had more than enough experience with those creatures that truly demanded—and could enforce—that aloofness that she recognized it at once in Wendy's friend. She had to force herself to confront that term, Wendy's friend, and remind herself to give the woman a chance. She'd almost talked herself around by the time Wendy finally noticed her

standing by the door.

Wendy's smile broadened when she spotted Kelly and waved her over. Jess—Kelly was sure it was Jess—looked around to follow Wendy's gaze and Kelly at last saw her face. It was made up to take five years off the aging prettiness. She didn't have the kind of handsome beauty that captured Kelly's heart, but plenty of men and women would swoon at her smile. Her nose was pert and slightly upturned, her brows slim and manicured, her eyes piercing and the blue of the ocean. Her cheekbones were high and accented with blush, her lips full and painted red. The smile she had on those lips was thin and tight, a smile of patronizing forbearance. Kelly endured the long, slow once-over that Jess gave her from across the room and consoled herself with the fact that the woman's makeup was just a little heavy handed, and that the shade of red on her lips was not quite a perfect fit for her complexion. The weight of her gun in the backpack was a distraction and she hitched the narrow strap up as Wendy pushed away from the booth to approach Kelly. Kelly let herself get lost in a moment of deep appreciation for the leg showing under the hem of Wendy's skirt.

"You made it!" Wendy exclaimed, just a little bit sloppy from the alcohol Kelly picked out of her scent as the mortal rushed into her arms. Wendy's perfume—not the midrange scent she bought from the store but the living scent of her body—inundated Kelly and she felt, for a moment, like she was drowning. Her thirst woke as Wendy's heart thudded against her breasts, and their lips met, but Kelly pushed it away. It was a different starvation she was determined to feed, and she reveled in the closeness of the mortal. Wendy's tongue delved to find Kelly's, and the mortal gave a soft moan into the kiss as it lingered. Finally, blushing hot

enough to stoke the return of Kelly's thirst for blood, Wendy withdrew. "Come on," she needlessly half-shouted over the music. "Let me introduce you."

Kelly felt the warmth of Wendy's hand slide down her bare arm and closed her fingers into Wendy's hot ones. She allowed herself to be led back to the booth and the woman waiting there. Was it her imagination, Kelly wondered, or had she caught the low spark of disdain in Jess's eyes when she glanced at the way their hands were clasped? Perhaps Kelly merely wanted to have a reason to hate the new mortal. She tried to give Jess the benefit of the doubt, and to summon determination not to be the first to show claw (*fang*) at the introduction.

"Kelly, this is Jess," Wendy bubbled. "Jess, this is Kelly. Isn't she just *gorgeous*?" If the scent of the booze oozing from Wendy's aura was not enough to reveal how deep in her cups the mortal was, the giggle she concluded the introduction with would have been a giveaway. Kelly pulled the corners of her lips into a smile.

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance," Jess said. She pushed a thin-fingered hand forward, palm down and limp. Kelly stared at it for a moment, not entirely certain what she was expected to do with the gesture. On some level she knew this was meant to be a handshake, but it seemed just a little too much like Jess expected Kelly to bow over her hand or kiss her knuckles or otherwise show some kind of deferential servility.

"Likewise," Kelly answered coolly as she lifted her eyes back to Jess. She twisted her grip as she snagged Jess's hand, forcing the woman into something approximating a proper handshake. Her fingers might have closed a little tighter than necessary, but Jess didn't seem to notice. She was too

busy being shocked by the grave-cold chill of Kelly's touch. Kelly hoped her enjoyment of the mortal's instinctive recoil didn't shine too brightly in her eyes as she released the brief touch and followed Wendy into the booth.

"Don't mind the cold," Wendy soothed when she seemed to notice Jess's jerk, and the way she rubbed her palm with the thumb of her other hand in the wake of Kelly's grip. "She's got some kind of circulation problem, I think. She's always freezing. It's only gotten worse since winter started."

Kelly was spared having to respond when a buxom red head in a white t-shirt a size too small and a black miniskirt an inch too short came to take drink orders. Kelly let her snag the empty shot glasses and Wendy's empty beer bottle before she offered to the other women, "I've got no stomach for shots, I'm afraid, but would you two like another?" Wendy beamed that she would, Jess gave a demure agreement, and Kelly turned back to the waitress. "Three more beers, please, and two..."

Kelly trailed off and reached for one of the empty shot glasses. With a quick pass under her nose and a sharp sniff, she identified the type of liquor they'd held. "Two tequilas, please," she finished as she set the empty shot glass delicately back on the tray. The waitress went away with a promise that they wouldn't have to wait long.

"I'm surprised, Wendy," Kelly said to the mortal at her side as the woman disappeared into the crowd. "I didn't know you were a tequila drinker."

"My fault," Jess answered for Wendy with a note of mockingly-sincere apology. "It's been so long since we saw one another, I thought we should celebrate a little."

"No fault assigned," Kelly replied with a tight smile. She tried for a sincere tone, but under it she was roiling with

rage at a low boil that Jess should presume to answer for Wendy. Kelly could see the subtle light of possessiveness in Jess's smile as Wendy warmed Kelly's profile with a grin, and her arm went around Wendy's shoulders in response. Wendy made a soft sound of pleasure and snuggled into the crook. "I just haven't seen her drink it before."

"Peer pressure," Wendy giggled up at Kelly, and Kelly favored her with a small smile. Wendy missed the look Jess gave, but Kelly was finely attuned to such flashes of intention and emotion thanks to her frequent forays into the monsters' balls of her unlife. She certainly did not miss the gleam of insult in Jess's eyes as she was referred to as a peer.

"You two went to school together?" Kelly diverted as she tried to allow the increasingly-irritating flashes of Jess's manner slide off her back. Wendy nodded against her shoulder.

"Mm-hm," Wendy said. "Jess was a year ahead, but we were on cheer squad together. Jess was the one who made sure all our kicks and pyramids were done just right. She was a real slave driver about it sometimes." She giggled again, and Jess's tight smile was a match for Kelly's.

Ah, Kelly thought. A queen bee. One of those who became accustomed to fawning devotion from the boys who wanted to fuck them, and the girls who wanted to be them. The sort that never quite lost their taste for the adulation and control as they aged. Well, Kelly thought. It had been some years now since she had feared the might of a mortal queen bee.

"Wendy was a bit like a protégé to me," Jess said as she picked up the thread. "She was always one of the better girls on the squad."

"Maybe," Wendy answered. "But you still got all the boys anyways."

Jess's answering smile was accompanied by, "True, but from the looks of things that wasn't really too disappointing to you after all."

"Oh, well ... I mean ... Kelly is just ... She was ... I don't normally ..." Wendy stammered, and Kelly finally registered it through the seething. She gave Wendy a light squeeze around the shoulders to soothe her and the hot blush that Kelly could feel rising in Wendy's cheeks. The drinks were delivered, the waitress granting a moment of reprieve with her interruption. Kelly grabbed her beer with her free hand and lifted the bottle to feign a sip.

"What I think Wendy is trying to say is that I am her first foray into alternative relationships and lifestyles." She smiled down at Wendy and was warmed by the gratitude for the intercession on her behalf in explaining a situation Wendy was still somewhat awkward with.

"Alternative relationships," Jess repeated as she sipped her own beer. "That's a good way to describe it, I suppose." Kelly's smile melted halfway as she lifted her gaze to Jess's and saw there the judgement that went unsaid. She was still trying to frame her response when Jess continued. "Wendy tells me you're some kind of high-priced lawyer? That must keep you pretty busy."

"Wendy over-sells me just a bit," Kelly demurred. "I'm a lawyer, yes, but I'm only just getting my firm off the ground, and aside from some work I did for Eliot Frisk, I don't really have any prominent clients to speak of yet."

"Still, your own firm. That's pretty impressive, isn't it? And ... Wait, did you say Eliot Frisk? *The* Eliot Frisk? The Hammerschmidt Arms Eliot Frisk?" Kelly knew that the

twist of her smile must have been touched with the cold, vindicated superiority she felt swell inside her at Jess's incredulity. She also didn't care. Let the bitch be awed; it beat her being dead.

"Yes," Kelly confirmed with a nod as Wendy disentangled herself from Kelly's grip to reach for her beer and eyed the shot beside it with the lemon wedge and bowl of finely-ground rock salt. "Though not his firm. He was looking for someone else to handle his personal needs and heard of me through a friend of a friend."

"Kelly doesn't like to talk herself up," Wendy said with mock conspiracy after she licked her lips so delicately that Kelly was transfixed by the slow passage of the warm tongue along blood-rich tissues. It wasn't until the gesture ended that Kelly was able to register at last what Wendy had said. She found the strong, alluring beat of Wendy's femoral artery under her fingertips and realized she was kneading the woman's thigh. As Wendy continued, she spread her legs slightly to give Kelly an easier angle to her leg without being obvious about it. Kelly availed herself and stroked her fingertips gently back and forth along that soft line of inner thigh. "She met him because she was at some gala or something for this board she sits on, too."

Kelly faked a sip of her beer to avert her eyes and buy a moment to compose her instant urge to shush Wendy sternly. When she had deflected Wendy's questions about the Camarilla she hadn't really expected the deflections to become the topic of conversation with Wendy's old friends. Kelly glanced up as she made a show of wiping her lips with the back of her hand and saw the curious brow lifted across the table.

"It's kind of a niche organization. I'm sure you wouldn't

have heard of it, but sometimes we get a local politician or celebrity stopping by events we attend. I was the new kid in town, as it were, and Chris Hopkins wanted to meet me. Apparently, I made an impression because he mentioned me to Eliot and, well, the rest is history." She waved the matter away as if it were inconsequential and hoped her facade of the same was opaque enough to cover her desperation to change the subject.

"Sometimes you just get lucky," Jess agreed, and for a half beat of Wendy's heart Kelly forgot to hate Jess. It felt greasy and she reached for her dislike of the mortal as more wholesome. What did that say about her, that she would rather hate a person than accept gratitude toward them for selfish reasons? She didn't really need an answer, though. She knew what it said about her and what she was.

"Shots!" Wendy interjected somewhat boisterously and Jess was further diverted from her curiosity.

Now that the attractive glimmer of envy had faded from Jess's gaze, Kelly could see the new, vicious gleam of suspicion that had been buried under it. Jess had realized an underestimation, Kelly knew. She may not have realized it consciously, but it would color the rest of the night at least. Kelly let them go through the ritual of tequila drinking and glanced out over the crowd for the Toreador or any new-come kindred. She saw only Jackson again, still on the dance floor and apparently inattentive to his surroundings, the male and female mortals dancing against either side of him notwithstanding. She turned back to the table as the glasses tapped in syncopation. Wendy gasped in a way that made Kelly's fangs ache in her gums.

"So, what do you do, Jess? You seem to have me at a disadvantage," Kelly inquired before either of them could

seize the reins of the conversation. Jess chased the shot with a sip of the cheap beer before she answered.

"I teach art history at the Milwaukee High School for The Arts," Jess replied. "Hired right out of college."

Kelly nodded. "I've heard good things about that school. I know a few people closely involved with the arts, and some of them had a hand in getting the school built so far as I've heard. Do you enjoy it? Are the students receptive?" Kelly didn't even have to make a polite lie. She knew of then-Primogen Lucina's role in getting the project off the ground, and of several other ancillae in the clan who were now enjoying a new round of laurels upon which to rest about having assisted the now-Prince with such an important boon. Gracis was mentioned nebulously in related rumors, but Kelly had no idea if he was in support of or against Lucina on that project; both were mentioned with equal weight and probability.

"Sometimes," Jess admitted. "And some are. A lot of them are trust fund kids whose parents want the name on the transcript. They don't mind writing shallow free verse or splashing paint on a canvas and calling it modern impressionism, but they don't care much for where those terms even came from, let alone anything that might actually make them put some effort in."

Kelly commiserated as she felt Wendy's hand on her own thigh, clutching. From the soft tingle of warmth that lingered under the palm, if the music had not been so loud Jess would probably have heard the smack of Wendy's sudden grip. Kelly realized her fingers were running slow circles up the inside of Wendy's leg, like a searching predator drawn to the growing heat of life burning where the legs met. She didn't stop. "At least you get the serious

ones, now and then," she offered as the outside edge of her pinky finger brushed the smooth cotton of Wendy's panties. "And you'll know whose work to buy early," she added.

From the corner of her eye she could see Wendy blush hard and study her beer as if it were the key to understanding the universe in all its complexity. Her fingernails dug almost painfully into Kelly's thigh and her breathing and heart fluttered like a deer sensing danger but unsure of whence it came. Kelly's other hand tightened onto the moist coolness of the condensation on her beer and she forced herself to focus on the trail of cold water trickling over her fingers.

"What do you mean, buy early?" Jess asked, confusion clear on her face. Dammit, Kelly thought. Teachers don't buy art. Wendy was distracting her.

"Uh, I mean you can suggest to collectors whose work would be worth keeping an eye on, that's all. Good way to make friends." Wendy's grip abruptly relaxed on Kelly's thigh and vanished. She could still feel the ghost of living warmth on her flesh when the grip returned, steely and insistent on her wrist under the table. Wendy pressed Kelly's fingers the last few inches to nestle against the dampening cotton.

It took two heartbeats for Kelly to realize what was coming. The first drove her awareness down to a pinhole's width, and filled her field of vision instead with an opaque curtain of red. The second manifested as a spasm in her gums in time to the heartbeat she felt through her fingertips, a sensation of relaxing control into the comfort of her fangs extended. With a desperate act of will she coughed abruptly and violently. She interrupted Jess saying something that Kelly couldn't make out. She snatched her hand up from

under the table and clapped it over her mouth to cover her fangs let loose. She shifted her head down until her chin was buried against her chest. The choker's edge cut into her skin and she used the discomfort to distract herself further. She continued faking the cough for almost half a minute as she struggled against the thirst that was crippling her with its electric agony in her every cell.

"Good god," Wendy exclaimed as she leaned back from the concerned hunch Kelly gently waved her out of. "Are you alright? What was that?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Kelly assured as she finally regained control of her thirst and need and fangs. She pressed gently outward with her supernatural Presence to sell the act. "Just a sip down the wrong pipe, is all. Nothing to worry about. I'm sorry about that. It's really quite embarrassing."

"We've all been there," Jess said with a hint of genuine consolation. "You sure you're okay, though?" Kelly nodded she was and Jess continued, "Good, I was starting to think you needed an ambulance. Nice friend you have here, Wendy. Only the best nights end when an ambulance is called." Kelly summoned a polite smile for the double-edged compliment and Wendy gave a small chuckle in which Kelly could hear the lingering concern. Kelly didn't turn to take in the expression, or the confusion and hurt that would doubtless greet her when she kept both of her hands firmly atop the table. The subtle shift of Wendy's warmth away from her was proof enough that they would be there, to Kelly.

"Well that was exciting. What were we talking about?" Kelly offered lightly, trying to regain the reins of the conversation. She slid it in another direction as Jess hesitated to think, commenting on the ever-present music

to divert the river of eddying words.

January 12, 1999. 12:44 AM.

An hour later, Wendy had either forgotten or forgiven her moment of pique. Kelly suspected the former, as that hour had also seen three more shots of tequila disappear into the woman's stomach. The poison was working on her, Kelly could tell. Her body was trying desperately to off-gas it, and the cloud of scent around Wendy to which Kelly was finely-attuned was sour with the potent drink. She clung around Kelly's shoulders, leaned in with head tilted back to nibble on Kelly's earlobe and neck, at least as much because gravity was working against her as because she wanted to. Kelly endured it almost as much because she felt compelled to as she did to force herself to poke her temper with each of Jess's somewhat uncomfortable and subtly incensed glances at the intimacy. "I like your short hair," Wendy slurred in a whisper against her neck. "I couldn't do this with your curls and two hundred bottles of hairspray a month." Even Wendy's giggle was slurred, somehow.

Jess was more subdued with her tequila consumption, and Kelly was careful to seem to nurse her warming beer as well. She steered the conversation toward Wendy when it became obvious they had little else in common, and also because those tales, too, fanned the embers of her feral rage. It felt good to hate in so visceral a manner, and while she despised herself for reveling in it, she was as compelled to do so as she was to luxuriate in Wendy's blissful devotion.

Call it nostalgia, rose-colored glasses, or golden age syndrome, but Wendy was much happier to see Jess than Jess was to see Wendy, and Kelly could see the difference. She was adept at her social masking, but Jess was no match

for a kindred and Kelly knew too many of those to be taken in. Kelly thought Jess could have enjoyed a reunion with Wendy, if Wendy's attention was not so commanded by another. This woman was every bit as much the vampire as any kindred, though it was not blood she drew from her victims.

As the conversation stalled for a moment, and Jess glanced away to sip at her beer, Kelly made the decision to kill her.

It was a cold calculation. Once, even a helpless drive to murder in the grip of frenzy had been a hot, shameful burn in her mind. It had been a horror from which she recoiled as surely as she did from fire or sunlight. But tonight, in a building that had been throbbing its heartbeat into her ears and chest all night, and with her adoring lover and obsession—yes, it was an obsession, but it was not one that Kelly would allow to hurt Wendy as it had so many others—cradled against her shoulder, she made the decision with as little shame or malice as she would over which case law to quote in an argument. Jess was meant to be shaping the minds of the next generation. She had had a kind of power and influence without effort that women like Kelly and Wendy worked their whole lives to gain, and she had frittered it away on self-gratification, on tearing down those around her. On tearing down Wendy. She held her civil smile as Jess looked back, and continued the light, meaningless banter of a night of first meetings wrapping up, and all the while Jess was completely unaware that she would not see tomorrow. Somewhere, very far away and buried under the low roar of a temper she had been stoking since she had first learned Wendy was out with someone without Kelly, a recoil of revulsion squealed.

"Come home with me," Wendy slurred as she stumbled along at Kelly's side. The three women made their way out

of the club in a short line. Kelly flushed herself with the strength of her vitae to support Wendy's weight as she forced a smile down at the mortal clinging to her.

"I can't, not tonight," she said gently, and soothed the disappointment that flashed across Wendy's features with a kiss. "No, I'm going to put you in a cab, and you're going to go home and straight to bed. Call in sick tomorrow, if you can. Or at least take a cab to work."

Wendy sighed and leaned harder into Kelly, making both of them take a staggering step away from Jess on the other side of Wendy. Jess didn't think Kelly saw the look of disdain cross her features at Wendy's stumble, but Kelly couldn't miss it. She had glanced over to look for it specifically. "You take such good care of me," Wendy cooed.

Kelly saw Wendy into the cab and disentangled herself from Wendy's sloppily ardent final goodbyes. She overpaid the driver to see Wendy home three times over, and then stood on the sidewalk with only the muted throb of the club's din and Jess as company. She straightened and poured every ounce of her supernatural charm out at Jess. She smiled a broad smile and draped herself in the mantle of the chagrined. "Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot. Why don't you let me buy you a coffee before you go? I can give you the name of a collector that's usually interested in new talent. Might get you a finder's fee and one of your students a shot at the big time?"

Kelly saw the hesitation and distaste in Jess's instinctive response, but she saw the greed, too. She had had her eye on the watch Kelly had bought Wendy all night. She wanted a taste of the finer things association with Kelly seemed to bring. Kelly saw, too, the sly edge to the smile Jess flashed at her after the beat of pause. "You know, a

coffee sounds good. Know any place around here?" Kelly nodded and gestured down the sidewalk. She did, in fact, know of a decent coffee house near Glitz, but she had no intention of Jess ever seeing it.

"Wendy kept telling me about how you seemed to know everyone, and that you told her you had dangerous clients. I guess you're one of those mob lawyers, are you?" Jess accepted the cigarette Kelly offered but waved off the lighter.

"Mm, something like that," Kelly replied around the filter of her cigarette as she lit it. "Not quite, though."

"Well you have Eliot Frisk as a client, I guess you mean the Military Industrial Complex. Say, aren't you cold? Are we far?"

"No, not them either," Kelly demurred, and even if she didn't stumble like Wendy did, Jess was loosened enough to accept the deflection without pressing. Kelly went on, "Are you cold? Here, I know a shortcut. We're almost there."

With a hand on Jess's shivering elbow, shivering but still oh-so-hot to Kelly's fingertips, she guided Jess toward a gap between two taller buildings. A drive, it seemed, to some shared loading area or off-street parking. Jess balked, but Kelly's reassuring Presence was enough when combined with the beer and tequila to convince that it was safe. After a moment's hesitation and querulous study of the dark drive, Jess fell back into step with Kelly.

"What's this place called, anyways?" Jess asked as their footfalls echoed back from the darkened walls looming above them and blackening the already-snow-heavy sky. Kelly made a sound as if she were trying to remember when in truth she was ensuring that no sound of intruding life would interfere with or observe what she planned.

"You know?" she asked as she paused in her step, just short of the open, back alley parking lot that was dimly lit ahead. It was softly lit enough that it couldn't be more than a single bulb mounted on a wall facing the square. Jess drew up short and half-turned, alarmed by something in Kelly's voice. "I don't think I want to buy you a coffee after all, Jess. I think," she said as Jess turned fully to face her and adopted the slow confusion of the inebriated. Kelly's muscles were still flush and humming with the power of the blood she had used to bear Wendy to the car. Kelly stepped forward and, as if to a confidant or friend, lifted her hands to Jess's shoulders. "I think, instead, I'm going to drink your blood." Jess gave an awkward kind of chuckle and tried to shrug out of Kelly's grip, but more of Kelly's vitae was emptying into her muscles. The blood filled her with inhuman power so that the frail woman's struggles—so many years removed from that most acrobatic pastime of cheer leading—were of no consequence. Even as Jess realized she was well and truly caught, and her struggles intensified, Kelly held her firmly and with relative ease.

Kelly's fangs came out slow enough for her to enjoy the woman's terror and realization. Her heightened senses heard the throat close on the scream until a sharp, second inhalation opened it. In the hesitation of that breath, Kelly hissed at her and lashed out with her preternatural ferocity. The Dread Gaze killed the scream in a gush of air, as though Kelly had physically struck the woman in the stomach. The sour stink of alcoholic urine filled the air between them. "No, y-yo-you can't be ..."

"No, Jess. What you showed me tonight proved that *you* can't be, and that since I am damned already I ought to use it for some measure of good." Kelly's voice was far away to her own ears, low and filled with menace, but controlled

and cold. As Kelly's fangs sank into the adrenaline-spiced arterial flow, Jess finally found her scream for the half second before the Kiss's paralysis took her to the ground.

Kelly went down with her and held her close as they made a controlled collapse onto the damp, icy paving below. The shift in blood pressure brought fresh, wild spurting of blood into her waiting mouth, and she clamped her lips over the gout after the first arc half escaped her mouth. The sticky heat splashed across her cheek, ear, and hair.

As she rode the pulsing, slowing flow of life, she felt the act was as pornographic as anything she and Wendy had done. She reveled in the sensation of abandon and the lack of shame in indulgence. She pulled it around herself as she ground and grunted on the dying, and then dead, human. Her thirst, which had burned so hot in the wake of her efforts to taunt it, was quelled in an orgasmic crash with every hot gush across her tongue. The feel of that pain leaving, of feeling the most horrible part of her lulled back to its fitful slumber, was more fulfilling than anything she had done with Wendy.

The last trickle flowed and Kelly lapped at the cold flesh for the final traces, as a lover in afterglow tasting the sweat of her partner. She lay on the stinking ground, entangled with a body now as dead as her own. Slowly, insidiously, the concerns of her existence began to creep back in. She fought them; she didn't want to let those seconds of nirvana be shattered or tainted yet by anything but its reality. The harder she fought, though, the more insistent they became. She sighed into the dead woman's shoulder and nestled into it as if for comfort and succor. It was only then she realized what she was doing, and what she had done.

Kelly heard herself mentally recite all the reasons she had

had to kill this woman. She heard herself remind that Jess had been a terrible person, who had tormented more than one girl (*Wendy*) and student with shame and belittling. She heard herself cry that Jess had been every bit as sly and wicked as any kindred. She heard herself whisper that she had been protecting Wendy. Every syllable of it rang hollow in her own ears.

She had hated this woman for the mirror of herself she knew Jess to be. She saw all the same cold manipulation in how she kept Wendy close, in how she used Wendy to feed her what she needed. She had seen the bitterness in Jess at having that taken from her and couldn't face it. She had had to destroy it. It had felt so good to destroy it, and she had known, too, that it would. She had wanted it to.

Kelly frantically shoved herself to her feet and off of the sightless-and-yet-accusing woman. With a choked cry, she threw herself to the side and reeled. One arm took the impact, while the other hooked around her midsection. Her stomach clenched, and her throat tried to close greedily to keep its contents in check. She gagged soundlessly, and as her throat relaxed, a trickle of the still-warm blood flowed like bile from between her lips to splatter on the wall.

How dare she try to use Wendy as a shield against herself? How dare she even consider that any of the petty failures and moral laxity Jess had displayed were even remotely so bad as to earn Kelly's judgement? She felt sick again and dry heaved. Kelly leaned her forehead into the wall and closed her eyes. The alcohol in Jess's blood weighed like a cloud of poisonous fog in her mind. Eyes closed as they were, she spun in place without moving an inch. Her forehead ached with the rasp of rough brick as she heaved again and spat another rivulet of blood bile at her feet. She felt it splatter her bare shins and ignored it.

Kelly forced herself to confront a list of those who would be hurt by this single act. She traced the ripples of her sin through family, friends, students, and co-workers. She forced herself to envision the vigils; the weeping of desperate parents on the evening news pleading for the safe return of a daughter they would never know was already dead and deaf to their cries. She deluged herself in the vivid—oh her imagination had always been so vivid, hadn't it?—detail of the empty-casket funeral when those who had loved finally accepted the truth. Or perhaps it would be the aching sighs of loss in the final months of old age, the empty hope of survival, somewhere, that had become more habit than belief. She imagined children, scared and confused about why their mother was gone, why she had left them.

At some point through the parade of imagined damage she felt warm tracks of stolen blood on her cheeks and heard the dripping of it to the puddle of her vomit below. She opened her eyes and watched the tears fall for a moment before she forced herself to straighten and turn to face the body and the glazed gaze.

Jess stared up at Kelly, slack-jawed and empty of life. Kelly could Embrace her. She could correct her mistake. Jess had already shown she could probably swim with the sharks. But Kelly's Embrace without permission would embarrass the Prince and, Kelly thought, the cost would be astronomical. She could spend centuries repaying the boon to the Prince. It churned her stomach again to realize that she was not going to Embrace this woman just as much for the cost of doing so as the revulsion of condemning her to the Dark Blood.

She dug her cell phone out of her bag and dialed Gordon to call for a ride and to tell him to bring the saws and bags. She wanted to scream at the moment of his hesitation

before his agreement, to scream into it that she didn't need his judgement. She did not scream. Instead, she drove herself to face it and understand it. Even this man, enslaved by the most potent power she had ever heard of that one might use to chain another, was sickened by her act. Or afraid of her for it. *Stefan.*

Kelly waited for Gordon to disconnect the line and then sank back to sit against the wall and stare into Jess's eyes until he arrived.

January 12, 1999. 2:17 AM.

Later, as Kelly worked the saw down through cartilage and tendon and muscle to separate forearm from bicep, she kept returning to what she would tell Wendy. She had already come to accept the fact of her murder. It was not a thing to be shied away from, but rather to be dealt with. She had moved into the future mentally in order to soften the sting of the past. She couldn't tell Wendy what had happened, but she wasn't sure she could live with the secret between them.

What would Wendy think? She had introduced Kelly to Jess and three hours later Jess lay dead, being dismembered. Could Wendy live with what Kelly had done, what Kelly was going to get away with doing? That was the kicker, wasn't it? Kelly wondered to herself. It was bad enough that she had killed—again, though Wendy wouldn't know that this wasn't the first—but she was going to get away with it.

Gordon worked in grey-faced silence beside her. He had never really gotten used to this part of his life with her, and for all that she sometimes thought him dim or inept, she admired that part. How much worse for him must it be to

be accomplice to someone else's murders? To be as compelled to protect a monster as the monster itself was compelled to do this harm? It was a wonder he kept his humanity, or even his sanity. She would add to that burden before she was done with him. Perhaps it would come down to whether he broke under that weight measured against his continued usefulness. And then what, she wondered to herself. Then he would join Jess in the basement storage closet, being sawed into easily disposed of pieces for his replacement to discard.

When the grisly work was done, Kelly numbly bid Gordon care in his disposal and went up to her bed. There were still a couple of hours before dawn, but they passed in a featureless blur for Kelly. Mostly, she saw the parade of grief she had observed once already tonight as the ripples of her sin expanded across her mind's eye. Repetitious or not, she faced it. She welcomed it, in fact. Every step of its participants echoed in her mind with the voice of condemnation. A shimmering red film of tears obscured her vision as she began, but the crimson wash couldn't dim the accusation in the eyes she imagined she saw, dead and glazed, in the darkness.

January 12, 1999. 8:34 PM.

Kelly pushed the blinking red light on the answering machine in her home office. The electronically-tinny woman's voice announced, "Monday, January twelfth, ten twenty-three AM." A gentle tone sounded and then Wendy's voice floated up to her. "Uh, hi, Kelly. I tried your office but they said you didn't come in today. I ... A detective just left the station. He said that Jess is missing. He said she never got home after we went out on Saturday.

Can you call me? I'm worried and scared. He was acting like ... Well I don't know what he was acting like. Just call me, okay?"

The counter on the machine ticked down to 4 and then the helpful female voice returned. "Monday, January twelfth, twelve nineteen PM." The tone repeated and then, "Kelly, it's Wendy again. Where are you? I need to talk to you. Call me. Please."

A tick down to 3. "Monday, January twelfth, one forty-four PM." Kelly began to hate the soft tone between time stamp and message.

"Kelly," Wendy began in an exasperated gush of breath. A pause where Kelly could hear her inhale sharply. Her voice quavered. "Kelly, I don't know why you're not calling me back, but this is important. Do you know where Jess is? Call me."

Tick, and 2 blared balefully up at her as she stared at the small speaker in front of her. "Kelly this is ridiculous. Your office still hasn't heard from you, you aren't answering your home or cell. What's going on? Now I'm worried about *you*. Call me please."

The counter helpfully informed Kelly it was about to deliver her last message. "Monday, January twelfth, five twenty PM." Kelly was jarred as, instead of Wendy's quavering and near-frantic tones, she heard a man's voice. "Ms. Patterson, this is Detective Dorst of the Milwaukee PD. It's been a bit of a day trying to get in touch with you, but I finally got your number from your associate Mr. Gibson. If you could call me back at 555-631-0976, extension 202, I'd appreciate it. I just have a few questions for you pertinent to an investigation. Well, I can give you the details when you reach out."

Kelly played the last message back and felt her senses sharpen as she tried to read the cheaply-relayed tone. He had the casual manner of a professional, she could tell that. If there was anything but cool politeness in his words, either she or the recording was insufficient to reveal it. She played it a third time and still came up dry.

She thought she recognized the Detective's name, but she couldn't place from whence. It wasn't likely something from her professional life, but it felt like it was; for obvious reasons she didn't handle trial law where a Detective's name might be common. This was ... She rifled her memories and finally came up with a headline she'd read at college. Someone had dropped the paper on her desk as she'd been cramming for midterms in her second year. "Your hometown's in the news, Kelly," Joshua had said.

"Hero Cop Blackballed in Milwaukee," the headline had read. Given the story's relevance to law enforcement, and she'd still had foolish hopes of trial law, she had read it eagerly. Detective Lincoln Dorst, the Boston Herald had assured, was a hero cop. He had uncovered a ring of corrupt cops at Police Headquarters skimming from the evidence locker to run guns and drugs into the streets. He had stepped over the thin blue line and, without the support of IAD, built a case and shut them down. There had been eight arrests, and indictments against the police chief and captain of the squad had only narrowly been avoided. Both had resigned. In response, the article continued, he had recently found himself being transferred from the precinct at the HQ to a much smaller and quieter precinct. With an arrest record that the newspaper had promised was impressive even when compared to Detectives from other major cities, Det. Dorst was being put out to pasture. She remembered reading that the justification given to the press

had been "a negative impact on officer morale." She remembered, too, thinking that a case like his was the kind she would leap at taking.

No call to Lieutenant Wilkes would put this hound from her trail, Kelly knew. She felt the boundaries on her existence close in around her as her options narrowed. She was, so far, only a person of interest. Of course, she would be. She was one of the last people to see Jess alive, so far as anyone but she yet knew. She did not think Dorst was the kind of man who would be put off with a simple lie.

She wracked her brain, trying to think of who else might have seen the two of them walk away from the club. There had been the drivers in the taxi line, but she knew most of them would have lost interest in them when they passed the next waiting cab. Had there been a bouncer at the door? She couldn't recall. Kelly reached for her cellphone and saw the message indicator in the top corner of the screen. A small, blocky numeral 3 sat superimposed on the corner of the little spool of tape image. Kelly dialed voicemail.

As Wendy's messages became ever more frantic and wounded, Kelly closed her eyes. She could cut them short with a twitch of her thumb to the delete button, but she forced herself to face every syllable. The last, the most panicked of the messages from only an hour before Kelly rose, she replayed. She let the greasy guilt flow over her until it seemed to seep into her pores and ooze along under her skin. This is why she had to leave Wendy alone. This is why she had to cut ties, fake her death, do anything to push Wendy away and remove herself from the mortal's life. She would do nothing but destroy her, piece by piece, until she did so.

Kelly knew she wouldn't.

Kelly deleted the last message and gathered her papers for her meeting with Lucina as she ran through a quick script of what to say to Detective Dorst. She would have to call him; probably go in to make a statement. Did the club have security cameras outside watching the street that would have caught her and Jess leaving on foot? She didn't have time to check before she returned the call. She had to get ahead of this somehow. There was no way they would find the body, and Kelly knew they needed that. Unless she made a mistake. Unless they managed to corner her with evidence, even if they managed only to arrest her on suspicion. She clicked the latches closed on her briefcase in near-perfect unison as she stared at the telephone on her desk.

She was too focused to really register her fingers on the keys, or to hear herself ask to be connected to extension 202. A moment of music later, and the familiar easy voice answered. "Robbery Homicide, Detective Dorst speaking."

"Detective, this is Kelly Patterson returning your call. I just received your message. I understand something's happened to Jess?" Kelly was careful to keep her nomenclature personalized, attached.

"Well, we don't know that yet, Ms. Patterson. Unless you do?" His question sounded like a joke, but she knew it was anything but. Some criminals would volunteer just about anything if simply asked.

"No, Detective. I'm afraid I don't. I had a message from a friend of mine you spoke with earlier, which I received just before yours. I'm afraid I tend to sleep most days, as I have several international clients and it's easier for me to work nights than for them to get entire corporate headquarters to do so. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, of course Ms. Patterson. I understand. I'm sure you just had ear plugs in or something and didn't hear the ring. But now that I've got you, on the line that is, I'm going to need you to come down to the station and make a statement, please. How does tomorrow morning sound?"

"I'm afraid that won't work for me, Detective. I have a conference call with a client tonight, but I can stop by around ten, ten thirty? If you don't mind working late."

"Oh no, Ms. Patterson. I practically live here. I'll see you at ten, then. Precinct sixteen. Do you know where it is?"

Kelly rattled off the address, which surprised him until he added. "Oh right, now I remember. You're a lawyer; of course, you'd know where the cop shops are."

"Corporate contract primarily, Detective. Don't worry, I'm not one of the ones putting scumbags back on the streets. At ten, then." Kelly disconnected the line and felt a chill deeper than that of the grave to which she could never quite become accustomed. Dorst was a dangerous man.

January 12, 1999. 9:26 PM.

"Are you okay?"

"Kelly! Where have you been? I've been calling all day. I think your receptionist hates me."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't able to get a phone. I had to jaunt out of town with Frisk for a few hours to attend a meeting he wanted me to sit in on. Like an idiot, I left my cell on my nightstand."

"Oh ... I-I'm sorry," Wendy answered. Kelly knew she was apologizing for what she had thought, for the suspicion of an affair, or of trying to avoid her. Maybe even of being involved in Jess's disappearance. She felt vaguely nauseated

by the knowledge. "A Detective stopped by my work this morning. He said Cal—Jess's husband—reported her missing. She never came home after being out with me. With us, I mean. But the Detective ... Durn or Droff or something ..."

"Dorst," Kelly supplied.

"Right, Dorst. Did you talk to him? I ... I didn't want to give him your number, but I had to tell him you were there. He ... he said people had noticed us, but I don't really remember much after ... after, well. Was that wrong?"

"No," Kelly soothed her softly as she pulled into the parking lot at the Hyatt. "No, you did the right thing, Wendy. You should cooperate, but I think you should talk to a lawyer first, and make sure you have one with you if you talk to Dorst again."

"What? Why? Am I going to be in some kind of trouble? Do ... do you know what happened to Jess?"

"No, Wendy," Kelly lied so smoothly she almost felt the slime of it on her tongue. "It's just a good idea. Listen, call my firm, make an appointment with James Gibson. He'll be able to make sure the Detective doesn't get the wrong idea about anything, okay? It's just for your own protection. I know cops, and they can get ... overzealous trying to close cases."

"I don't think I can afford ..."

"Wendy," Kelly cut her off with a somewhat stern tone. "You can afford it. Just make the appointment, I'll take care of everything else."

"Okay, Kelly. I trust you. I'll call him tomorrow."

Kelly barely heard herself mumble her apologies before disconnecting the line. The sound of her own voice,

screaming at her until she felt very small inside and very dirty, was too loud.

January 12, 1999. 9:58 PM.

The 16th had been passed over for extra funding for over a decade, and it looked it. At one point or another, it had earned a reputation as the precinct cops got dropped into when firing them or making them disappear wasn't an option. Year by year, other precincts transferred their burn out, their controversial, their snitch cops here, and the case closure rate kept dropping. There had, every year for the last three years, been a major expose on the state of the 16th featured front page on the Milwaukee Banner. When city funding for training, equipment and renovation had been tied to closure rates, the problem had only gotten worse. Now, it seemed the place was barely holding itself up as she approached down the sidewalk. She caught two of the blue-clad men leering at her openly and knew that a traffic stop or a jaywalking ticket from them was more than likely to go badly. For them, should it be her on the other side, but most women did not have her edge.

The sounds of bustle and phones and voices washed over her as she pushed in through the door and approached the Duty Sergeant. A moment later she was directed to sit and wait, and she selected the first available seat. She folded herself into the chair next to a Latino woman in a halter top and miniskirt whose arms were marked with track marks and tattoos. On her other side sat a hobo, snoring loudly as he slumped in the chair and drooling on his still snow-damp shoulder. The odors rising from both were wretched, and human, but they were also a reminder that you didn't have to stink or look like a whore to be the worst

person in the room. She blinked up as she realized she'd heard her name in the tone of a repetition.

The man standing in the pushed-open, saloon-style door looked to be nearing his fifties. He wore a rumpled blue suit and a white shirt that looked at least two days into its tour of duty. His simple blue tie was loose, and the top button of his collar was undone. A small, dark coffee stain marked the cuff of his suit jacket. She could see the shoulder holster that bulged against his ribs, and the ankle holster backup piece he wore under the wrinkled blue slacks. He was white, pale even, with a barely-brushed mop of brown hair. His build was athletic, though. This was a man with a workout schedule, and one who kept it. There was not an ounce of fat on him that didn't seem carefully measured and added to cushion the gut against sucker punches, or the face against broken cheek bones. His smile was easy and polite, and as phony to her sharp eyes as a three-dollar bill. Accustomed as she was to seeing the predator's glow in someone's eyes, she saw it easily in his. This man was a hunter, implacable in his need to pursue and catch. Her own predatory nature woke and stirred and inclined her to bristle, though she forced the urge away.

"Yes, sorry. Detective Dorst?" She rose from her chair and glided across the dingy tile floor to offer her hand.

Dorst confirmed his identity and took her hand. He gave a jolt at its chill and then a laugh at the abrupt withdrawal. "Sorry, you gave me a start. Cold out there, is it? Glad I didn't keep you waiting too long."

"Cold enough for Milwaukee in January," Kelly confirmed with a tight, strictly-polite smile. "I'm not sure how I can help your investigation, though I'll be glad to tell you anything I know."

Dorst nodded as he led her to the Detectives' pit at the Robbery Homicide division. Well, Kelly wondered, if you could call three desks a pit. This wasn't the best neighborhood; it was hard to imagine three men keeping up with the murder investigations here. Only one of the other two desks was occupied, by a somewhat corpulent black man leaned back in his chair and snoring. There was a mickey of Jack dangling loose and half-empty from his arm beside his chair.

"Have a seat, please. I appreciate you coming in. I'm sure you understand I have to dot the Ts and cross the Is on this one. I just have a few routine questions. You know how it is."

Oh yes, Kelly thought. She did know how it was. Someone was putting pressure on this case, pushing for a resolution, and he was on a fishing expedition. "Of course, Detective. As I said, any way I can help." She tried to give him a reassuring smile but he seemed to miss it as he flipped a few pages in his note pad.

"So, you were at Glitz on the night of Monday, January 11, is that correct?" Kelly confirmed it was. "And you were there to meet Wendy Weaver and Jessica Carlton, is that correct?"

"Wendy called me around eleven and invited me to join them there, yes. I understand they were there for a couple of hours before I arrived."

"Right, yes. That's what we got from the staff." He tapped a page in his notepad after flipping back once. "I hear things got a little steamy when you got there." Dorst looked up at her with lifted eyebrows over the top of his notepad.

"Wendy had a few drinks and we are in a relationship. Is that somehow relevant, Detective?" Kelly couldn't help the blunt edge of indignation that crept into her voice, nor

resist the tiny flex of a scowl between her brows.

"Well, I don't know Ms. Patterson. Is it? What's your relationship to Missus Carlton? Any reason she might have been jealous of Wendy pawing you?"

"She wasn't *pawing* me, Detective. We were behaving as any couple would. And no. I'd never met Jess before that night."

"So, she wasn't ..." He trailed off and waggled his hand, making a kind of two-toned whistle. "You know, a switch hitter?"

"If she was, Detective, I'm sure I don't know. Perhaps you should speak to her husband about that." Kelly's self-control was slipping. He'd found a wedge into her temper and he was prying at it. She could see it in the intensity of his eyes. She struggled with herself to ratchet it back into line.

"Maybe. That's a good idea. Thanks." He made a point of flipping to the last page and making a note. This, at least, was familiar territory for Kelly. Police, and lawyers, often used note-taking as a spur. It tended to unsettle people to have their words written down in an official manner. He was careful to conceal even most of his pen from her. He was good at the trick; his loss that it didn't work on her. "But just to confirm, she didn't seem jealous to you, or maybe upset by the pawing?"

"No, Detective," Kelly replied with simple sincerity, and ignored the 'pawing' jab. "Jess and I discussed some stories about their time on the cheer squad and in school together, we chatted about our work, I had a couple of beers, and then we left so I could put Wendy in a cab." More notes, and Kelly saw him dart a glance to try to gauge the reaction to his jotting on her expression. She showed him nothing.

"How come?"

"I'm sorry?"

"How come you put her in a cab? Sounds like she was ready to go." He lifted his eyebrows inquisitively over his pad again, changing tactics as he began to click the button on his pen in short, chaotic bursts.

"It's rape to have sexual relations with a woman in a state of intoxication, Detective Dorst," Kelly replied icily. "I'm surprised I have to remind you."

"Intercourse." When Kelly blinked at him in confusion he continued, "It's illegal to have sexual intercourse with a woman in a state of intoxication. But you girls don't really, you know ..." He made a lewd whistle and pushed his pen up in the air. "I guess that kind of makes you the lucky ones, eh? No next-day-regrets rape reports."

Kelly felt her shoulders straighten, and the indignation nearly tipped her over the edge of control. By raw effort of will she clawed her way back to some measure of her lawyer's neutrality. "Did you have another question, Detective? I believe I've answered that one."

"Alright, so after Wendy left," he continued as his eyes ticked down to his notes with his pen click-click-clicking away. "You and Missus Carlton headed North on State Street. Where were you going?"

Kelly felt her world tighten further. Someone had noticed, or a camera had shown her. She licked her lips and replied, "My car was parked a couple of blocks over. I don't like parking at clubs. Never know what kind of idiot is going to come out drunk and plow into a parked car."

"Smart," he allowed. "Were you going to give her a ride home?"

"Pardon?"

"Why was she following you to your car?" Click-click, click-click-click went the pen.

"Ah, no. She'd asked to walk me to the car. We had ... not really gotten on well, and she wanted us not to leave it on a sour note," Kelly lied. She sprinkled in truths to bury the deceptions.

"So, you two argued." It wasn't a question, and the clicking stopped to be replaced with the soft hiss of pen bleeding ink into paper.

"No, we didn't argue, Detective. We just didn't really get along. I'm sure you've met people you just didn't get along with; that doesn't mean you wish them any harm."

"No, I guess it doesn't. So, on this walk, Missus Carlton didn't say anything to you that might have provoked an argument? Say, calling you a sinner, or maybe your, ah, girlfriend? Turns out she was pretty active in the church." She enjoyed the momentary flash of disappointment in his gaze as he realized he had missed the mark.

"Not all religious people are prejudiced, Detective. And not all prejudiced people are religious."

"Sure, you just start to see patterns in my line of work. Old friends meet out of the blue, one of them finds out the other, now a dyke ..." Kelly's eyes must have flashed at the pejorative, as his brightened again with the scent of blood in the water. "Has a few years' worth of shower room scenes tucked up in the ol' spank bank—do you girls call it that?—and maybe decides to take it out on the new girl."

"Sorry to disappoint, Detective. It was nothing so exciting as that. She walked me to my car, called a cab, and I drove away. We agreed that we had had a rather unpleasant evening and wouldn't repeat it, and I drove home." Kelly reminded herself that he was trying to put her off balance, that he was playing a role. She reminded herself of his decorations and commendations and eventual plight that

ended him across this desk, in this station, from her. She had to, because she had begun to wonder how easy it would be to make *him* disappear, too.

"You know what company she called?" he asked as he jotted again. "Did she have a business card from them or use a phone book or something?" Kelly said she did not, and he continued. "Shame. Alright, and what time did you get home?" Kelly did some quick mental math and was not quick enough. Her hesitation was enough to bring back that blood-in-the-water light in his gaze as he lifted it. "Happen to know, Ms. Patterson?"

"It was about one thirty AM, I think," Kelly offered. When asked if anyone could confirm that she added, "Gordon Bantz. He's my roommate. I woke him when I came in."

"Do you usually do that, Ms. Patterson? Wake your roommate just to tell him when you get home?"

"Only when I bump into the side table and break a vase in the middle of the night, Detective," Kelly lied dryly.

"Right. Tricky thing, furniture. It just seems to get in your way when you least expect it." He jotted another note. "This Gordon Bantz, is he as hard to get a hold of as you are, Ms. Patterson? Got a number I can reach him at?"

"I can ask him to call you when I get home. I'm sure he's already in for the night."

"Sure. Or I'll just try him there tomorrow, I guess, since I got your number already. Just one last question, Ms. Patterson," he added. Kelly could detect the coiled pounce coming in his words and was still barely braced against it as his eyes came up sharply from his notepad. "Did you kill Jessica Carlton?"

Kelly knew her reaction was half of his heartbeats too slow, and her tone of indignation was shaded with hollowness.

She rose from her seat stiffly as she said, "I came here to answer your *routine* questions, Detective, because I wanted to help. But so far all I have received from you is insults, accusations of being a rapist, and now an accusation of murder. I think this conversation is over, Detective Dorst. I suggest if you wish to speak with me again you make arrangements through my attorney."

He didn't rise to follow as she turned on her heel and stalked for the exit. "I'll do that if I have any more questions for you, Ms. Patterson," he called lightly behind her. "I'll just do that."

Too late, Kelly realized she hadn't actually denied it.

January 17, 1999. 9:12 PM.

Nights passed, and Kelly almost managed to forget Dorst and his questions. Gordon had, as expected, backed her alibi. He was, at least, reliable enough to do that. Or, rather, his enslavement was. And so, it was with some surprise that she received the knock on her door, and the sight of the rumped Detective—in a grey suit instead of blue—shortly after awakening. She froze as she peered through the peephole, and was startled by a second brusque knocking, accompanied by, "Ms. Patterson? It's Detective Dorst. I'd like to speak with you, please."

She backed away from the door and, in Mandarin, assured her clients that it was not serious, but that she must end their conference call early and would continue to make any necessary adjustments to the purchase contract for the shuttering Stellar Steel plant. Kelly disconnected the call and pocketed her cell phone as she went to open the door to the limits of the chain. "I believe I asked you to speak

with my attorney, Mr. Gibson, if you wished to talk with me again, Detective. I have nothing further to say."

"Just a couple of quick questions. I was in the area and thought I'd stop by. I'm sure you don't mind one or two questions, right? To clear your name? I'm sorry about before," she could hear the lie in his voice, but also knew he hadn't considered the needling personal. "I promise I'll be polite. Can I come in?"

"Do you have a warrant?" When he shook his head and opened his mouth to continue his patter, she cut him off. "Then no, Detective. You cannot. You may ask your questions; I don't promise to answer them."

Dorst rubbed his hand across the back of his neck as he consulted his notepad. "I've done some checking around town about you since we spoke. Seems a lot of people have heard of you, seen your car. I guess a lawyer like you tends to get known by all sorts, but the strange thing there is, I made a note about you saying you did mostly corporate law. Thing is, even the CIs seemed to know about you." He flipped back a few pages in his notepad and nodded, adding, "Yeah. Yeah, I have it right here. Anyway, your ride kind of stands out, but you know the damndest thing? I can't find any records of you owning a car like that. I'm sure it's just a clerical error, but it's been a chore."

"Did you have a question, Detective?"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, I did. So, I did some calling about Missus Carlton, too. You had told me that she called a cab before you drove away. Was that on your phone, or hers?" He looked up from his notes, peering at the half of Kelly's face he could see through the crack.

"Hers," Kelly lied, and closed her lips tightly to indicate she would volunteer no more. He gave her three or four

seconds to change her mind and flipped a page in his notebook before he continued.

"That's weird, Ms. Patterson. Because we got her phone records today—her husband is really being helpful, you see—and the last call we have from her phone was to him, letting him know she'd be going out with Wendy and you the night she disappeared. How do you explain that, do you think?"

"I'm certain I don't know, Detective, but if I had to guess I'd say perhaps she had a second phone that her husband didn't know about."

"Right, right," Dorst agreed with a congenial nod. He jotted a few notes in his pad. "That could be it, yeah. Except ..." He hummed thoughtfully. "It doesn't make any sense. She was a homebody. No problems in her marriage. No one seemed to have any grudges against her at work. And, like I said, active in the church, you know."

"That's all very interesting, Detective, but I'm not certain you should be discussing the details of an ongoing investigation with me. If there's nothing else ..."

"Just one more thing, Ms. Patterson, please, if you'll indulge me." Kelly stopped with the door halfway to shut. He leaned a little to meet her eye through the crack. "Do you own a pair of size 6 Perry Ellis boots, heeled?"

"I own many pairs of shoes and boots, Detective. You will need a warrant to get more." She shut the door.

Through it, she heard, "Thanks for your time, Ms. Patterson. I'll be in touch."

Kelly seethed as she listened to him whistle his way casually back to the elevator and then longer still until she heard the faint ding of its arrival at the ground floor. If they were looking for her boots, they had found what they thought was the scene of a crime. She flashed to the sickened

heaving she had done next to Jess's body, the way her vitae had splashed to slushy ground and the wall of the building. Yes, she thought. It was entirely possible they thought they'd found her kill site. Damn her. She wished, just for a moment, she had had that implacable frigidity with which Lucina approached mortality.

Kelly moved into the bedroom and the walk-in closet there. She grabbed the offending boots from the rack, and the T-shirt and skirt she had worn. Her stalking path took her into the kitchen, and she dragged a black garbage bag from under the sink. With her armful of objects, she returned to her room. Her senses dialed up as high as possible, she combed over the clothing. Finally, across the toe of the left boot, she found the faintest trace of her own vitae splashed there. It would have left a break in the blood spatter, she knew. Kelly cursed and stuffed the clothes into the garbage bag. Dorst would be watching her place, still. Maybe waiting in the lobby downstairs. If she took this down now, or dropped it into the chute, he would have it. She stuffed the bag into the corner of her closet as she tapped her nails rhythmically on the door frame.

The situation was getting out of hand, and it was time to put a bit of pressure of her own on the case. She dialed Gibson from her cell as she strapped on her shoulder holster and threw a leather jacket over top of it. "Kelly," Gibson greeted after realizing it was her. "You sound ... stressed."

"You could say that, James. Dorst just showed up at my front door." She was impressed with the cool confidence of his reply.

"Did he. Well, that's unfortunate. What did he want?"

"They pulled her phone records," Kelly said. "He picked up

a discrepancy in my statement."

"The cab," he guessed, and she confirmed. "I thought that might prove to be problematic. Anything else?"

"He was asking about whether I owned a particular size and make of boots, as well."

"Of course, you don't have those boots," he said.

"No," she said, letting the lie ring in her tone. "Of course, I don't."

"Right," he replied, and in it she read his understanding. "Well let's be sure you don't pick up a pair in the next few days, just in case. What do you want to do?"

"Let's fire a warning shot across the bow, James. I'd like you to file a complaint with his Captain about harassment. It won't go anywhere in the 16th, but we'll get a better idea of who is pushing this and why this one is getting his full attention. Maybe he just doesn't like me."

"Maybe," Gibson offered, but neither he nor Kelly thought it likely. Not with Dorst. "You sure you want to do that already? Biting back this early could end up encouraging him."

Kelly had to admit he was right, but if the pressure to resolve this rose above Dorst, she needed to know. She would know by the results of the warning shot, and so it had to be done. "Yes, James. File the complaint tomorrow on my behalf, please, and keep me informed. And call Lieutenant Wilkes for me. Tell him I'd like his opinion on the case that's being built. I'll make sure he knows what that means."

"Kelly ..." Gibson trailed off, and she knew the quandary he was facing. It was Gordon sawing body parts. It was Wendy being questioned at work by a homicide Detective. It was

being close to Kelly. She dragged everyone around her down into the slime and filth and horror of who she was.

"I understand, James. But there are some things that cannot be allowed to come to light, as you well know. Just make the call, please."

"Fine," he sighed. "Yes, I understand. I'll call him first thing tomorrow."

Kelly thanked him and disconnected the call. She placed another quick call to Wilkes, left him pleading with her not to make him get her a copy of the case file, and then headed down into the city. As she hit the street from the ramp that rose from the underground parking garage, she could see the out-of-place Toyota Carola parked half a block up from her front door. She turned her car away from it and was rewarded with the flare of headlights as she began to take the turn at the end of her block.

January 17, 1999. 9:32 PM.

Dorst was slick behind the wheel. He knew the shortcuts and alleys and he managed to keep up with her for three blocks, but the Carola was just no match for the Viper or her reflexes. Kelly barely had to strain her own skills before she lost him. With her foot to the floor once she was safely out of his sight, she sped back to the house in order to dash upstairs and recover the bag of clothes and boots. She leaned on her supernatural speed where she could and made the street in the car she'd left running in less than a minute. She was just pulling around a corner when the Toyota rolled back to the front of her condo to wait. Well, she thought, he was good, and worse, patient, but she had won this particular engagement.

Kelly gave a start when the electronic jangle of her phone drew her attention to her pocket. She shifted awkwardly to fish it out and answered it. "Kelly Patterson," she said, but barely got it out before Wendy cut in.

"Kelly, we need to talk." The sound of her voice, the hurt in it that was so obvious to senses she had sharpened in her attempt to evade Dorst, made the bottom drop out of her guts.

"What's wrong?" She didn't want the answer, not to whatever was making Wendy sound like that.

"Kelly where were you on Monday? Dorst said ... Dorst said you told him you were sleeping."

Kelly didn't answer at once. So Dorst had gone back to Wendy. And Wendy, it seemed, had done exactly as Kelly had done; spoken to the Detective without Gibson. Neither one of them was doing herself any favors. "Why did you lie to him, Kelly?" Wendy pressed. "Or did you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie to you, Wendy. I lied to him. Did you tell him where I was?" It was, she thought wildly, always so curious how one sin seemed inevitably to lead into myriad others.

"... No," Wendy answered at last. "I told him if that's what you told him, then that's where you were. I said I didn't know where you were." And, Kelly realized, Wendy truly believed that last. One more of the slow, inevitable steps toward the dissolution of Wendy's trust.

"Listen, Wendy. Dorst seems to have it in for me. He was knocking on my door earlier tonight, and I saw him sitting outside my building. He's pretty good with the dirty cop tricks, and while I know them ... I'm worried he's going to twist anything you say or do to make it fit his case, instead of making his case fit the facts. Trust me, okay? You know the 16th is full of rotten cops. He's just looking to make a

pay grade, alright? Right now, I'd be a good one to even put suspicion of murder on, whether it's true or not."

"I ... Okay, Kelly. I'll ... I'll make sure I send him to James, just like you want."

"There's a girl," Kelly soothed. "Just let James deal with him. That's what I pay him for. He knows all the dirty cop tricks, too." Kelly took heart in the fact that Wendy sounded at least a little surer as they signed off the call. Dorst, though, was starting to tread on dangerous ground. She knew she wasn't entirely stable when it came to Wendy, but she also knew she couldn't afford to be reckless. He was a good cop, and probably at least a decent man. She didn't want to kill him.

Kelly pulled up to the curb by a school she had visited only once before. The high school was dark and had the peculiar silence of a building abandoned or inhabited only by the undead. She retrieved the bag from the trunk and carried it up to the school. A quick glance to either side showed the street deserted. She rapped on the door, and listened to the sound echo down the long, empty halls of tile and locker. She gave it a few minutes of delay, and then knocked again. Finally, a few more minutes of waiting having passed, Kelly sensed the timid presence creeping up to the door.

"What ... Who is that? Why do you want to come here?" Anastasia's child-like voice queried meekly through the doors.

"It's Kelly Patterson, Anastasia. I wanted to ask you a favor, and to ... to ask you to tell me about how you were the envy of the whole school."

She knew the lie sounded obvious even as she spoke it, but Anastasia didn't seem to care. "Oh! Kelly!" she greeted, and Kelly heard the door unlatch. "Oh, you're just as pretty as

the last time I saw you. Did I ever tell you I was the prettiest girl in school?"

An hour later, the bag and its contents incinerated in the school's furnace, and Kelly laden with memories she didn't want about cute high school boys that had wanted to kiss Anastasia before the accident, she finally escaped back into the night. The street was just as empty as before she had entered, and she went to start the drive back to her condo. As she turned onto the street she saw Dorst's car still there on the curb, and as she met his eyes through the windshield he gave her a wave. Then she was in the underground and headed up to the condo. There was no way he'd be getting a warrant for tomorrow, not with the complaint of harassment going in early. But she was not eager to be in her haven when a warrant was finally served there.

Dorst had already proven to be more disruptive to her existence than a city full of kindred. She wondered if her associations with mortals were not only destructive, but self-destructive.

January 18, 1999. 9:17 PM

The fluorescent hum of the office lights irritated Kelly. She wished, not for the first time, that James could manage with the dimmer desk lamps as she could. She sat across from him at her desk, a police file opened in front of her. She scanned evidence lists, reports, and memos as Gibson sat in silent observation. His heartbeat and the whisper of his breathing felt like a violation of her sanctuary, echoing as it did from the glass walls of her office.

"So, they don't have much," she concluded. It was something of a relief, but they had enough that that relief

could turn to doom in a few hours.

"No, aside from the boot print, and the bit of her blood they found in the alley, they seem to be largely leaning on the fact that you were the last one seen with her. There's a very plausible gap, of her returning to the club, where she and you have good isolation. Factually, anyways."

"But Dorst isn't buying it," Kelly concluded. Gibson agreed. "Alright, did you get any response to the complaint?" His hesitation told her it wasn't good, and she impatiently waved him on.

"They took the complaint, but it's not going anywhere. I heard a lot of 'we take this seriously but we can't pull good cops off of important investigations without some proof.' They don't want this buried; not yet, anyways."

Kelly's nails tapped out a rhythmic line on the desk as she pondered. The walls of the world closed in a little tighter, and though the office was spacious and open, she felt a frisson of claustrophobia crawl up the skin on her spine. There were only two possibilities, then. Someone cared about the teacher—"the teacher," what a cold name to give a woman—or someone knew Kelly was involved and was hoping to embarrass her. She would have to trace the connections back from Jess if the first one, which could draw Dorst's attention. That path would require a delicate step indeed across very thin ice. The second ... Well, the second was perhaps easier to deal with, though it may still require her to deal with Dorst in a way she would more than prefer not to.

"Thank you, James," she said as she closed the file and slid it back across the desk to him to take with him. She stood behind the desk to indicate the dismissal.

James rose, and adjusted his round-framed glasses. "Listen,

Kelly. I didn't want to suggest this yet, but I think it's getting close to where you have to make the decision. I know a guy that can ..."

Kelly cut him off with a wave of the hand. "Let me stop you right there, James. We're not even close to considering that, yet. And if it comes to it, I'll take care of it. This is my mess, not yours. You're in deep enough already, and I'm going to try to keep you out of it beyond the legal options." When he nodded, and she read the gratitude in his expression, she added, "Give Jillian my best, please. Good evening, James." "Good night, Kelly," he replied, and made his way down to the street.

Kelly began the list of those she had crossed, or who would be jealous of her rise and status. She distantly enjoyed raking her soul over the coals of their hatred, and knew she deserved each searing scar from it.

January 21, 1999. 8:38 PM.

Kelly's eyes snapped open and she sharpened her senses at once. An unspecified, but urgent, fear washed through her, something that terrified in an instinctual manner that could not be ignored. She took in the distant sounds of life and movement and machinery in the hotel around her. She smelled the cheap soap bar's faux lavender, too sweet by several shades, that had been poisoning her suite all day. She smelled Gordon, too, in the dregs of his take-out meals and the tang of his body odor. She dampened her senses as the fear dissipated until, after a few minutes, like a dream, she forgot it.

There was no murmur of television—God, she hated that this room came with a television—so she knew Gordon was

out. He would sit in front of that box for hours, just staring, if he was able. It had been a struggle in the nights since she had moved into the Hyatt Regency to keep him occupied enough to stay away from the idiot box. Fortunately, Gibson was working on a case that had called for the investigator's services, and so Kelly had gladly lent him to her associate's needs. Kelly lifted her hand to her brow and closed her eyes.

She was tired. She was homesick. She missed her carefully constructed existence of control and competence. She thought of Stefan, and his desperate flight from one distraction to the next, his constant quest for next flash and flare, and the deep depressions he would fall into between objectives. His melancholies were so different than her thrashing rages, but one was merely an echo of the other. Stefan had turned to the Long Sleep to endure. She could do the same, she knew. Just close her eyes and drift in blackness for a month, a year. A decade. She could start over; he managed it, nor was he the only member of the city's population to vanish for stretches of months. If she warned Lucina, and made arrangements, she might even retain her standing ...

With a growl, Kelly opened her eyes and rolled out of the bed. She wouldn't succumb to the lure of that; not after how much she had hated her sire for it. She didn't want oblivion, she wanted her existence back. As wretched and limping and hurtful as it was, she wanted it back. Dorst was the problem, not her. Dorst and his goddamned tricks and his needling. But, she knew, if it wasn't Dorst it would be another. Dorst was only the agent; it was just her ill-fortune that he happened to be an extremely effective one. She pulled jeans and a crew neck sweater from the suite's dresser drawers. Her dry cleaning was hanging on the hook on the

back of the door, but she didn't want a suit tonight. She had things to do and people to visit where a suit would hurt more than help.

As she clipped another mop of curled blonde hair from her scalp, she amused herself for a moment by wondering what the cleaning staff might think, were they to notice that every night saw a new garbage bag full of hair down the chute. The amusement soured when she wondered what Dorst would make of the same discovery. Mirthlessly, she completed making herself up. After a final check on her gun and magazines in the shoulder holster under her open leather jacket, she grabbed up the day's rental car keys from where Gordon had left them on the side table.

As she rode the elevator down to the lobby she had a flash of apprehension, a revisiting of the first moments of her night. If her body could have lifted the hairs on her arms, or pimpled her flesh with goosebumps, she felt sure it would have. Suddenly the elevator car felt very small, and she felt every inch of the hundreds of feet that yawned below its floor. Kelly reached out to snatch hold of the rail, and focused on the solid, stable feel of its cold brass under her palm as she plummeted.

The moment passed and Kelly scowled. She needed to put an end to this. She had told Wendy not to let Dorst rattle her cage, but in this as in so many other things she was a hypocrite. She was rattled, and she thought the worst part of knowing that was that she believed she should be. She was struggling against it, she would struggle against it to the point of murder she knew, but on some level, she accepted it as her due. It was penance, her hair shirt to wear, as if it could scour away the slimy skein of sin. Kelly barely noticed the lobby pass by and only the heightened threat of leaving her den brought her back to attention.

"That was a neat trick, with the rentals. Kind of ironic, though."

Detective Dorst stepped away from the wall in the shadow of the hotel's long, arching awning. She smelled alcohol on him, at least two nights old. He was heavy-eyed, as well, with bags that told Kelly her sleep was not the only troubled of late. Good, she thought with vindication. At least she was shaking him up nearly as much as he was her. That he had tracked her to the hotel, though, was troubling. She struggled to keep the surprise from her features as she drew up short and turned slowly to face the man. She didn't, though, try to suppress her scowl of consternation.

"Another one with alerting the hotel staff that I wasn't a guest with the do not disturb order on your room. Must be hard to get any work done up there in a hotel room. Spending a lot of time on the phone?" He moved in closer and buried under the deodorant and coffee and cigarette she smelled a man who had not showered in half a week.

"Detective, you have already forced me to file one complaint for your harassing behavior; would you like me to file another? Perhaps you'd like to reconsider speaking to me before ..."

Internally, Kelly bristled when he cut her off. The wave of his hand carried with it his aromas in a deeper draught. "Talking to your lawyer. Right, right. You like to say that, but you know who it turns out who also likes to say that? Gordan Bantz. And we both know who his lawyer is."

Her vindication faded. She had made a mistake; Dorst was not shaken. He was burning himself up, chewing through his energy like a cheetah in full pursuit, whose chase was a matter of life and death for both pursued and pursuer. He was a wolf tracking prey through the arctic, alone and

desperate. He wasn't haggard, he was starving. She wondered if that is what Jess had seen in Kelly's eyes in the moments before her death.

"That's a cute end around, Detective, but we also know it won't stop me from getting a restraining order if you continue this reckless and disruptive behavior. I'm perfectly willing to file complaints on Gordon's behalf as well." Kelly put her hand on her hip, and she saw Dorst's eyes tick to the Glock holstered inside her jacket when it opened with the posture. He tensed, but Kelly hadn't intended to threaten him with the weapon. Not consciously, anyways. "Since you're digging into my background, Detective, you know I'm licensed. And there are all kinds of crazies out there who think a woman like me looks like a perfect victim."

"Right, sure," he agreed. "Thing is, Ms. Patterson, I'm just following up on leads. You see, forensics is really great. Don't know what I'd do without them. For instance, did you know that alcohol doesn't affect how quickly blood freezes? I didn't, not until a couple days ago. So, the lab techs were able to nail down when Missus Carlton's blood hit the wall. Of course, most of the blood we found couldn't be tested; contaminated by the snow or something the lab said, but that sample on the wall was good. Told us right about when she was killed."

"So, you've found a body then?" Kelly inquired icily. Dorst chuckled.

"No, not yet, Ms. Patterson. Not yet. What we did find were tire tracks near where she was killed. Sorry, where she *went missing*. Turns out, they're the same tread and depth as the tires on Gordon Bantz's car. Imagine that?" He pulled his notepad and flipped it to a rubber-banded page. "Yeah,

exact match according to the lab. Really crazy what they can pull out of thin air. Can't imagine what we did before the geeks got hired."

"Tell me, Detective," Kelly returned coldly enough that his easy smile faded a shade. "Is there a particular stratum of society that doesn't warrant denigration from you? It seems every time we speak, I learn of a new group of people you seem to have poor opinions of and insulting names for."

Dorst's smile came back full force and twisted to a wolfish baring of teeth. "I guess I figure once you cross the line into killing people, you can handle a little rough talk. I don't meet a lot of squeamish killers." Kelly narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth to respond, but he carried on over her. "Anyways, here I am. We're going to need your client to come in for another round of questioning. Explain why his tires were at the scene of a crime."

Kelly crossed her arms and let her jacket fall closed over the gun again. She chuckled and shook her head as she smirked at the Detective. "You're a piece of work, Dorst. If you had enough to say conclusively that those were Gordon's tires he would already be in custody. But he isn't, or you wouldn't be here harassing me. I'd bet there are several hundred or thousand cars on the streets of Milwaukee with the same tire tread and similar depth. You don't have anything to tie him to the location, because he wasn't there. *I* wasn't there."

"That's funny," Dorst replied from behind his wolfish grin. "I thought you said you weren't a criminal lawyer."

Kelly returned her own feral smile. Two strange dogs meeting in an alley with a fresh cut of New York strip loin between them would have bared less fang. "Just because I don't practice it doesn't mean I don't know it. Kind of like

how I suspect full well you know how to act with courtesy and respect."

Dorst gave a snort at the barb. "Fair point, Ms. Patterson. Fair point. Fact remains you'll need to make yourself available tomorrow. Thought I'd give you a heads up that the tread was enough to get us a warrant for his car, and house. Which, I believe, is your house too, isn't it? Or was until you moved in here. At any rate, you'll want to be there, I'm sure, to make sure the warrant is on the up and up, legal eagle that you are."

At least, Kelly thought, she had been anticipating this. She countered smoothly, "Well obviously I have a conflict of interest with my client, Detective Dorst. I suppose I'll have to refer Gordon to new representation." For just a moment Dorst's eyes flashed with a thrill of victory, until he noted that she was still holding her full, toothy smile. His faltered a whit. "I'm sure Mr. Gibson would be content to represent us both."

Dorst laughed. "Talk about a conflict of interest," he barked. Kelly let him laugh until he realized she was still smiling.

"Gordon and I have been cohabiting for almost three years. We are, according to the State of Wisconsin, eligible for joint representation. No, Detective. There is no conflict of interest in an attorney representing both of us in court, as we are considered cohabitants and are under a cohabitation contract." Kelly had to struggle to keep her fangs in check as she watched Dorst's smile drain away. His eyes lit with the fury of a wolf who's had the rabbit snatched from his jaws.

"Oh no, you're a dyke. No way that flies," he shot back, and wagged his finger under her nose. "You don't get out that

easily."

"Detective Dorst, even if I did have something to '*get out of*,'" she said, uncrossing her arms to add a set of mocking air quotes. "You're wrong. I could cite you the precedent but I'm sure that would bore you. It's all very dry stuff. Took me hours of research. So, you'll see Mr. Gibson there tomorrow, who I'm sure will adequately represent both of our interests."

Dorst visibly bristled. Now, she knew, he was rattled. She took pleasure in the victory, but still the knowledge that this was just one battle in the war dragged at her. The thrill of victory was short-lived. "I know you killed her, Ms. Patterson. A teacher. Someone with family who loved her." Kelly leaned forward, and she didn't know what it was—yes, she did, monster that she was—in her gaze that backed him up a step, but she was thankful for it and sickened by her gratitude. "Then *prove* it, Detective." It was only half a dare, Kelly knew. Somewhere, screaming in a locked room in her heart, a piece of her was pleading with him instead of daring him.

"I'm going to, Ms. Patterson. You count on that."

He turned on his heel and stalked off without another word or glance. Kelly straightened and watched him go until he disappeared around the corner.

Gibson would ensure the search warrant got not a hair more than it was due. This was old hat to him, making sure search warrants turned up nothing. And her home office was protected as a registered business space covered under attorney client privilege; he would need a federal warrant to enter there. If the FBI, DOJ, or IRS were involved she would have heard about it long before now. Still, there was always the doubt that nagged, and it was too late to return

there tonight. That would be probable cause for them to enter without a warrant. Dorst had ensured that, by telling her the warrant was coming in the morning. She judged they'd come out about even in tonight's exchange as he vanished from sight, and she pulled her cell from her pocket.

"Gibson here," came the tired reply after several rings.

"James," Kelly greeted. "You sound like you could use some good news."

"You have some?" he brightened.

"No, I'm afraid not. Just the other kind." He sighed, and she carried on. "I had another visit from Dorst."

"Good god, the man's suicidal," James answered. "What was it this time?"

"They've matched a tire tread at the scene to Gordon's car. Apparently, that was enough for them to get a warrant signed. They're going to be executing it tomorrow." Kelly wandered around the parking lot beside the hotel as she looked for the license plate that matched the rental fob.

"I hope the place is clean," he answered. "You obviously can't go back now to double check."

"It's clean," Kelly provided. "But you're taking over as Gordon's primary attorney. I'm going to need you there tomorrow to make sure the warrant is executed properly, and that Dorst doesn't go poking around where he's not supposed to."

"You moved into the hotel?" Kelly confirmed that she had, some nights ago. "That's good at least. Alright, Kelly. I'll be there first thing. You're leaning on the cohabitation contract, are you?" At least, even in this moment of crisis, she could appreciate his professionalism.

"You got it, James. I wish I could afford to give you a raise. Make sure you find out which judge signed the warrant. This is pretty thin justification; it could be the next step in whoever is playing this game with me."

"Right. I'll be in touch after sundown tomorrow."

Kelly thanked him and disconnected the call as she finally spotted the black BMW sedan. She climbed into the car and made her way to the Barrens, and Milwaukee Park. She had an appointment to keep that Dorst had almost made her late for.

January 22, 1999. 1:42 AM.

Kelly used a set of tweezers from her purse to pry the bullet fragments from her shoulder with a wince. "Jesus, guys," she complained as the 9mm fragment tinkled to the pavement at her feet and she started on the next. "Where the hell do you buy your ammo? Bullets aren't supposed to shatter like this when they don't hit brick."

"Buy?" Wrecker replied, in his almost-endearing dimness. Kelly had, for a time, wondered if it was merely an act, a wounded bird display to lull or lure predators. She had long since abandoned that idea. Akawa gave a snort of laughter that Kelly heard as if it were the yip of his reaction in his wolf form.

"At least we got your top off," sniped one of the others whose voice she didn't recognize except vaguely and she smirked through her fangs in its direction.

"As if you know what to do with it," she retorted to laughter from the others. "So, listen, it's all fun and games until someone brings up an ask, but I have one."

"Why does it always seem like you're coming to us for favors,

even though you never seem to do any in return?" groused Wrecker, scowling above his folded, muscled arms. Kelly showed him no fear, despite being well over a foot and three hundred pounds his lesser. Instead, she scowled with insult.

"Really," she replied flatly. "*I* never do anything for *you*." She could sense Akawa hanging back in the tall grass just a bit, not disinterested in the conversation, but not showing any intent to join it. From the corner of her eye, she watched his gaze follow the back and forth. "You really sure you want to go down this road, Wrecker? You really want me to embarrass you in front of all your friends?"

She punctuated the quietly cold question by plucking the last fragment from her skin and letting it clatter to the pavement. The ragged wound in her shoulder healed over with a quiet sucking sound.

Wrecker cut his glance to Akawa, apparently saw no help coming from that quarter, and instead bolstered his courage with the support of the handful of others in the gang that seemed to back him. Kelly quietly made note of them. Finally, he looked back at her and squared his shoulders as he lifted his chin, as if she was going to be cowed by his bulk. She wasn't stupid; she knew he could hurt her if it came to that, but it would never come to that. He just hadn't figured it out yet.

"Fuck yeah I do," he spat at her. "Every other time we see you, it's 'Blood Brothers do this' or 'Blood Brothers do that.' But we never get anything from you. Fuck, last time you stopped by, we stood around with our thumbs up our asses by Marquette. Didn't get to smash no one. So maybe this ask, you just forget about."

"Right, you did say something about never getting anything

from me, before," she returned coolly. She tugged on the sweater, and as she strapped on the shoulder holster, she continued. "Funny thing about that, Wrecker, is that it's complete bullshit. Yeah, last time you were backup. I *trusted* you assholes to have enough sense to keep a cool head until it was time to not have one. I figured you were hard enough to know that, sometimes, a job sucks but you just have to do it when the pay is good."

She looked up when she finished buckling the holster. Someone handed her jacket to her, and she slid it over her shoulders. "Oh, but I almost forgot, you have the bright idea that the pay *isn't* good, I guess. You think I don't give you enough. Well, I told you a while ago that so long as you played ball you got a space at the grownups table to talk and be heard, so let's hear it. What do you want that I'm not providing?"

Wrecker seemed like a fish just struck with a bat after being lifted from the water. His mouth worked a few times, a physical symptom of his brain losing traction as he tried to process acceptance of his grievance instead of marginalization of it. The low murmurs in the crowd were just beginning when he seemed to settle on his strongest trick. With a deepening scowl and fangs extending, he loomed over her. "You're fucking with me," he charged. "You know what your end of our deal was, and you're just pulling fuckin' elder tricks to try to turn it around."

"No, I'm literally asking you what you want that I'm not providing. I agreed to arrange things so you guys were more or less left to your own devices, and I haven't heard peep one about the Camarilla, the Sheriff, *or* the Scourge coming down hard on you. You wanted to have a voice at the table, and I haven't had a single call that when you wanted someone to listen to you, you couldn't get it.

Fucking hell, Wrecker. I'm literally doing that right now and you're giving me lip about it. Put those fucking fangs away before you put your eye out, for Christ's sake."

Wrecker backed off half a step, but Kelly matched it. She loomed in return though she was looking up at him. "I've got you secure territory, I've got you safety. I've got you fuckin' prestige, and action, and all the blood you can drink. I *raced* you through the heart of elder territory, because sometimes you just have to say fuck you to someone and I bloody well know it. And you're going to stand there, dripping in the embarrassment of riches I've lauded on you, and tell me I've done nothing for you. Because a couple weeks ago you had to stand around on a different block for a few hours, instead of in this park."

"Well, I mean ... When you put it like that ... I-we-wasn't really ..." the huge kindred stammered, and his arms came uncrossed to hang at his sides. Kelly backed him up another half step as she closed again. She was edging into a danger zone, and his Beast wouldn't lie still for much more of it, but she had to make the point.

"You weren't really, what? Thinking? No, I guess you weren't." She was sure to cut her narrowed glance at those around she had marked from before, and most of them had the good grace to drop their eyes rather than meet her stare. A few hold outs weren't bad; she didn't want the Blood Brothers spineless, but this wasn't a good time for her to deal with some kind of insurrection. "You have my phone number," Kelly continued in a softer tone as she relented. "If you want something, use it. But I think I've made sure you've never had reason to, haven't I?" When Wrecker returned only murmurs, Kelly brought back the icy edge to repeat, "*Haven't I!*" She turned off the intensity when he finally agreed loudly enough to be heard by everyone

watching on.

"So, what's your ask?" Akawa finally contributed as the tension diffused.

He was a sly one, Kelly could see. Doubtless he had heard the whispers of the others, goading Wrecker into reaching for more and in the process biting the hand that fed. He'd probably, in anticipation of Kelly's next return to them, subtly goaded them himself to bring the matter to a head. Testing her, maybe, or more likely simply getting her to remind them of how good they have it under his leadership. Perhaps he should take the form of a fox, instead of a wolf, she considered.

"Simple enough, I think. And," she added with a sharp glance at Wrecker. "It works to your benefit, too."

"Usually does, with you," Akawa answered, and she got the distinct impression it was not she to whom the answer was addressed. "What is it?"

"You guys know the 16th?" The smirk of acknowledgement was all the confirmation she needed, and so she continued. "I think you've got some Camarilla loyalist fingers in there, stirring pots that you want to keep to yourselves. I'll deal with it, but I just need you to track down who it is."

"The fuck we look like? Ironside?" Wrecker sniped. She let it slide, since elders meddling in his turf was an understandable sore spot. She wanted them a little pissed off about it, anyways.

"Ironside was a lawyer," Kelly corrected him gently. To Akawa, "You up to it?"

The tan-skinned Native man sucked his teeth and studied Kelly's eyes. She met his gaze levelly. He could probably guess at her reasons, if he didn't know them already. But the 16th was close enough to Anubis territory that they may

not keep as close an eye on it. It was halfway to a Rack district, given how lax and corrupt the cop presence was. Finally, without taking his eyes off of Kelly he said over his shoulder, "Stitch? You had a cousin worked at the 16th, right?"

A woman with a sleeveless denim vest as her only top chimed in, "Yeah. Hugh still works there, last I heard. You want me to give him a call?"

"Me, I don't much care," Akawa replied, his gaze lending subtext to his voice. "But I think Kelly here does." Kelly acknowledged the debt with a nod for Akawa's benefit alone.

The Anarch game dispersed, and Kelly took the highway back toward the city core. As she drove, she dialed. She was disconnecting her tenth call by the time she was pulling into the parking lot of the hotel, but she already had a good idea of how she'd settle with Akawa and his people.

Stitch wasn't the only one of the Blood Brothers with family in the area. Another of them, one she recognized as AJ, had a sister. A sister with a rap sheet as long as Kelly's arm for hooking, possession, and resisting arrest, and she was sitting in a cell at the pen waiting for a court date on her latest case. Now, it only remained for her to position AJ to have Akawa's ear.

As Kelly walked up to the front door of the Hyatt, neither Dorst's car, nor person, was anywhere in sight.

January 22, 1999. 8:42 PM.

Kelly woke to the jangling vibration of her cell phone on
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the nightstand. She did not wake with the shapeless, sharp fear tingling through her nerves like electric shocks of the night before. Kelly grabbed the phone and connected the call. "Kelly Patterson," she announced. It was Gibson, as promised. "I'm glad you're punctual, James, but I didn't need an alarm clock. How did it go?"

Kelly pushed herself up in the bed and leaned against the loosely-attached headboard as she listened. It was, at least, heartening news. The police had collected tire tread imprints, as Kelly had expected, but James explained the Detective had not seemed pleased with the results. The common areas were combed, but the only thing recovered were the fragments of porcelain buried in the carpet where Kelly had smashed, and then cleaned a vase after giving her statement to Detective Dorst. Her foresight had, according to James, frustrated Dorst to no end. At one point, three hours into the search, Dorst had tried to enter the office.

"I rather thought he was going to punch me," James explained. "He was in quite a rage."

"Given that I'm sure you could have taken it, I almost wish he had. There was nothing in there that would have helped him. No offense, but it would have put a tidy bow on this little situation." It would have, she knew. The case might get kicked to someone else, but only Dorst would persist like this. He was nearing the end of his sprint, and if he didn't bring the gazelle down soon, he was going to starve to death.

"The only thing they left with is questions about where the outfit you wore that night had gone. It's not enough to justify another search, I don't think. Oh, and before I forget, the warrant was signed by Judge Matthew Brant. I made some calls around the courthouse this afternoon

during lunch recess. He seems to be one of the good ones. Apparently, he and Dorst go way back. Something about a corruption charge he tried."

Kelly winced inwardly. "Yeah, I know the case. It's what landed Dorst in the 16th instead of the Police Chief's office."

"I've known cops who would prefer to die than to step across that line, so he's got that going for him." Kelly's teeth grated at the reminder. James seemed to give her a moment to absorb it. "Anyways, it looks like the warrant might have been the last favor he had from Brant. Dorst has been making a bit of scene about this, behind closed doors. Kelly ..." He trailed off with a hesitant tone whose flavor she couldn't identify.

"Yes?" she prodded and he gave in.

"Be careful, alright? He's starting to look like a cornered animal." He's going to catch his prey, or he's going to starve to death, Kelly couldn't help but answer silently.

"Thanks, James. I will be." And, she thought as she disconnected the call, she would be. After a fashion. But first, she thought it might do some good to be a little reckless.

Kelly dressed quickly in jeans and a t-shirt and though she threw on her leather jacket she left the holster and its accompanying gun in the drawer, tucked under her jeans. She wouldn't need it tonight. She snatched up her purse and grabbed the new rental's keys off the table on the way out of the suite. As she pressed the button to summon the elevator, her cellphone was ringing in her ear. The doors opened as a man picked up on the other end.

"Hello, Joel. It's Kelly," she said as the doors slid closed and she started her descent to the lobby. "You're a smart guy,

Joel ... Where's the nearest cop bar to the 16th?"

January 22, 1999. 10:18 PM.

The silver Mercedes looked out of place in the parking lot of Lucky O'Tooles, though if you left out the lightless parts of the sign it read only, "Lucky Tools." Around the sleek car were sedans ten years out of date and showing the russet battle scars left from Milwaukee winters. The ramshackle wooden structure that seemed to groan and sway under the weight of snow clinging stubbornly to its roof looked about to topple over and swallow all of the cars, luxury or not.

Kelly walked up to the door of the bar and shouldered her way inside as she kicked the slush from her shoes on the frame. The room was closed in, dim in a musty kind of way, suffused with cigarette smoke and classic rock from a jukebox that needed a new speaker. Knots of men and women stood around the claustrophobic space, and though there were no more than a dozen, fifteen at the outside, it gave the air a palpable humidity. She brushed snow off of her shoulder as she scanned the bar; the man she was looking for would not be here in company, boisterous and unwinding after a day of shaking down dealers and busting whores, but rather perched alone, brooding like a gargoyle.

Detective Dorst was hunched over a tumbler of amber liquid devoid of ice. It was three fingers full, and he stared into it as if into the deepest of wells. It was, Kelly more than suspected, a bottomless well for him. He didn't look up as she strolled into the bar, nor when she stopped behind him. She could smell the sour reek of the cheap bourbon, not just in his glass, but oozing from his pores. For all that he smelled like a man who should be unconscious on the

floor, perhaps in a puddle of his own urine, he sat his bar stool steadily.

"Mind if I join you, Detective?"

Dorst's eyes rose to meet hers in the mirror. She saw the flicker of rage twist through his features in the warped reflection, giving his face a funhouse strangeness for a single pulse of his heart. Then she saw it dull, along with the hunter's gleam in his eyes.

"Sure," he said carefully but without a slur. "Why not? You sure you don't want your lawyer here?"

Kelly gave him a small, gracious smile as she slid onto the barstool. "I think we both know that's no longer necessary, Detective." She waved over the bartender and, from the corner of her eye, watched Dorst study her in the mirror. She ordered two more of what he was drinking and turned to watch him down the bourbon in a single swallow before holding out the glass for refilling. Kelly waited until her own glass sat, stinking, on a bar napkin at her elbow and the bartender had moved away to continue running a rag through a glass beer mug.

"It might not have come down from the top yet, but it's only a matter of time until it does. And you played your last card getting the search warrant."

Kelly tried not to enjoy his flash of surprise too much. She needn't have bothered, as it faded into a look she very much disliked. The cold loathing that rose as the surprise faded stung deeply.

"You're pretty happy with yourself, aren't you, Ms. Patterson?" he said. "Feel pretty smug? Pulled one over on me and the world and got away with murder?"

She averted her eyes down to her drink and lifted it to run back and forth under her nose. It smelled about as

wholesome as the last hobo she had fed from, and maybe more toxic. She reveled in her disgust. "No, Detective Dorst. Even if what you accuse me of were true, I doubt I'd feel smug about it." She lowered her glass and met his gaze again when he scoffed and emptied his glass.

"Why don't you drop the act already?" he griped bitterly and waved the bartender over for a refill. "We both know you fucking did it."

In all seriousness, though how serious Dorst did not know, she replied in the wake of the bartender's leaving, "You wouldn't prefer me to drop the act, Detective. I can promise you that."

"You think I'm scared of some rug-munching shyster? What are you going to do, sue me? Go ahead. You'd be lucky if my pension covered your rent." He resumed staring into his glass, and Kelly found the confirmation she had been looking for. The last time she had seen that look in someone's eyes, that self-loathing resignation, it had been in her own reflection as she lied to herself and said she would leave Wendy.

"How long were you on the wagon?" Kelly asked gently. She saw him scowl, his jaw tighten, but she gave him the seconds of silence he needed.

"Two years," he finally muttered. "What the fuck do you care?"

"Because I don't like to see good people make bad decisions," Kelly answered, and Dorst snorted. Kelly lifted her glass for another delve into its sour bouquet.

"I thought I was ill-mannered and a bigot?" Kelly nodded her agreement.

"You are," she confirmed. "But I said a good person, not a perfect one." Kelly watched him over her glass as her lips

tingled with the alcohol she tipped against them in her feigned sip. Dorst was watching her as if dully trying to pluck the trap out of her words.

"No, Detective," Kelly answered his unspoken question. "I'm serious. You probably won't believe this, but I was actually quite inspired by what you did once upon a time. I would have fought for you, if I'd passed the bar when you got blacklisted."

"So, you're just here to rub my nose in my life," Dorst said and drained his glass. He made to reach for his wallet, half turning off his barstool but she drew him up short with a light touch on his arm. He froze at the contact, and she kept her voice sincere and soft.

"I'm not, Detective. I just want you to consider the idea that maybe I'm not a perfect person, but I'm a good one." For a moment, she thought she'd almost convinced him. Then he shook his head and stood from the bar. Kelly stood with him.

"You go ahead and tell yourself whatever you need to sleep at night, only I guess you don't sleep at night, do you? Kelly the lesbian late-night lawyer," he sneered. "But I know the truth. You're a killer, and I'm not done yet. I'm going to bring you down."

Kelly put her hand out and stopped him from tugging a sheaf of bills from his wallet. "Let me get it, Detective. It's on me as long as you promise you'll hit a meeting tomorrow." She could see Dorst had to struggle to hold onto his scowl.

"Should have been drinking the good stuff, then," he said at last, and stalked past her to the door with the over-cautious forward lean of a man deep in his cups. Kelly watched him go as she handed her credit card to the

bartender.

January 23, 1999. 10:31 PM.

"Gordon, it's Kelly."

"Oh, hey, Miss Kelly. Did you like the car I got you today? I know you said comfortable was more important than fast, but that one's kind of both."

"It was fine, Gordon. Yes. Thank you. I need you to do something for me."

"Anything, Miss Kelly."

"I know, Gordon. I know. And I love you for it. I need you to file a complaint with IAD, but don't do it yourself. Something anonymous. Detective Dorst has fallen off the wagon, I'm afraid, and he's accepting bribes in the form of bar tabs from people he's investigating."

"Anonymous ... off the wag ... he's investi ..."

"The most recent was a bar called Lucky O'Tooles, near the 16th. I'm sure they'll know it."

"Got it, Miss Kelly. Can... can I call you when it's done?"

"Of course, Gordon. I hope I see you before morning tonight."

January 26, 1999.

It had been good to be back in familiar environs the last few nights. The warrant defeated, Kelly had moved back into her condo and spent the following evening indulging her minor victory with Wendy's help. She had, for a time, convinced herself that it was an impulse borne of some

wholesome desire for companionship. But the deeper and deeper she slid into her entrancement, the more she sought to remove any barrier between the woman's living body and her own, to take every bit of warmth and beauty and life into herself, the more she realized how sick it made her. It was at once an intense vulnerability and compulsion to control that which made her vulnerable. To destroy it, piece by piece. At least, Kelly thought as they lay with Wendy exhausted and dozing in the circle of her arm, the mortal seemed not to notice the flavor of her ardor. At least, she amended to herself, she had not succumbed to her senseless and dangerous desires entirely.

It had taken her three hours the night after to track down the name gifted to her by Akawa, and another one to arrange the girls Wrecker asked for. Well, another to convince Wrecker they all had to come back in one piece.

Her opponent seemed to be a dark horse, a Ventrue possibly looking to make her bones in the clan by flexing muscle on the Seneschal. Or else to convince Lucina that clan Ventrue, more specifically Kris Macalister, would prove a more profitable investment as Seneschal. Gory had been hesitant, at first, when she'd called him for a couple of bored Anubi looking to make a little extra money. But after she had explained that if she didn't handle it roughly enough for Lucina's benefit—as she was certain Lucina would hear of it—then it would end with Kris's Final Death instead, he got on board.

She forced herself to attend after the three of them caught up to Kris, and to watch every blow of baseball bat and tire iron. She immersed herself in it, with every keen sense. Kris could have been considered beautiful, at first. Not to Kelly's tastes, but she would not want for companionship if she desired it. By the end of it, the woman hanging broken and

dripping vitae in the chains in front of her could have been mistaken for a Nosferatu were it not for the blood. Kelly knelt in front of her and lifted her chin. The cold, thick vitae that oozed down over her fingers and gloved her hand to the knuckles was at once repulsive and delightful.

"You understand your mistake, don't you Kris?" she had heard herself say, as if from across the room. She heard her neutrality and was afraid of it. "Are you angry, Kris? Do you think I've treated you harshly?"

The kindred's eyes had swum in and out of focus in front of her. Her fangs had been broken along with most of her teeth and her lips, but Kelly could tell they were extended. She memorized the gore-flick victim's mask, and she leaned on her anger at the hardship this upstart had inflicted on her to hold her stomach steady when it began to lurch.

"The next time I have to send for you to be staked, Kris, it won't be bats I inflict on you, but dawn. There is more on the line than your ambitions. We are trying to keep the city afloat, and we are trying to make it a better place for all kindred. So," she had concluded as she wiped her hand on the kindred's shoulder and let the chin sink back to the shattered chest. "You're going to take your licks, you're going to be careful about how you recover from them, you're going to pull your weight for the good of the Camarilla. Make your clan proud through your diligence. I'll give you a call in a couple of weeks, and we can chat about what you've come up with."

January 30, 1999. 10:10 PM.

Kelly returned from Mitch's bar, Wendy's disappointment as they'd parted ways after the performance closer to her

consideration than Kris's shattered face, and experienced a jolt of realization. Dorst's car was parked on the street, discretely but she had been keeping an eye out for it. Gibson had informed her two nights ago that he'd been suspended without pay and placed under investigation.

Her own case, hopelessly tainted and thin to begin with, was kicked out of the district attorney's office as DNP—do not prosecute. The precinct Captain seemed to lose his fire to close the case, and Jess Carlton, former cheer squad captain, former high school popularity contest winner, former abuser of Wendy, was doomed to enter the thousands of open cold cases still filed away somewhere in the deepest parts of the police records hall. Even the mortals, Kelly thought, preferred to bury their unjustly dead where they couldn't see them.

She checked her pistol in her handbag as she rode the elevator to make sure the safety was off and that a round was chambered. Her jaw relaxed and she checked her ready stance as she found the door to her unit was still closed and locked. She had somewhat expected him to be waiting for her inside; if it went poorly, it was easier to explain having shot an intruder. She was not entirely surprised he had not made that mistake, though. Dorst wouldn't risk interruption by a nosy neighbor, or risk that she would just turn around and run once she saw the signs of the break in. He was too smart for that, even if she was sure he was pickled in at least two days' worth of drink.

Kelly unlocked the door and headed inside. She threw the bolt, slipped the chain into the lock, and did a quick sweep to ensure Gordon wasn't home. The mortal was not, for which she was grateful. No telling how he would respond to what she planned, but sometimes a little shock therapy was for the best. It had done wonders for her, when she was

Embraced.

Her boots went into the closet, and the gun into the back of her waistband. She flicked off lights and relied only on the diffuse reflected glow of the yellow bathroom light from the cracked door. Kelly leaned back against the wall by the door and waited, senses dialed up and alert for the whine of the elevator's electric motor.

She had time to abandon the plan. She could survive the drop to the ground outside her condo. She could call the police when he showed up at the door, as long as he didn't kick it in. She could call the police now; his car was parked on the street. But she wasn't going to do that. The cheetah was starved, the chase had been a failure. And, she knew, in this case the cat should have fed. She was not going to let one of her killings inflict another.

It was five minutes before the elevator began its descent back to the lobby from her floor. She checked her courage; shored it as she began to waver again. She could just let him go. He would die, was already dead. But maybe that would be cleaner; maybe all she was doing was inflicting a longer, more torturous destruction. She was drawn from her reverie by the pound of a fist on her door.

"Ms. Patterson!" Dorst called through the door. He was at least as far gone as at Lucky Tools. "Ms. Patterson, I have to say, you got me. You almost had me going with that 'good person but not perfect person' shit, Ms. Patterson. C'mon, open the door. I know you're in there. I want to thank you in person." She could hear, though he didn't know she could hear, his muttered addendum. "C'mon and open the door, you uppity dyke."

Kelly took the mental equivalent of a deep breath and moved for the door. She put her hand to the lock and knob

but turned neither. Instead, through the door, she said, "You don't want to do this, Dorst. You don't have any idea what you're dealing with."

"Yeah, no, I finally do. I get it now; you helped show me, Ms. Patterson. Even when they lose, the bad guys win. I'm on board. I've been reborn." They do, Kelly answered silently. They do, but you still have no idea. You will, she added and turned the bolt.

Kelly closed her eyes and braced for what was coming as she turned the knob. Dorst's foot hit the door as soon as the latch clicked, and the chain was ripped from the frame in a splinter of wood. The door flew open into Kelly, and she couldn't help but cry out as it cracked her cheekbone. The room spun for a moment as her brain bounced off the inside of her skull and she stumbled back away from the door.

Dorst was there, a wall of mass rushing toward her, in the blink of an eye. His hand went around her throat hard enough that a mortal would have gagged. She had just begun to regain her senses, to muster her considerable will to hold back the instinctive drive to murderous vengeance against the assault, when his fist crashed into her face. Kelly struggled harder, redoubled her efforts, and clung to self-control by a thread.

Dorst rode her to the floor and pinned her with his bulk. His stink was full of fear sweat, adrenaline tang, and alcoholic fog. He was three days from a shower and she could smell every minute of it. His heart, driven by rage and hatred, hammered in her senses and brought her back through the blackness that closed in as the blows ceased.

Both of his hands closed with lethal intent around her throat. The back of her head bounced off the floor as he

throttled her. Spittle blotted out part of her field of vision as he panted and seethed through bared, gritted teeth. His eyes were wide and wild, and dull with drink and resignation. Kelly lay motionless, staring up at him with present, intelligent, and fearless eyes.

"Why won't you die?!" he raged down at her, and she felt his spittle mingle with the vitae oozing from her bruised and broken face. He was not seeing what she had seen in Kris's face. Not yet. If she let him continue, he would. She toyed with the idea as she prodded and embraced the aching, piercing pain that throbbled like needles into her. "WHY WON'T YOU DIE?!"

Kelly felt her vitae twitch, felt the pain soothed and washed away by degrees. She felt her skull crunch back into place, and shards of bone slice through knitting flesh to settle back into their proper form. Her vision cleared, her thoughts cleared. Her wrung-out neck forced his hands away as the bruising faded, and the esophagus opened. Her thirst tried to grab the bit of her self-control in its teeth, but she wrenched it back. She would have some relief from it, soon. She could be patient.

"Because," Kelly said to him from between extending fangs as he tumbled backwards off of her and scuttled crab-like for the door, "I'm already dead."

"N-no, y-y-you can't ..." He lifted a hand to his head, gave it a shake as if trying to dispel a hallucination. As she rose, whole, if bloodied, and with eyes blazing with every ounce of her constrained, predator's fury, she loomed over him and he shrank back.

"I told you, Detective. You don't understand, you don't know what you are getting involved with. You should have listened, but it's too late now." Dorst reached for his gun,

but she was faster, and sober. She lunged forward and twisted it out of his hand before it was even fully clear of the holster.

"If you try for the backup," Kelly hissed with narrowed eyes as she pointed his own nickel-plated .45 at his face. "I'm going to have to kill you. Cool off, *listen*, and you get a choice about whether you walk out of here." She punctuated her statement with a confident cocking of the automatic. A needless gesture, but one that had a recognizable sound and implication.

When Dorst lifted his hands to his sides, half-feral with terror and looking half-convinced he was dreaming, Kelly lowered the gun, though she kept it cocked at her side.

"I meant what I said at the bar, Detective. You're a good man, even if you're an asshole. And I'm sorry you got put in the middle of something you had no chance to get out of in one piece. It wasn't your fault; it had nothing to do with anything you would understand. But there was only one way this could have ended for you, if it didn't kill you."

Dorst licked his lips and blinked up at her. He slowly lowered his hands, and when she didn't point the gun at him again, he used them to push himself to his feet. Kelly lowered the hammer on the man's pistol, clicked the safety on, dropped the magazine to the floor and quickly worked the slide to take the round out of the chamber before she returned the gun to him. He hesitated only a moment, during which she encouraged him with a lift of the gleaming length. He took it and slid it into the holster.

"It doesn't have to end for you, Dorst. You don't have to stop being a good man or doing good things. You still have a chance to change things for the better. But it means just being a good man, and not a perfect one."

"I'm not like you. I'm not a killer," Dorst said. She heard the pleading under the words, but knew it wasn't directed at her. "I'm not a killer," he repeated, and it rang as hollow as any echo.

"Are you sure, Detective?" Kelly pressed coolly. "If I weren't what I am, I would be dead. You killed me, for all intents and purposes. Can you really say you aren't a killer?"

She could see his lip quiver as her words filtered in, and his chin sank to his chest as he stared down at his hands. "I don't ... I didn't mean ..."

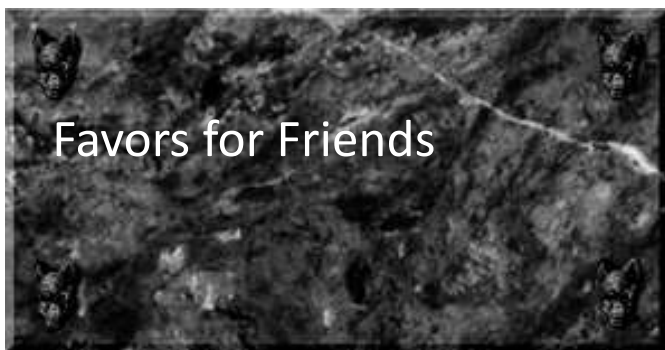
"Oh, yes you did, Detective. You meant every bit of it. I admit, I got a little fuzzy after the first few hits, but I gave it some extra seconds to make up for it. If I'd been anyone else, *anything* else, I'd be dead, and you'd be a killer."

Kelly took two steps forward, and with the tips of her cold fingers, lifted his head as she had Kris's. His expression was as broken as hers, just in a deeper, more lasting sense. "But now you know, don't you, Detective? Now you know that you can be a killer and *live* with it, still want to do good things with your time on this earth. You know you can be a good person, without being a perfect person."

She watched him fold in on himself as each of her words seemed to add ten pounds to his shoulders, until as she finished he was kneeling in front of her. Her fingers still gently forced his head back so that even from the floor she could stare into his eyes. "Kill me," he pleaded, tears coursing over his cheeks. "I can't live with it. I'm not you."

"You can, Dorst," Kelly assured, as she cupped his cheek and wiped a tear from his eyes with her thumb. "And you can still do more good than you do harm. Serve me, Detective. Let me show you how to carry it and move forward."

Kelly waited until he finally nodded and cast his eyes down before she closed in with her bite. It was both to soothe her raging hunger and to grant Dorst a reprieve in temporary oblivion as she drank him just to the point of unconsciousness. He didn't even stir as she urged a thin stream of her vitae past his lips.



March 12, 1999. 2:00 AM.

Milwaukee's night accepted Kelly without fanfare as she drove from Stefan's haven. Left him there rather than bring him back to the condo they had shared since his waking a week ago. The performance engine purred with constrained fury, and it was a voice she now appreciated in a whole new light. Until she had woken this evening, she had felt much the same. There had been an engine of rage and violence running in her heart, with enough power to bring down a building or raze a city. And had she not almost done just that? Flashes of crimson abandon threatened to overwhelm her and she pulled over with a sharp jerk of the wheel. The car sat askew as one of the tires jumped the curb just before it came to a stop. With leather steering wheel creaking under the straining twist of her grip, she closed her eyes against the flood of images and memories.

The worst of it faded, and a tiny voice in the back of her mind mocked her quavering revulsion at the vivid

memories. She had enjoyed the release and try as she might to deny it she could not. In those minutes of abandon, as she shredded flesh and spilled hot life in pulsing arcs, as she dove upon ravaged veins and arteries, she had felt close to the peace and contentment she strove so hard for. In her music, in her work, in Wendy. In anything but the one thing that seemed to give her a look at its glowing nirvana. She was disgusting.

The car's engine had stalled out and she cranked it, giving life to her machine as quickly as she took it from the people around her. Working clutch and gas in jerky motions, blinking back the shimmering scarlet screen of tears, she wrenched the car down from the curb and started away again. She wasn't going to allow herself to cry again. She had cried too much in the last week; more than she had in the half year leading up to it, she was sure. And besides, didn't she have what she wanted? He was gone again (*oh God, please not again*). She had her haven back to herself (*without his touch, his smell*). She could return to the semblance of life she had constructed in defiance of his abandonment (*to earn his love*).

Kelly had never poured so much of herself into her performances as she had just hours ago. She felt drained in the aftermath, like she had fed the very fires of her existence into the songs until it had burned away everything that kept her supported and stable. Why had she done it, she demanded of herself? She should have bored him. She should have left him wanting. He might have gone back to sleep, then. But she couldn't bear to see that blankness in his gaze or know the oozing cold of his disdain. That was a sinkhole into which she couldn't force herself to step; better to stare into the slavering maws of a dozen werewolves than feel that again. Better to greet the sun than to feel that

again. She hated Stefan and how much she needed him.

As she guided the sleek animal into its berth below the (*empty*) condo nestled into the beating heart of Downtown, she hesitated with her hand on the key. It wasn't too late; she could return to his haven, plead with him to come back with her. She could give him what he would undoubtedly want after her singing. Her stomach at once fluttered with anticipation and twisted with disgust at the thought of sharing a bed with him again. But he would *stay*. The engine died and with eyes closed and brow against the arc of the wheel, the leather seam digging a furrow across her skin as she pressed into its unyielding hardness, she listened to it tick tock click clack as it cooled. If only her own needs were so easy to cool.

Her haven welcomed her. It rang with the unique silence of an empty tomb. Like a burglar, she eased the door closed and the locks into place. She pulled off her boots and padded carefully into the office. She feared disturbing the silence, and tread around it like it was a coiled viper waiting to strike if antagonized with the slightest noise. She should feel comfortable, safe from the world in her haven. She felt like an intruder as she sat at her desk and buried her face in her hands. She had (*to see Stefan again*) work to do, things to focus on that were critical beyond measure. She had (*to hear him humming*) to concentrate. All she wanted was his hands on her shoulders.

With a sigh she turned from her desk and leaned back in the swiveling chair. The single, black and white photo of Wendy was still pinned on the board in the office. Candid, unsmiling, carrying trash from the now-familiar house of her parents to the curb. No snow, in that image. How long had she been dragging Wendy into the Hellscape of her existence? Why did she persist? She could let her go, now,

couldn't she? Give her freedom from the endless hunger of the blackhole that Kelly represented? Now that Stefan was back. She should break up with Wendy. She wouldn't. Kelly's head fell back into the welcoming embrace of her chair's tall back.

All of this, everything that had begun to spin out of control, was Stefan's fault. She tried to believe that, but had he not said it was *she* that woke him? Her weakness that had drawn him out of his dreams and slumber and back to the night. Back to her. She felt sick but had no idea whether it was at being the instrument of her own destruction or with the lack of him in the condo. She was pathetic, she derided. A man had died, and would go unknown and unmourned, and all she could think of was (*Stefan*) her own petty problems.

"Get a fucking grip," Kelly snarled at herself, and snapped the spell of silence. She forced herself back to her desk and began the boot process of her computer. She leaned on the rage, rage she had only last night craved to be free of, and fed herself into it until it burned away her stasis. She could deal with the Wendy situation later. She had work to do, for now. A few minutes later she allowed herself to become lost in the labyrinthine halls of law.

March 12, 1999. 8:55 PM.

Wendy's warm lips pressed a slow trail of soft, wet marks down her throat. The welcome of her flesh was manifest in its nearly searing heat as it pressed along Kelly's cold corpse. Delicate, hesitant fingers explored the taut expanse of Kelly's belly, stroked the curve under her breasts, rested where a heartbeat should pulse and didn't. The beating of Wendy's heart was strong enough for both of them as it

drove the relentless rivers of blood through her living veins. The smell of her body, of her excitement, drenched Kelly's senses.

Stefan's cold lips touched lightly, icily, down Kelly's throat opposite Wendy. Fire and ice mingled as their fingers twined, and then separated again to pursue their own explorations of her body. His cold rigidity pressed alongside her, his hardness tight against her hip. Kelly gasped her helpless submission to his ministrations as he pinched her nipple into firmness. The points of his fangs grazed her collar bone and she felt her stomach tense with a convulsion of pleasure.

Arms spread to encircle them both, to pull them into her until she could scarcely tell where she stopped and they began. Kelly gave herself to them. Her body tingled with the memory of living warmth in the wake of Wendy's touch. It tingled with cold electric jolts of pleasure as Stefan set her nerves afire. She felt tension building toward release as their fingers delved into the light, blonde hair above her sex. Her hips rocked upwards of their own volition as she tried to force their teasing touch to the sensitive nub they stopped just short of. Another gasp slipped from her lips as Wendy's hot mouth closed around her nipple, and Stefan's cold fingers delved into her.

The ache of her fangs throbbed in time to Wendy's heartbeat, the pulse of that life echoing through her nerves as the hot tongue encircled her breast and tasted the death on her skin. As if joined to Wendy through Kelly, Stefan's curling fingers moved in time to the heartbeat and stroked the deepest parts of her until she felt herself contract around him. Her back arched as release came, and her cries of pleasure echoed in the shapeless void in which the three of them floated, together. She tasted the tang of Wendy's

excitement in the kiss that silenced her cries, and then, as fang points pricked the tongue that searched her mouth insistently, her blood. Kelly came again at the first fiery blush of that flavor.

Then Stefan was on top of her and her legs wormed around his hips. The head of him pressed against her lips and she struggled to pull him into her, futile struggles against his immeasurable strength. Then Wendy was there, between them, panting her need as Kelly could not. Blood ran thick and crimson from between her lips and dripped onto Kelly's chest. Stefan was lured to it and leaned down to lap at the hot, sticky life on Kelly's breasts. Wendy's body welcomed Kelly's fingers and gripped them fiercely, even as Stefan—at last—filled her with the hard length of him. Waves of release flooded her one after another, and Wendy coated them all in the blood—too much blood—that flowed like ambrosia from between her lips.

Hot and cold, alive and dead, they writhed together. Kelly tasted Wendy on Stefan, and Wendy tasted Kelly on him, as well. All of them tasted the living blood that flowed until it filled the void and they floated in an ocean of it, until it made them all red and slick and squelched between them as they moved and rocked and roiled. Kelly felt Stefan's pleasure pulsing cold and rich and bloody against the back of her throat even as her own pleasure drove her hips up into Wendy's lapping tongue. She felt Wendy's nails dig into her hips as her pleasure crested around Stefan's girth, and Stefan's moaning release pulsed into Wendy below their kissing forms. Kelly opened her eyes to take in her lovers, to see what she had known so far only by touch, and screamed.

Desiccated, drained of all vitae and with flesh stretched dry and tight around bones, Stefan's mummified body twitched

and jittered and thrust awkwardly between the still, blue-skinned legs of Wendy. Dead and staring up at Kelly with lips parted in the final gasp of life that had been taken from her, Wendy jerked with each of Stefan's awkward thrustings. Kelly tumbled away as Stefan began to grin, to bear his yellowed teeth and growing fangs, as Wendy's death-glazed eyes began to turn toward her in accusation and hatred. Kelly screamed again and felt the terror and revulsion of the sound like shards of glass in her throat.

Kelly came awake with a start and a gasp and fought the thick folds of her duvet and blankets that seemed to be trying to strangle her. She panicked, and the red sheen of the Beast's fear began to descend until she heard the silence of the place, and the remembered echo of blood scent faded with the immediacy of the dream. She fell back into the tangle of the bedsheets and wished she could pant to relieve the tension. The condo rang with silence, still, but through the walls, floor, and ceiling she could hear the quiet whisper of voices and movement. She clung to those small sounds of life, alien to the void in which she and her lovers had hung, and like a lifeline it drew her back to stability.

She threw a hand up over her brow and lingered in the last dregs of the dream. God, she thought, and immediately regretted it. She had never been overly religious in life, and that had not much changed since the Embrace, but she was sure that if there was a God he had little to do with dreams of that sort. The mummified image of Stefan, and the death-touched pallor of Wendy's flesh, drew a shudder from her and then the last fog of dreaming burned away in the light of consciousness. Kelly untangled herself from the heavy blankets and sat on the edge of the bed. Her feet on solid ground, she at last began to feel something like normal.

Kelly sought solace in the hot needles of water from the shower and found none. She dried and dressed in a black suit and pencil skirt and tried to ignore the quiet of the place as her neighbors settled in for the night and the sounds of their living began to fade, one by one. When the phone in her office rang it disturbed the silence as abruptly and frighteningly as a gunshot. Kelly jumped at the jangle and berated herself for her nerves during the second ring, and on the third answered.

“Patterson,” she said, though she had to try twice as her voice was little more than a croak for the first.

“Jesus, Kelly,” Julie Montareaux chirped. “You are difficult to get a hold of these days. You always seem to be out of your fancy new offices.”

“Julie,” Kelly greeted with a measure of pleasant surprise tinged only lightly with dread. Surely, she could trust herself around Julie. At least as much as she did with Wendy. The dead eyes flashed in her mind’s eye but she forced them down. “Sorry about that, it’s just been crazy lately, and I was out of town until just a couple of ni-days ago.”

“I know how it goes,” Julie commiserated. “And we thought it was bad when we were pulling all-nighters cramming for exams, eh?” She laughed, but Kelly could only muster a small chuckle.

“The all-nighters haven’t gone away,” Kelly replied in the wake of Julie’s laughter. “The stakes have just gotten higher.”

“Preach it, sister,” Julie said, and then carried on at once. “Listen, I, uh, I need a favor Kelly. Let me buy you dinner? We can talk about it then.”

“Sure, Julie,” Kelly replied as she looked at the half-completed job sitting on her desk and desktop. It would

keep. She'd made some good progress on it the night before. "But I'm not letting you buy me dinner; it's my treat."

"No way," Julie said in the stubborn tone Kelly knew so well. The last time she'd heard it, the two of them had ended up tandem bungee jumping. "It's me asking the favor, so dinner's on me."

"Alright, Julie, I give. Where do you want to meet?"

"How about Danny's? Say, half an hour?" Kelly agreed, and they signed off. She set the receiver back in its cradle and sighed.

She loved Julie, as a sister rather than the perverted love she felt for Stefan, or the insidious and demanding love she felt for Wendy, but she wasn't sure the two of them had anything in common any longer. What remained of her time at college in her heart and mind were memories of light that she tried not to think of too often. Still, she wasn't willing to deny Julie anything; if it hadn't been for Julie, Kelly would have probably flunked or dropped out of law school more than once.

She grabbed up her keys and headed for the diner that her one-time-friend preferred. The city slipped past, cold and weighted heavily with fresh snow. What a beautiful lie of purity the snow presented, Kelly thought. A blanket of cleanliness that belied the seething pit of monsters that bred and strove at its heart. Her family. She felt like an intruder in the blanketing sameness of the snow, like the snow would be stained black with the touch of her foot. Was there no place that felt like home, anymore, she wondered silently? The only answer that came to mind (*in Stefan's arms*) she refused to acknowledge.

Julie wasn't there when she arrived, but she took a booth

seat by a window and watched the occasional drift of glittering snow outside as she breathed the tart aroma of coffee and waited. There were a few couples in other booths, and several men in coveralls seated at the counter. Kelly drifted in and out of awareness of their conversations as she watched the parking lot. Fred the foreman was a hard ass, she learned, and Cathy was shorting time cards to save on overtime. Susan was lucky to have Greg, and she didn't know what she was throwing away by cheating with Charles. Justin just had to get his head on straight and get off the sauce. Amber was doing fine, and so were the kids, and wasn't it just lovely to see James again? She envied them their simple concerns.

Kelly glanced away as Amber came over to offer a top up on her coffee, which Kelly politely declined as a wash of headlights flashed through the window. Eyes squinted against the glare in the moments before it switched off, she turned back to see Julie cutting the engine of her Chevy Cobalt. The plain-looking brunette, in her U of M sweatshirt and two- or three-year-old blue jeans, waved happily as she stepped out to the much more subdued glow of the interior light. Kelly forced herself to smile and offered a lift of her hand in return. Julie made a show of stopping next to the sleek black Viper and making a "that's hot" gesture with her hand before she trudged into the diner.

"Hey, Amber," Julie called over the counter as she kicked the snow from her heavy boots at the door.

"Hi there, Julie," the waitress greeted familiarly in return. "Just have a seat anywhere, hon. I'll be with you in a jiff."

"Oh, I'm here with a friend tonight. Just bring me a coffee when you get a chance, will you? And my regular?"

“Sure thing,” Amber waved over her shoulder, and Julie headed toward Kelly’s table.

When Julie stopped next to the table and stared down at Kelly expectantly, it took Kelly a moment to register why and, somewhat chagrined, she scooted out of the booth to hug her oldest friend.

“You can’t have been here long, cold as you are,” Julie said as they separated and took their seats opposite one another at the booth table.

“No, not long,” Kelly deflected with a small shake of her head. “It’s good to see you again, Julie. How’s Geoff?”

The expression Julie returned was telling, and Kelly mentally prepared herself to hear at least a small tirade about Julie’s long-time boyfriend. Instead, Julie said, “Well, that’s part of why I asked you to come to dinner. But there’s time for that later, right? I want to hear what you’ve been up to that’s got you behind the wheel of that *beast*.”

Kelly experienced a moment of shock until she realized that Julie was referring to the car in the lot. “Oh, that,” she said dismissively. “I probably should have stuck to my old Accord, but I felt like treating myself a little while back. It’s good for business to look successful.”

The two of them dove into reminiscence and light conversation as Julie worked her way through the heaping plate of hash, eggs, bacon, and sausage that Amber brought over along with the coffee. Kelly apologized to Amber and begged another cup as she’d clumsily let the coffee go cold, and Amber obliged. Half an hour later, as Julie leaned back with a low sigh of contentment at the filling meal, Kelly had almost managed to return to the easy companionship she had shared with this woman for so many years. Almost. The sounds of her chewing had reminded Kelly a little too

poignantly of the sound of blood-slick bodies moving together in passion and abandon for the ease to manifest fully.

“You sure you don’t want anything? Even a muffin? They have great cranberry muffins here.”

Kelly shook her head. “No, thank you, Julie. The coffee’s fine. I had a late lunch with a client.” She was a little surprised she didn’t feel a prick of guilt over the lie, but she welcomed the relief. “So, what’s on your mind? You mentioned needing a favor.”

“Guh,” Julie groused, and pushed her nearly-empty plate away. “It’s stupid. I mean, it’s probably nothing. Just ...” She trailed off and Kelly prodded her gently with an exhortation to continue. “It’s just, Geoff’s been acting weird lately. He always seems distracted, and he’s been getting calls at all hours of the night. You... I mean, that private investigator still works for you, right? Jerry?”

“Gordon,” Kelly corrected gently. “Yes, Gordon still works for me, and I had to hire another recently to help cover the firm’s caseload.” Julie chewed her lip, and Kelly gave her the time she needed to screw up her courage. She watched the colors of her friend’s aura shift and swirl hesitantly through determination and hurt and love and grief.

“What’re his rates like? Do you think I could hire him?” Julie finally asked in a rush. Kelly had practically seen the question forming in the shades of aura and showed no surprise.

“No,” she answered, and Julie looked crestfallen until she continued. “But if you want me to get him to help you out, I’ll be glad to. Do you really think something’s going on with Geoff? Maybe he’s just finally getting ready to pop the question.”

Julie snorted her disbelief at the suggestion. “Not Geoff,” she assured. “He is many things, but the marrying kind is not one of them. Which I didn’t really care about until...”

“Until he started acting weird,” Kelly supplied and Julie nodded her agreement. “Alright, Julie, I’ll put Gordon on him for a week or two but you need to know that he’s not going to pull any punches. If it turns out Geoff is, I don’t know, screwing around on you or something, it’s going to come out. Are you ready for that?”

“No,” Julie answered with a weak laugh. “God, no, I’m not. But I need to know what’s going on with him; if he’s in some kind of trouble, I need to know. Jesus, I’m such a wimp.”

“I don’t think you are,” Kelly assuaged, and reached across the table to rest a hand atop Julie’s. Her flesh still held the memory of the warmth of her coffee cup and her friend didn’t start at the touch as so many others did. “It’ll be okay, Julie, even if it isn’t. We’ll get to the bottom of it and then we’ll cross whatever bridges we end up at.”

“Thanks, Kelly,” Julie said with enough relief that it echoed in subtle ripples through her aura. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Kelly shook her head and waved away the thanks. “Don’t thank me yet, Julie. I don’t know what Gordon’s going to turn up, and I’m going to hate being the bearer of bad news if it comes out there *is* something going on. But I’m glad to help as I can.”

Julie smiled her thanks again and Amber brought over the bill. Kelly tried to pay for dinner, but Julie was adamant and Kelly didn’t struggle too hard. Julie had a stubborn streak in her a mile wide when she wanted, and she insisted since Kelly hadn’t had anything but coffee. The two exchanged

another hug and Kelly stood next to her car as she waved Julie out of the parking lot. A few years ago, she would have felt rage at the idea of Geoff stepping out on Julie; now, she felt only a cold species of determination to untangle the puzzle. She was revolting.

Kelly got into her car and headed for home as she hit the speed dial on her cell to reach out to Gordon.

March 16, 1999. 8:58 PM.

The last several nights with Dorst and Gordon returned to her had been difficult and soothing both. Stefan continued to swirl through her thoughts, surfacing like the dorsal fin of a shark to cut through the waters of her mind and with as much instinctively understood threat. She seemed incapable of pushing his presence away to that tiny corner of her mind in which he had dwelt as he slept; he was not beyond reach as he had been then. She had only to drop what she was doing and seek him out to have his hateful (*beautiful*) eyes on her, or to cast aside her responsibilities to have his blood as hers again. But her boys were back, and safe. Wendy and her family were enjoying their stay at Disneyland and safely removed from Stefan, and she managed to take some measure of comfort from both truths.

Gordon was only too eager to keep her apprised of his progress on the investigation into Geoff. Kelly half-suspected he thought she'd sent him away out of some fit of pique at Stefan's unannounced arrival in the haven and feared that should he fail her, he would again be sent away. She tried to soothe his fears but knew that it was pointless; there was some measure of neurosis she had come to expect and accept that came with his bonding by blood. It wore on

her, at times, and at others made her feel sick to have inflicted it upon him, but she endured both.

About Geoff, Gordon had made little progress in the first couple days of investigation. It seemed, at first, that Julie's suspicions were unfounded. Kelly was glad of that, but cautiously so; it had been a long time since she had been content with merely the *appearance* of propriety. Lucina was the image of polite society when she wanted to be, but Kelly had seen the monster behind the curtain when Kelly had arranged for Raul's humiliation. And before, too, when the Prince had come to collect the staked Union members. No, Kelly knew that just because something looked on the up and up did not in any sense imply that it *was* on the up and up. Her wariness proved valuable when she woke on the third day of the investigation to find Gordon sitting in the kitchen, chatting with Dorst.

"More good news?" she inquired from her bed, not particularly concerned with her interruption of their discussion of the Detroit Red Wings' season record or chances for a Stanley Cup. She pushed herself up against the pillows and headboard and tugged the sheet up to cover her chest for some measure of modesty before they entered.

Gordon was first, but Dorst was right on his heels. They practically collided trying to fit simultaneously through the door into her bedroom. Kelly rolled her eyes but let them sort it out themselves. At least they'd stopped most of the jealous glaring after the trip to Chicago. It had been worth the few hundred dollars it had cost to force them out into the city together. They didn't have many opportunities to make friends or have a social life, enslaved to her as they were. At least, though, they had each other. She could appreciate bonding through shared misery.

“No, Miss Kelly,” Gordon said at last, once they’d entered and taken up relaxed positions leaning or sitting on the various bedroom furniture around the room. “I’m afraid not. It looks like something is going on with Mr. Handscomb, but it isn’t infidelity.”

Kelly arched a brow. “Drugs? Gambling? Mob debts?” she inquired, and Gordon shook his head.

“No, Miss Kelly. It ... It looks like he’s been tapped by one of the city’s kindred.” He fished in the messenger satchel he had hanging against his hip, pulled out a manila envelope that had its flap held closed with a twist of string, and passed it over to her. Kelly took it from him and worked the string as he continued.

“As you know, Miss Kelly, he’s an investment banker with First Milwaukee Savings and Loan.” Kelly nodded that she did know as she pulled the small sheaf of high-gloss photos from the envelope and began to flip through them. The somewhat shaggy lank of Geoff Handscomb, a man Kelly had always thought didn’t quite live up to the potential Julie had, was featured in conspiratorial conversation with another man she recognized but couldn’t immediately place. Who was that, she wondered as she listened to Gordon.

“I did a little digging into his work. He was recently put in charge of managing the Teacher’s Union pension fund. It’s not on par with the Police Union’s pension fund, but it’s nothing to sneeze at, either. The problem is it looks like he’s skimming from it and funneling it to several offshore accounts. I lost track of the money from there; it went down into a Cayman account and then vanished.”

Kelly flipped through the photos again and studied both of the men featured. The meeting was taking place just inside

the mouth of an alley. She recognized the street, she thought. It would be a few blocks from First Milwaukee, she was sure. Not the kind of neighborhood where many people bothered to look into alleys as they traveled through. Most would be too involved in their own business, or selves, to bother to notice. That whisper of familiarity continued to nag at her as she studied the man Geoff was meeting. Her memory spun, like wheels on ice, and failed to catch.

“Alright,” Kelly said without looking up from the pictures. “So, what makes you think it’s a kindred?”

“He, ah,” Gordon replied in a tone of discomfort, and hesitated until Kelly lifted her gaze to his and then he hastened to continue. “He got a real strange look on his face after meeting the man in those pictures and went straight back to the bank to jump on his computer. I followed him in and, ah, he completely ignored one of his coworkers when she came to stick her head into his office. He just kept working like she wasn’t talking to him.”

“Very good, Gordon,” Kelly praised absently as she let her gaze sink back to the photos. That was indeed a sign of kindred interference, she reasoned. Dominate, probably. Some kind of command implanted in his mind that he would be compelled to fulfill once it was triggered. Undoubtedly by the man in the pictures. That narrowed... Suddenly her mind caught traction and her memory kicked forward as it lurched back into motion.

It had been at the Elysium hosted by Tommy Johns, his effort to reclaim his reputation after the disaster of a jazz concert. Jonas Myabb had been there; they’d spoken. She’d only just recently vetted him for Gory. As he’d been leaving, the man in these photos had been the one to collect his coat and settle it around his shoulders. The deferential posture

and expression had been unmistakable; this was a man enslaved to Myabb's blood. She cursed under her breath.

"Miss Kelly?" Gordon inquired nervously at her swearing. She waved aside his concern and slipped the pictures back into the envelope.

"No, it's nothing, Gordon. You did very well. But it's obvious this is a bit above the level of danger I'm willing to put you in. I'd like you to go back to your regular duties now, please. I'll take care of it from here." He looked like he wanted to argue, and Dorst looked like he had something to say about her willingness to take on dangers she didn't want her mortal servants facing, but neither said anything. "Alright you two, let me get dressed. Dorst, thanks for watching me today. Sleep well, alright?"

The two left her room and she indulged in another moment of relaxation before she forced herself up and into motion. Kelly plucked hangers from the racks and held them against herself as she gazed into the full-length mirror on the back of the closet door. She realized she was sliding back into the habit of considering how Stefan would view her in the clothes, and with a scowl snatched a last hanger free to haul out and hang over the edge of the bed. It held a severe slacks and blouse combo that would bore Stefan to death. As she buttoned the blouse and tightened the simple leather belt she felt like a traitor but swallowed it fiercely.

A page to Eric brought the car around within half an hour, and he greeted her simply as he held the Town Car's door for her entry. She returned the greeting in kind and directed him to M.E.C.C.A., Milwaukee Exposition and Convention Center Arena, when he'd retaken the wheel.

"Party tonight?" he inquired as he navigated the smooth-riding car into the streets. She shook her head as she

watched the city roll past outside the windows; there had been another heavy snowfall during the day, it seemed.

“Not tonight,” Kelly answered. “But I need to get a hold of Myabb. He’s usually at some function or another there. Seems like a good place to start.” Eric nodded and the ride passed in silence until he tuned into WBIT to pick up the beginning of Barth’s show, even though it was still an hour off.

Kelly was glad for the distraction, and she hummed along to the songs in order to keep from wondering where Stefan was, what he was doing, what he was wearing. To keep herself from ordering Eric to turn around and return her to her haven so that she could change into something brighter and more revealing, as Stefan preferred her to wear. She smoothed the buttons of her blouse as if it were a rosary as she let herself go into the music. Eric’s tapping fingers on the steering wheel were only slightly off tempo and she let him continue.

March 16, 1999. 11:01 PM.

As the massive complex of MECCA appeared outside the tint of the windows, she directed The Driver, as Eric was known, to keep the car close. She didn’t expect to have to make a break for it, but it somehow soothed her to know she could, at a moment’s notice, step back outside and be on her way to Stefan’s side. Eric pulled up to the curb a few hundred feet away and killed the engine as she headed inside. It didn’t take her long to find the small gathering of monsters that murmured quietly as they moved from one rather uninspired sculpture to the next at the private showing. The security at the door recognized her name, and she was allowed entry with a minimum of fuss; it seemed

almost as if they'd been prepared for her unexpected arrival. Word must have gotten around about her crashing that art showing before she'd left for Chicago.

As she suspected, Myabb was in the crowd. The narrow nose and coif of dark hair was unmistakable, even as she glimpsed it only briefly from the corner of her eye. Edie intercepted her before she could make her way across the small space to the man. The harpy of Milwaukee swept into her path to the swish of silk skirts and sparkle of diamonds. "Good *God*, Kelly," Edie whispered in scandalized tones. "What are *you* doing here? Showing up at this soiree will practically ruin your reputation."

"Good evening, Edie," Kelly replied and glanced around the room again. "What do you mean? How could any event I attended alongside your illustrious self ruin my reputation?"

Edie's answering smile was all plastic gratitude for the compliment. "Just look around you, dear," she said in that same scandalized whisper. "This art is absolutely *atrocious*. I think you did a terrible thing encouraging Tommy by hanging his painting at City Hall. He suddenly thinks his fumbling efforts at creativity are worthy of public display. I mean, really, would you just look at the size of the cock on that one?"

Kelly followed Edie's subtle gesture to see the indicated sculpture. It was a nearly-perfect recreation of David, except the penis was as large as a third leg, and it wrapped around the feet of the sculpture like a snake, or a vine. It confused her to see, and she blinked as she tried to think of why Tommy would have done such a thing. He could have, at least, changed the base sculpture. "Oh dear," she said to Edie at last.

“Just *terrible*,” Edie agreed solemnly. “I think he would like us to believe it’s a self-portrait.” She snickered and Kelly favored her with a smile.

“What an unfortunate deformity to have,” Kelly replied dryly. “And an unfortunate choice to attempt to showcase it.” Edie gave a small, acidic laugh.

“Oh yes, that’s right,” Edie said lightly. “I seem to recall hearing something about your preferences being ... non-traditional.”

“Something like that,” Kelly answered absently. She tracked Myabb with her eyes as he broke off his conversation and moved across the room to join in with Tommy’s small group. “Truthfully, I’m not here for the art. I didn’t even realize Tommy would be having a showing tonight.”

“I envy you, dear,” Edie said. “I’d have given up a child to be ignorant of tonight’s little do. Still, professional obligations being what they are...” She trailed off and Kelly gave her a sympathetic nod. A fourth figure joined with Tommy and company, and Edie watched with Kelly as she drew a check book from her clutch. “Oh no,” Edie breathed. “It looks like he’s sold a piece. We’re going to be putting up with these monstrosities for *decades* now.” Kelly snorted her amusement and Edie gave her a grin. “Ah, but you’re clearly here on business, and I should stop being a pest. Maybe I can go ensure that no one else does anything to encourage Tommy to do one of these again.”

“Good luck,” Kelly wished her, and meant it. Even the pieces that showed a glimmer of talent showed absolutely no originality, that she could see. Nor was there, to her eye, any kind of theme to the collection. Except, perhaps, for Tommy’s penchant for oversized phalluses on the sculptures. Kelly wondered briefly if he was trying to tell

them something as she made her way toward the knot of kindred surrounding Tommy.

“All the old masters were men, because it was a patriarchal artist’s society,” Tommy was explaining as she approached his orbit. She felt the subtle inclination to attend him and forced it aside. His Presence seemed a weak and inconsequential thing beside the lower-case-p presence of Stefan. “So obviously all their art was male-centric. They might as well have painted or sculpted with their cocks. But as our progressive city, with an illustrious and talented Prince at the helm, has shown, women are to be—Oh, hello, Kelly. I didn’t realize you’d be in attendance this evening.”

“I’m afraid my visit will be fleeting, Tommy,” Kelly demurred politely. “I just need to steal Jonas away for a few minutes, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Won’t you stay and tell us all what you think of the show?” Tommy pleaded just the right side of politely. She fought off the impulse to acquiesce. He was lucky this was his Elysium, throwing around disciplines as he was. “I’m sure everyone is eager to hear what you think of my sculpting since you’ve previously taken a shine to my painting.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to bore them with my uneducated opinions, Tommy. I’m afraid I’m a bit pressed for time this evening and couldn’t possibly devote the necessary attention to form a proper opinion. Some other time, perhaps,” she finished, and turned her attention to Jonas. “Jonas? Might I bend your ear a moment?”

Presence or no, Myabb seemed glad for the excuse to extricate himself. “Excuse me, Tommy. I’d hate to deny our Seneschal anything she should require.”

“I understand completely,” Tommy replied lightly. “I’m certain whatever she has to say to you must be important

for her to make such an unannounced, and brief, appearance tonight.” With a smile that set Kelly’s teeth on edge he said to her, “However I truly would like to hear your views on male-domination in the artistic world. I would think your experiences in the field of law—another traditionally male-dominated profession—would lend your opinions some extra weight and value.”

Kelly forced herself to return a polite half-smile. “It is my experience,” she said as she gathered Jonas by the elbow in a gentle grip, “that all fields are male-dominated, once men get it into their heads that they can do a thing.” She left to a small smattering of polite chuckles, and Jonas leaning in to whisper to her.

“Thank you,” he breathed. And Kelly shot him a raised eyebrow as they departed the small gallery space. “For getting me out of there,” he answered her unspoken question.

“Well,” she replied. “Don’t thank me yet; I do really only need to speak with you for a moment.”

Myabb seemed disappointed but waved in a dismissive gesture. “Whatever. A few minutes not having to stare at that giant co—” He cut off with a flash of embarrassment as he realized what he’d been about to say.

“I’m a big girl,” Kelly said drily, and allowed a touch of her irritation at the kid gloves to seep into her tone. “I’ve heard the word cock before, Jonas, and even seen a few more properly proportioned ones in my time.”

“Right, sorry,” he said, and she got the distinct impression he would have blushed if he could have. “What’d you need?”

“I’ve heard you have some interest in the Teacher’s Union pension fund,” Kelly answered. Any trace of chagrin left his

expression in exchange for surprise.

“How did you...?” he began, but she cut him off with a mild gesture.

“Don’t worry about it, Jonas,” she said. “I hear things. Your secret is safe with me, for now. But I want to know what you’re up to there, and what your exit strategy is.”

“Well, Gory was trying to put together some capital for a project he was thinking of, some sportsman’s show of some kind, and I had had my eye on the Teacher’s Union for a few months. I knew they were shopping for a new bank to handle their investments. They took a bath a few years ago and are still struggling to recover, and the state’s not helping.” He shrugged. “I figured when I was done bleeding it off, I’d drop ten grand in the guy’s account and call the SEC.”

Kelly struggled to control her wince and did so by effort of will alone. It would be one thing if Geoff was embezzling of his own free will, but this was altogether different. It was questionable he would even be able to answer the accusations Julie would undoubtedly throw at him if Kelly told her what he was up to. She pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Look, Jonas,” she said when she had control of her voice again. (*Stefan would be proud.*) “I’d like you to wrap things up a little less ... messily. For Handscomb. Find something else to use him for and cover your tracks some other way. I’d count it a personal favor, of course.”

“Geez, Kelly,” Jonas said, and lifted a hand to the back of his neck. “It’s a bit late in the game to try that now. Pretty risky.” She knew he wasn’t just trying to drive up the value of the favor; he’d have to find some way to go back and change digital transaction records and perhaps pull some

strings from on high to keep the IRS and SEC uninvolved. “I have every confidence in you,” Kelly assured him. She was almost able to be honest in doing so. “I’m sure you will find him a useful pawn in the future, as well. More than likely well worth the expense and effort of keeping his nose as clean as yours.”

Jonas looked doubtful, and she considered applying her own Presence to him. He seemed to fall under the sway of Tommy’s easily enough. She opted out. “Look, Jonas. What’s Gory need for his show? Maybe you can just take a pass on the plan entirely.”

“Two million, give or take,” Jonas said after a moment of contemplation. “He’s trying to draw in the bigger companies, so he wants me to put all the bells and whistles on it.” Kelly cursed silently. That was not an easy sum to arrange.

“Alright,” Kelly replied. “Give me a week to make some calls and see what I can do and talk to Gory as well.” Jonas stiffened at that, and she held up a hand to forestall the retort that seemed soon to follow the deepening of his scowl. “Not to yank your lead or go above your head, Jonas. I just want to see what he’s looking for in detail and see if I can make arrangements to help you achieve it in a different way.” He relaxed, a little, and she continued. “For the moment put a stop to the visits from your man to Handscomb, please. They’re not as discrete as you thought, or I wouldn’t have heard about them. Let the heat die down a bit; it’ll be better for everyone.”

Jonas did not look pleased, but he grudgingly admitted the truth of her statement and agreed to stop drawing from the fund for a time. The two having reached a temporary agreement, they parted ways—Jonas just a few notches shy

of genial as his mood had soured—with Kelly heading back to the street. A glance over her shoulder showed her that Jonas was staring at the closed doors of the gallery with something akin to quiet dread in his features, but then she was around a corner. A minute later she was emerging into the light flurry of snowfall that had begun while she was inside. The tail lights of the car bloomed to life as she emerged, and she headed for them with a quick step.

“Everything turn out alright?” Eric inquired as he opened the door for her. She smiled a thin smile of thanks as she stepped into the car.

“More or less,” Kelly replied. The door closed and she waited for him to take his seat behind the wheel before she added, “If anyone ever offers to sell you a Tommy Johns original, decline.”

“What?” he asked, confusion clear in the gaze he turned into the rear-view mirror at her.

Kelly shook her head. “Don’t worry about it; I don’t think you get many offers from art dealers anyways.”

“Not unless you count dealerships as galleries,” he agreed, and the car slid away from the curb. Kelly let the engine and the hum of tires on pavement, and the occasional thump of windshield wipers, be the only sound in the car as they headed for her haven.

Kelly struggled with how to handle the Julie side of the situation. She was toying with Geoff ending up tied to Jonas in the long term, thereby drawing her one-time-friend deeper toward the danger and destruction that were the kindred. On the other hand, she couldn’t afford to weaken Gory, nor by extension, Myabb. Kelly pinched the bridge of her nose again against the headache forming behind her eyes and allowed herself to be distracted by the memory of

Stefan promising her that all would be well now that he was awake.

Perhaps, she considered, it was time for Julie to move on from Geoff. Kelly *knew* she wanted to be married, and have children, someday, and her time for that was shortening by the year. Not the marrying kind, Julie had said the other night. Probably not the fathering kind, either, she reasoned. It would hurt Julie, at first, but like tearing off a Band-Aid it was probably better to just have it done with. Particularly if Jonas kept up his end and Geoff proved to be worth keeping on-hand for various tasks. That would almost certainly destroy the relationship, albeit in a slower and more agonizing way, and one which would imperil Julie herself. Kelly sighed to herself, thanked Eric for the ride, and kicked the snow from her shoes as she entered her building's foyer.

She had almost decided to arrange for Julie to find a new beau by the time she re-entered her condo and sneaked into her office past Dorst's snoring form on the couch. Would any relationship begun by her interference truly be worthwhile, though? She felt sure that she could only poison the ground water of such a relationship, just by her proximity to it. Like she was radioactive, and she bled the death of love into all those around her. Or at least the perversion of it. She had to risk it, she decided.

March 18, 1999. 8:52 PM.

"Hey, Julie," Kelly greeted with more brightness than she felt. In the back of her mind, over the nights since she had learned of Geoff's true reason for the strange behavior, the consideration of how to handle Julie with regards to it had been percolating until only the bitter juice of acceptance

was left. “We should get together for a drink tonight. I’ve got an hour or so free,” she suggested after Julie’s return greeting, in which she could hear the wariness. Julie was afraid of what Kelly had to say, and though she didn’t know it Kelly knew she had reason to be.

“Yeah, sure, Kelly. You still practically famous at Mitch’s?”

Kelly gave a snort, though her denials rang hollow even in her own ears. They agreed to meet at the small bar and Kelly hung up the phone to lean back in her desk chair. Tonight was going to be difficult. Julie was going to fight her on the only path forward for all three of them that Kelly had managed to formulate. At least, she considered, as she pushed herself up out of her chair and started for her closet, Stefan had already tainted the purity of her sanctuary at Mitch’s. How much could a simple betrayal of a decade-long friendship stain her comfort in the place beside the increasingly-frequent public rape that Stefan inflicted on her there? Unlike Julie, Kelly felt sure she would barely feel the sting of it. It was for the best, she reasoned as she tugged on her tight blue jeans and pulled the turtleneck sweater down. Bad enough that Julie still kept ties to Kelly; if Geoff’s strings were being tugged by Jonas, it would only expose the woman to greater danger. Just like pulling a Band Aid, she thought as she snatched up the keys and headed for the door.

The drive to Mitch’s passed in a blur, and the silence of the car was broken only by the purr of its engine and the echoing cycle of rationalization that Kelly inundated herself with. Mitch’s place was busy, though perhaps not quite so busy as it had begun to be on Tuesdays when she sang. Still, it was a Friday night, and bars did a brisk business on Fridays. Thanks to her, Mitch’s was becoming one of those to prosper in the spreading wasteland of poverty that was

seeping into the bones of the city. She found a parking space near the back of the lot, one of the last available in the small lot, and spotted Julie's Cobalt parked closer to the street. Afraid of what Kelly had to say or not, it seemed the woman was intent on having her answers. Kelly killed the engine and stepped out into the moderate snowfall that bore the sounds of the city to the ground and gave the domain a hushed, expectant feeling. The sound of her boots in the snow was like tiny bones breaking underfoot and she shuddered at the memories it summoned. She plastered a friendly smile on her face and tugged open the door.

"Kelly!" was the pleased, multi-voiced greeting from the crowd as she entered. She lifted a hand in response to those who recognized her and swallowed the guilt she felt at being welcomed so warmly by those who could, at any time, be her prey. She scanned the crowd and saw Julie looking around from where she was talking to Mitch at the bar. Kelly forced her smile to brighten another notch as she made eye contact and made a beckoning gesture. A glance at her table showed it occupied, but a little push with her Presence and a hundred-dollar bill slipped over to cover the small group's bar tab cleared it out before Julie wound her way over.

"Bit pricey for a table, isn't it?" Julie asked with wry amusement as she approached. Kelly embraced her briefly and chuckled into her ear as she did.

"I can afford it," Kelly said as they parted, and she gestured for Julie to take a seat. She took one herself and scooted it into the table. "I usually only come on Tuesdays for the karaoke, and no one uses my table on Tuesdays. I don't mind covering a bar tab to have my favorite spot in the place." And, she added silently, the only seat in the house

where she could see who was coming in before they could see her.

“I’ll have to remember that next time I need a little extra spending cash,” Julie answered with a smirk as she took her seat. Kelly favored the small jape with a smile. Anne, Mitch’s part-time weekend waitress, came by and after a brief chat took Kelly’s order for a beer and disappeared. Julie sipped from the brown bottle in her own hands and looked around the room. The awkward silence between them stretched into a half dozen seconds and Kelly watched her struggle against the urge to ask after Geoff. She silently pleaded with Julie to let it drop, to forget the weirdness and to just take what comfort she could in Geoff’s fading presence in her life. Kelly almost sighed when she saw Julie lose her internal struggle and heard her ask, “So what’d Gordon find? Is it another woman?”

Kelly didn’t answer at once and instead turned to thank Anne with a small, tight smile as the mortal delivered the beer. Once the woman was several paces away Kelly feigned a sip of the drink, as if to give her friend time to change her mind, to ask after Kelly’s work, to start a conversation about the state of American politics, anything but what she was so intent on. Kelly was disappointed by the time she lowered the bottle. “No,” she answered at last. “He’s mixed up with some dangerous people, but not in that way.” The relief in Julie’s face made Kelly’s cold heart ache.

“That’s great news!” Julie blurted, but her expression melted into one of confusion when Kelly shook her head. “What? I can deal with anything as long as he’s not cheating.”

“I know you think so, Julie, but not this time. Not these people.” Julie’s confusion started to sizzle with an

underlying heat of anger at Kelly's words. "Trust me, Julie. Please. You ... You can't save a junkie from himself. You'll just get dragged down with him if you try."

Kelly reached across the table to try to lay her hand on Julie's, but the woman jerked back in her chair and tugged her hand out of reach. "No, you're wrong, Kelly. Geoff wouldn't get mixed up with drugs. He's no junkie." Her voice was rising in volume, competing with the Led Zeppelin being piped in through the stereo. Kelly's enhanced senses could pick out the glittering rime of liquid along the lids of Julie's eyes and she withdrew her hand slowly to wrap around her beer again.

"I know it's hard to hear, Julie," Kelly continued, and tried to connect with the power in her blood that would help her soothe the woman but felt herself miss the particular tingle of evocation. "For what it's worth, I really don't think he had a lot of choice in the matter."

"What, like he was just born bad? Is that what you're saying? Some liberal, hippy, it's all his parents' fault kind of shit?" Kelly swallowed the spark of ire that rose as Julie spat the words at her from across the table. She could practically feel the attention of the bar on her table.

"Julie," Kelly said, a few degrees more coldly than she would have preferred. "You know me better than that." Or, at least you used to, Kelly added silently. "I'm telling you that he's a junkie, now, and I believe you when you say it would be against his will. I'm on your side, okay? Try to remember that."

The mortal's mouth opened as the scowl deepened and one of the tears slipped out to streak down Julie's cheek and puddle at the line of her chin. "No..." she began, but the heat and tension drained out of her voice and posture in

the next moment and she gave a single, low sob. "There's rehab places. I can take him to one of those. Meetings. Something," she essayed desperately. The desperation shone in her gaze as she stared at Kelly, pleading with her to say it was so. Kelly's heart broke as she shook her head and lowered her eyes.

"Not from this, Julie. These people ... They wouldn't let him go now even if he could be free. I'm sorry. I wish it could have been different," she finished, and it sounded lame and weak even to her own ears.

Julie sniffled and Kelly squeezed her eyes closed against the confused pain in the single, plaintively delivered, "Why?"

"Sometimes good people get caught up in bad things," Kelly offered as she looked up, forced herself to confront the face of consequence. This was what she inflicted on the mortals she associated with, too. She deserved to see it. "It'll be okay, Julie, but you ... You have to break it off with him. It's for your own good."

Julie's sobs came quiet and fast, and she buried her head in her arms on the table. Kelly reached out to rest a hand on her shoulder and hesitated a beat before she finally made contact. "You'll be okay," Kelly heard herself say. "I know it sucks right now but it will be better, soon. You'll be alright." Julie made no response and continued to weep quietly into her shirt. Kelly gave her the time she needed, and let her hand linger on the woman's shoulder. She deserved to have this inflicted on her, but Julie didn't. The minutes slipped past, and Kelly diverted Anne's approach to check on them with a warning glance.

Finally, Julie sniffled and lifted her head to swipe at the streaks of mascara that painted her cheeks with the ghost of her tears. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she said briskly, and Kelly

enfolded her free hand with her cold touch.

“No, Julie, you have nothing to be sorry for,” Kelly assured, and this time she managed to swathe the woman in her supernatural allure. What a vile thing, Kelly thought bitterly to herself, to take the woman’s heart from her and rape her all on the same night. “It’s not your fault; there’s nothing you could have done differently. Trust me, I’ve seen this kind of thing before. There really is no blame to be had for either you or Geoff, but you have to break it off anyways, Julie.”

“Who was it?” Julie demanded as her scowl began to reassert itself through the bleakness. Kelly had often loved her for her fierce courage and fiery anger—Kelly’s own methodical brand of the same was a fine compliment to Julie’s often impetuous furies—but she silently pleaded with her to let it go this time. It was a vain plea, she knew. “Who did this to him ... To us?”

“I...” Kelly began, and pulled her hand from Julie’s as she glanced away to answer. “I can’t tell you, Julie.”

“Oh, fuck your ethics,” Julie spat at her and leaned into the table. Her half-empty bottle rocked on the edge of tipping over with the force of the motion. “This is *me*, Kelly. You owe me.”

Kelly’s own scowl manifested as she turned back to the mortal. “Don’t, Julie,” Kelly warned. “You have no idea what you’re asking. This isn’t you asking me to write your next paper for Robinson’s class because you want to go to the frat party. You do *not* take chances with these people.”

“Just tell me who it is,” Julie demanded again. “I deserve that much. You can’t just walk in here and tell me to end it with him and not tell me why. You can’t do that!” She punctuated with a fist on the table that silenced the

conversation around them and forced Kelly to dart a hand out to stop the bottle from an unfortunate demise. Kelly met her seething stare for a moment until the babble of voices, though more hushed than a few seconds earlier, resumed to betray the drift of the patrons' attention.

"I can't do that, Julie," Kelly replied evenly. "These people are powerful, and the less you know the safer you'll be." Julie's mouth shot open, but Kelly forestalled her with a look and a raised hand. "I would if I could, Julie. I *do* owe you, but this wouldn't be helping you. It would only make it worse if you understood what was going on. Even just telling you what I have, I've put you in more danger than I'm comfortable with. I need you to trust me. You *can* trust me," she lied, and it tasted like compost in her mouth.

Whether it was Kelly's manipulative power at work, or Julie's sense finally winning out over her reactionary fighter's response, Kelly wasn't sure, but she saw the heat draining from Julie's eyes again. "I know I can," Julie all but moaned, at last. Another glimmer of tears threatened at the corners of her eyes as she cried, "God, what am I going to say to him?" Kelly could only shake her head. "What am I going to *do*?" Julie wept and it forced Kelly's eyes to the table.

"I don't know, Julie," she said. "I just know you'll be better off. I really wish I could have told you something different. I found out a couple of ni-days ago, but I've been wracking my brain trying to come up with some other way. There isn't one, I'm sorry."

But there was, wasn't there, she thought. She had the Prince's blessing; she could sire. Would it be so bad, to have Julie with her for eternity? She had been without someone like Julie, someone she could just relax around and who

really understood her, for a long time. She remembered the nights spent in their dorm, and later the flat off campus they'd gotten together. Just talking about hopes, and dreams, about the myriad injustices in the world and how they would, in their own way, bring an end to them all. Julie was a fighter; she would survive the transition, maybe be stronger for it. She might even like the power of it. Probably would, if Kelly knew her at all and she liked to think she did even after all this time under the night. Then, maybe, even Stefan's presence might be more tolerable.

Or, even if she didn't drag her friend into the night with her, she could simply make her forget Geoff entirely. Kelly would suffer every minute of Julie's enforced love and devotion, but perhaps she deserved that, too. Then, though, she would be no different from Stefan. Was she anyways?

"I should go," Julie said, and brought Kelly out of her spiral of self-recrimination. Julie pulled her hand out from under Kelly's abruptly.

"Let me give you a ride. You shouldn't drive upset."

"No," Julie said bleakly as she rose. Kelly stood with her. "I just want to drive around for a bit before I go home. Try to get my head on straight." Kelly nodded her understanding.

"If you need anything..." Kelly said, but she couldn't give Julie the one thing the mortal wanted: her life back. Julie's tight smile of thanks in return told her the very same thought was running through Julie's mind, as well. Kelly watched her go and flagellated herself by memorizing every line and hitch of her shoulders, and by drinking in the oozing misery in the shades of her aura. Kelly deserved Stefan.

March 21, 1999. 9:21 PM.

The press of responsibility and the handling of the myriad small crises that comprised her nights drove the immediacy of her misery under a comforting blanket of distraction. Wendy's anger at Kelly's admission of intimacy with Stefan, simmering under the multitude of other shades that had thrashed and bucked in her aura and tainted what should have been a joyous reunion—or, at least, a fulfilling one for Kelly—took center stage in her mind. Wendy's absence had been like the itch of a scab in the back of her mind, and she had so wanted (*needed*) it to be scratched. But it had not been. Instead, it had been ripped off in a wrenching tug as she'd made admission after admission and watched the wound well and then weep with the blood of the hurts. Stefan had taken Wendy from her, too, now. Or, at least, begun the process. Wendy didn't understand that it was rape every bit as much as if she'd been attacked in an alley in the city. It didn't matter that she wanted (*needed*) Stefan, or the things he made her do; the wanting (*needing*) in the first place was the violation. Kelly more than half suspected that Wendy *couldn't* let herself understand, lest she recognize the shades of the same compulsions in how she looked at Kelly.

The nights of ignorance came to a jangling halt as Kelly was just settling down behind her desk to her night's work. She glanced at her watch and saw it was just shy of half past nine. Her fingers closed around the receiver and she lifted it to her ear absently as her free hand reached to flick on the electric glow of her monitor. "Kelly Patterson speaking," she answered as the hard disk began to chug and clatter its way to life.

“Kelly!” Julie practically blurted into the phone and Kelly winced silently and belatedly pulled the phone from her ear. “Kelly, I have great news! It’s going to be okay! It’s alright now, he ... he told me everything. I understand, and we are going to be able to get through this. Isn’t that great?”

Kelly went very cold and still inside and out, and she was disgusted to realize the first thought to enter her mind was where to dispose of Julie’s body, and that the second was that she was running out of places to dump corpses. A full two seconds later she found her voice and very quietly asked, “What do you mean, Julie?” Immediately, she added, “No, don’t say anything on the phone. I’m coming to pick you up.”

“What?” Julie asked, confused and with a prick of hurt at Kelly’s failure to rejoice along with her bleeding through. “No, it’s okay, Kelly. He told me everything and I’m okay with it. I don’t have to break up with him. He told me about the man, and how it’s just like a second job. He’s fine.”

“Julie,” Kelly said in a tone that brooked no argument; particularly over the last six months, she’d mastered a level of stubbornness that could match or exceed Julie’s. “I’m coming to pick you up. I’ll be there in ten minutes. Don’t go anywhere, don’t call anyone. Just be ready when I get there.”

Julie started to protest but Kelly cut it off by hanging up the phone. Her chair nearly overturned as the force of her standing overwhelmed the casters’ ability to navigate the carpet of her office.

“Dorst!” she called sharply as she strode forcefully for the door. The man stuck his head out around the kitchen doorway obediently and their gazes met along the hall. He rushed to swallow his mouthful of cereal and let the spoon

slop back into the bowl he was holding under his chin.

“Yes, Kelly?” he inquired eagerly. She barely took note of his slavish devotion; her mind was running through too many scenarios that churned her stomach far more.

“Get your coat,” she ordered as she swept past him into her room. “We’re going out.” She could hear Dorst stuff a few more quick mouthfuls of cereal into his face as he hurried to acquiesce. Kelly swept her shoulder holster from the back of her vanity chair and forced herself to watch in the mirror as she strapped it into place across her chest and against her ribs. She diverted her gaze only for a moment as she drew the pistol and pulled back the slide to ensure the chamber was clear and a round loaded and ready. She left the safety off as she slid it back into the holster; she felt like the gun as she met her own stare, loaded and ready to fulfill the purpose of death. With a disgusted twist of her lips she turned away from the mirror, snatched her coat from the back of the chair, and stalked for the keys and the front door.

She must have still been carrying the expression when she met Dorst just outside her bedroom door in his long, sable trench coat that bulged under the arm where his own gun sat, because he drew up short and then back from her. She scowled and shook her head, wordlessly beckoning for him to follow as she snatched the keys from the table and left in a rush.

The elevator seemed to flow like sap in the dead of winter, or an elder’s ancient blood. The car beeped its welcome as she indicated her arrival with the button on the key fob, and then they were roaring across the city at the limits of Kelly’s ability to easily maneuver. Dorst was grim-faced, she saw when she glanced to the side mirror outside his

window, but determined. He could see the hunter in Kelly, tonight, and it awoke the same in him even if he wasn't aware of it. Kelly spun the wheel, popped the handbrake, and slid 180 degrees on the snowy streets to pull up at the curb on the far side of the road. She came to a stop with Dorst's door closest to the abandoned storefront.

"Go inside, there's a backroom. Wait there, be quiet," she ordered, and with a nod of acknowledgement he hurried to obey. Kelly was giving the car the fuel it craved before his hand was fully clear of the door. The backend kicked out a few degrees before the wide, hot tires burned through the ice to find pavement and traction, and then she was off again.

A glance at her watch as she pulled up to Julie's brownstone showed her she'd missed her promise by three minutes. Close enough, she hoped, and left the car running and the door open as she jogged for the front door. A glance up and down the street showed lights in some of the neighborhood houses, signs of life that would be curious enough at the sound and presence of the sports car let alone at any kind of confrontation.

Her knuckles met the cold wood briskly in a *rap-rap-rap* full of urgency and impatience. Kelly repeated it within seconds, and earned an impatient, "I'm coming, I'm coming, Jesus" from Julie. Kelly ignored her protestations and knocked a third time. "Fuck, Kelly, hang on," Julie said, just behind the door as the latch slid on the lock and a chain rattled. "Just give me a second, I don't know what the hell is wrong with you ton—" She got no further as she opened the door and Kelly practically lunged at her and snagged a hold of her elbow.

"Come on," Kelly demanded firmly, and backed the

exhortation with a wave of her supernatural allure. "Come with me right now, Julie. I'm trying to save your life."

Julie blinked, her gaze glazing just a little with the abrupt, overwhelming sensation of a desire to trust Kelly, to do what she wanted. To earn her approval. "What are you...?" she began again, but Kelly was already dragging her through the door, and she cut off with an *urk*.

"For once in your goddamned life," Kelly spat at her as she met resistance and Julie dug her heels in. She spun and glowered, "Would you just not *fight*? Julie, I will explain as much as I can, but not here, not now. It isn't safe." As soon as she told Kelly herself to stop fighting, she knew, but Kelly had an edge in her grip on the woman's heart.

"Julie?" Geoff called from somewhere inside and above the front door. Kelly could hear his approaching footsteps clearly, though Julie could only hear his inquisitive call. The scowling woman's expression smoothed into uncertainty as she glanced between Kelly and the closed front door.

"Julie, please," Kelly said more quietly. "Come with me." When Geoff called again, clearly enough that Kelly judged him at the top of the stairs that lead down to the front door, Julie bit her lip and glanced down at Kelly's hand on her elbow. The resistance ended and Julie hurried along to the car with Kelly. The passenger door closed and Kelly jogged around the wide nose of the car for her own open door. Geoff appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against the light from within as she was sliding in behind the wheel.

"Julie!" he called, the exclamation cut in half by the *whumpf* of the driver's side door. Then the engine was roaring with eager power and they were skimming away from the figure charging into the street behind them. He was no match for the car's engine and soon they were away.

“What the *hell* is going on, Kelly?” Julie demanded. “What is this? This is crazy!”

Kelly didn't answer at once, having already to split her attention between the somewhat dangerous driving and watching for a tail. “Fucking talk to me!” Julie shouted, but Kelly let several more seconds of empty road stretch out behind her before she did.

“What, exactly, did Geoff tell you?” Kelly demanded. When Julie started to insist on answers first, Kelly almost connected with the piece of her power that would wipe away any barriers to the answers she wanted. But Stefan's image flashed in her mind, and she saw Dorst's tear-streaked face as it lit with more love for her than he had for himself, and she balked at inflicting that on Julie. Instead, she cut the mortal off with a shout.

“No! No,” she repeated more quietly when Julie abruptly cut off. “Julie, this is more important than you know. Tell me *exactly* what Geoff told you, right now. There is a good chance that if you don't, neither one of you will live to see tomorrow.”

Julie gaped and from the corner of her eye Kelly saw that she had finally gotten through to the mortal. The fight bled out of her completely and when Julie spoke her voice was quiet and scared. “He told me about the man he'd met, who explained a plan to make a lot of money. I mean, I know it wasn't on the up and up, but he was only going to be skimming from the bank and those bastards deserve it.” Kelly didn't argue, but instead resumed her watch in the rearview. “And I know what you were saying about ... about drugs wasn't really true. Geoff explained to me about the deliveries.”

Kelly cut her glance to her friend but was drawn back to the

mirror as a set of lights bloomed in the reflection and cut a glowing line across her eyes. “Deliveries?” Kelly inquired when she saw the sedate pace of the car behind and how it turned off shortly after coming into sight.

“Right,” Julie said. “The vials. From his, ah, supervisor he said he was like. Kevin.” Jonas’s ghoul, Kelly recognized. “I mean, it kind of grosses me out, the blood and everything. But Geoff says it’s not like being high, he says it’s great and he just feels better. He even offered to get me some, and he wouldn’t do that if it wasn’t safe.”

Kelly pulled up outside the storefront, and Julie looked at it in confusion. “What are we doing here, Kelly? What’s so important?”

“Get out of the car, Julie,” Kelly said stiffly. “I need to show you something inside.”

“Look, Kelly,” Julie said, and Kelly’s hands tightened on the wheel to the sound of creaking leather as the mortal didn’t budge from her seat. “I know you don’t like this, I can tell you feel strongly about it, but it’s okay. I can just ... just take the vials too, and then I’ll be okay, right? You said they’re only dangerous if you know about them or are trying to get off the stuff. Not if you’re on it.”

“Julie, I need you to get out of the car, and go inside. Please. Everything will be clear if you just go inside.” She lied so easily to those closest to her, these nights. She could scour herself down to the bone and she would never be free of the coating of slime she felt on herself.

“Fine,” Julie said, a spark of her fire returning. The door slammed hard enough to rock the car on its suspension and Kelly jogged to catch up with her around the heated hood. Kelly took advantage of Julie’s angry focus to draw her Glock. She kept it tucked behind her hip, held low and

concealed. The two of them entered through the door, and Julie stepped backward as she turned to look around the mostly empty space. Her arms came up and she demanded, “Well? Where’s the earth-shattering revelation, Kelly?”

Kelly stopped a few feet inside the door, quarter turned away from Julie to keep the pistol out of sight. She met Julie’s challenging gaze and tried to rely on her instinctive, predator’s response to such challenge. It wouldn’t come; it was leashed too firmly by the twisting revulsion she felt trying to strangle her determination. She tried to summon the knowledge of what would happen if this breach of the Masquerade spread, to envision the fire and the sunlight that would come to her and all of the kindred. It was a grey and wavering image that came to mind and broke apart like smoke to escape her grip just as easily. She tried to hate Geoff for his loose lips, Jonas for his poor choices, Gory for the very ambitions she had planted in him, Stefan for making her this thing that had to kill to survive. None of it held for more than the moment it took to ring hollow and deflate like the thin bubble of rationalization it was.

At the heart of it all, the cold chord of truth rang. None of the whys or hows of where she stood mattered; it was going to be her finger on the trigger, and it had to be her finger on the trigger. This was the loyalty she had chosen. No matter how many people she enriched or set free of being ground to dust in the apathetic machinery of the (in)justice system, no matter how many cases she empowered Gibson to resolve for the betterment of people all over the city, she had chosen to protect first and foremost the monsters that festered in the bowels of the domain. When kindred were involved, there was only ever one solution. The same curse that preceded their enduring one was what they spread, and always to those they cared for most. No mortal could

survive with impunity in the presence of monsters. Though she felt like she had been drowning in the sea of conflicting, and slowly freezing, thoughts, Julie's heart had beat only a handful of times.

"I'm sorry, Julie," Kelly whispered, and her friend's consternation turned to confusion.

"Sorry for what?"

"You shouldn't have trusted me," Kelly said, and lifted the pistol so that its cyclopean gaze was level with the center of Julie's forehead. The storefront swam in crimson blurs and as Kelly tried to blink through them she felt her vitae run in cold rivulets down her cheeks. Julie's eyes widened as she stared at, without seeming to comprehend, what she was seeing in Kelly's hand.

"I wish..." Kelly began, but trailed off. There were too many words to fit into the end of one sentence, and not enough hours in the night to say them all.

"Look, Kelly," Julie said quickly as her hands went up to her shoulders. She spoke to Kelly, but at the pistol, as if trying to soothe a strange, growling dog. "You don't have to do this. I told you ... I'll just ... I'll take the vials too, right? And then ... Or I won't, and I won't say anything. You *know* I won't say anything."

"Why didn't you just leave him, Julie?" Kelly pleaded as she heard the first patter of her tears on the dusty concrete at her feet. Julie's eyes ticked down to them, then up to Kelly's face.

"You're bleeding..." she began, and then, "Jesus Christ, are you *crying*? What's wrong with your tears?" Even as Kelly pointed a gun at her, and cried blood, Julie made a half step forward in an instinctive gesture to comfort Kelly, and it twisted like a stake in Kelly's heart. She couldn't hold back

the small cry of pain but lifted the pistol half an inch to draw the mortal's attention back to it.

"Stay where you are, Julie," Kelly warned as she sniffled and swiped at her cheek with the fingers of her free hand. "I'm so sorry, but there's just...no...other..."

Kelly trailed off as an idea, a beacon of hope in the drowning bleakness of her emotion, blazed to life in her mind. There *was* another way. It would cost her, dearly, but more dearly than killing her best friend for reasons Julie would never understand? She berated herself for overlooking the solution before, for plunging the two of them into this nightmare because she had conditioned herself to acting alone, to relying only on herself. She barely had time to plunge herself into the recrimination when movement pulled her attention back to the room.

Julie had taken advantage of Kelly's distraction and the wild cry of her rush was just beginning to vibrate in her throat. "Julie! Wait!" Kelly cried desperately. Or tried to. The larger woman's shoulder slammed into her sternum and turned the cry into a grunt. Her finger squeezed the trigger reflexively and her heightened senses left her dazed in the unexpected flash and crack of the nine-millimeter. The two women went down in the dust in a tangle of limbs, and Julie struck her over and over in the cheek as she continued to scream and sob. Kelly's skull bounced off the floor as she tried to lift her head and speak through the blows, and the world spun. Then a shadow was rising behind Julie, a familiar, broad-shouldered and beer-bellied shadow that had an arm tipped in nickel-plated gleam.

"Dorst! No!" she managed and tried to pull Julie out of the way as the gleam rose behind her skull, to wrestle the stronger woman out of the path of death. She struggled

against Julie's grip as she tried to bring her pistol up to stop Dorst before the irrevocable and inevitable happened.

The gleam came down in a flash, but not the flash of a bullet given purpose. There was a wet crack as the butt of the pistol hit the back of Julie's skull and the scream trailed off into a fading groan. Julie collapsed on top of Kelly, and if she'd needed to breathe she would have found it difficult under the deadweight that rested fully on her chest. Dorst grunted as he hauled the unconscious woman off of Kelly and rolled her onto her back beside her in the settling dust.

Kelly allowed herself a second to bask in the glow of relief as her hearing finally ceased to ring and she heard the sedate breathing and heartbeat of her friend. She reached up to clasp Dorst's wrist when he offered his hand. The bruising and swelling in her face was mended by the time she was upright and her blood did its old, healing trick. "Thanks," she said genuinely. "I'm glad you were here."

"Me too," Dorst replied, but she could hear the note of uncertainty in his voice. He'd heard everything, of course.

Kelly reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out her phone. As she did, she instructed, "Tie her up, Dorst. But be gentle. She'll be going home tonight." She could feel the echo of relief in her own heart that she read in his expression as she assured that. She dialed from memory, and when the voice on the other end picked up she said, "Jonas, we've got a problem I'm going to need your help to clean up."

March 22, 1999. 1:03 AM.

Jonas emerged from the storefront and Kelly flicked away the half-finished cigarette. She stood from her lean against

the car. "It's done?" she asked as she stuffed her hands into the pockets of her jacket.

"Yeah, I took care of it. She's going to wake up tomorrow remembering Geoff having gone berserk and cracking her over the head with a lamp. She won't remember anything about what he told her. She's pretty strong-willed, but I'm almost positive I got through eventually." Kelly nodded her acknowledgement and tried not to consider the specifics of what getting through entailed.

"Thanks, Jonas. And Geoff?"

"Oh, I've already tied up that loose end. He, ah, he isn't going to be telling anyone anything anymore." Kelly nodded again, and he hesitated before adding, "Thanks for giving me the chance to clean up the mistake. Sorry again. I'm not sure how he was able to talk about me."

"He didn't," Kelly started, but was interrupted by Jonas's men carrying the snoring Julie between them as they brought her to the car waiting to take her back home. "He talked about your man, Kevin, and about your little deliveries." He winced at that, but Kelly shook her head. "Just be more careful in the future. We'll call it even since you helped me minimize the loss of life. This time."

Jonas nodded, bid her good evening, and started toward the car as well. Kelly drew him up short when she couldn't stop herself from inquiring, "And there won't be any permanent damage you said, right?" The look Jonas turned in her direction was both considering and considerate.

"No," he answered. "She'll be fine."

Kelly nodded once and dug in her jacket for the pack of cigarettes. Jonas finished the walk to the car and got into the back seat. She was pushing the filter of the smoke between her lips as it pulled away from the curb. She puffed

it alight as she turned to watch the tail lights disappear around the corner and then got into her car in the haze of her first exhale. Dorst turned to look at her from the passenger seat as the interior light flicked out.

“She was your friend?” he inquired softly.

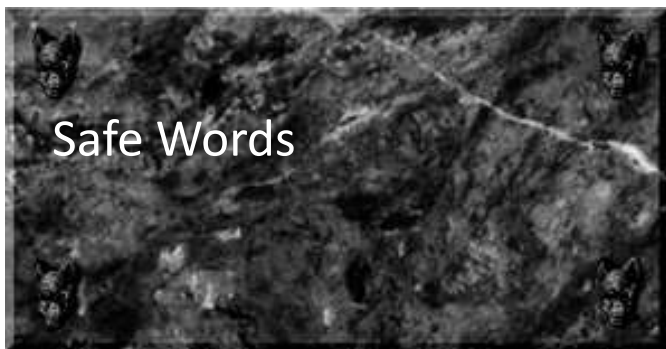
“Yes,” Kelly answered briskly and turned over the engine, which responded as eagerly as ever.

“You were going to kill her.” It wasn’t a question, nor did Kelly think he intended it to be one. He knew the eyes of a murderer better than most.

Kelly paused, cigarette bleeding blue smoke into the air between them where her hand rested on the shifter. “Yes,” she admitted coldly and gave the engine gas to guide it into the veins of the city.

“Good people, not perfect people,” Dorst said in the tone of a mantra, but one which came with haunting rather than calm.

Kelly didn’t answer as she headed for home. She was tired of lying to people she cared about, tonight.



June 1, 1999. 11:51 PM.

Cigarette smoke drifted blue-grey in whorls as strange to behold as the angles of dreams. They curled in the air and seemed, at times, to wrap around the lines of the woman lying asleep on the bed to the woman who sat across the room watching her. The smoke moved, shaped only in the most distantly related way, by the slow, easy breaths of the woman in the bed. The woman in the chair hadn't breathed for quite a long time, not by necessity. She lifted the cigarette and breathed by choice. A long rush of smoke snagged the whorls and shredded them like a dam before a flashflood. The woman on the bed shifted, rolled a quarter turn away.

Kelly stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray on the wide, carved arm of the chair, and stood. Wendy would begin to snore soon, she knew, from the posture of her throat. A tiny rivulet of rusty red caught Kelly's eye from across the room, exposed as Wendy turned unknowing eyes away

from Kelly. Evidence of what she had given in the throes of passion, and what Kelly had taken as the only real spur to passion she knew.

Panting breaths buried in a shoulder as fingers clawed and nails dug into cold flesh. Sweat and blood making breasts slick and hot as they slid against cold and dry. Muscles clenching and excitement gushing as the nails made pits of fire in the skin. A final cry of release as fangs went into shoulder and were gripped and caressed by muscle. When the blood came, so did Kelly.

A light wave of hand cleared the blue-grey haze from around her face and Kelly shot a last, lingering gaze at the exhausted Wendy before she moved as silently as Death from the room. The door clicked shut as she eased it closed. Doors and hallway passed, ignored. There was only one room she wanted to be in, and she stopped in front of the door that stood closed on it. Wendy's office—once hers—stood silent even to senses as sharp as a paring knife. Her hand didn't rattle the ancient doorknob as she gripped it between finger and thumb and turned it. The office welcomed her.

Arms outstretched, lips parted in lines of wanton paint. Breasts glistening in the light of a single candle, giving the pale, Midwestern complexion a dusky, exotic tan. Nipples erect and casting dancing shadows like fangs across the curve. Warm fingers wrapped and clung to the cold arc of rib and shoulder and pulled welcomingly. A living thing burning with need for the dead one whose hunger was darker.

Kelly's fingers pushed aside layers of high-gloss poster paper and her eyes skimmed the artful lines of logo and slogan. She appreciated the touchstone techniques that Wendy came back to time and again, and she was helpless to avoid

noticing them. There, a line angled just so to imply motion. Here, a slant to text that screamed energy. Everywhere, Wendy.

Legs twined and slid. Lips pressed together as tongues danced and spun. Hot clutching and clutched by cold, life to death and death to life. Blood, so sweet and warm and thick, slid across lipstick like gloss, shared between them. Cold tongue sought the coppery pleasure, and warm worked to share it. A heart beat hard enough for two, and its echoes vibrated through its too-still counterpart.

Computer fans whirred as Kelly summoned electricity to the circuits. Drives clicked and clacked as she let her fingers trail across blotter, pen, papers. The brief glimpses of Wendy's psychic residue were weak, tasteless. A sip of water (*blood*) when she wanted a pitcher. Kelly still stole what comfort she could in the closeness. It eased her need even as it teased her thirst for more. The computer screen showed a Windows desktop and Kelly sat in the chair formed to Wendy's slightly larger frame and felt the memory of her body.

Sharp burn and the smack of steel against flesh. A glitter of rectangular metal catching candle light on the back swing. Ropes pulled and restrained, burned on wrists that twisted in mingled pain and pleasure. Welting flesh hot in lines from fingers that caressed the curve of buttock and hip, but cold and pale even as it welted. Writhing need mingled with shame and humiliation made fangs ache and strain at full extension. The scent of excitement, blooming as the sense of power and control bloomed, fought the tang of blood in the air.

Text slid past as Kelly paged through the files on the computer. She skimmed the contents of files selected at

random. Mental snapshots of Wendy's work and days formed in her mind as she extrapolated and imagined details and conversations. Coworkers—some faceless, some all-too-clearly imagined in beauty and grace—came and went across the stage of Kelly's mind. The computer glowed electrically as she turned in the chair and slid open drawers to poke through their contents like an archeologist using a brush to unearth secrets.

Pleading for release and held on the edge until vision began to redden around the edges. Danger prickling and tingling in every nerve as a lethal tightrope walk played out. Fingers curled and touched and pinched and choked. The taste of life on parted, gasping lips and thick in sinuses. Sheets damp with sweat and stinking of humanity and sex and blood. Desperate need to be obedient to a will greater than hers at war with the quivering visceral demand to let go of control.

Drawers closed and Kelly withdrew from the contours of Wendy's body. Silent, slow steps carried her around the room, past the drafting table, the art and design magazines in the haphazard fan on the table beside the armchair in the corner. Her fingertips beat a nearly-silent staccato as they trailed like sticks on fence pickets across the backs of shelved books. Perfume, stale and dying and yet tenacious in the air and on the furniture, inundated her and she closed her eyes as she drank it in. The memory of Wendy's love hung about her still, too, and the two scents were intoxicating.

Scrambling urgency to heed a demand for pleasure. Slime of humiliation oozing along skin made sticky with sweat and excitement it could no longer create for itself. Fulfillment cresting like a climax and knowing that this base purpose was the only proper way to be used, the only

reason to exist. Crawling shame and the taste of spit and dirt as tongue lapped at floor under imperiously cold gaze. Shoe leather gleaming fresh and black and streaked with the touch of the same tongue.

Windows, dressed in velveteen gowns of brocade that were divided to show the treasures behind the veil, stared black and starry into the room. Kelly leaned into the desk and stared back as she tried to imagine the grounds below swathed in the golden silk of daylight, as Wendy would see them. The panes showed her only the drab greys and slinking sneakthief shadows of night's embrace, and the computer's wan light reflecting from half of her face. She met her own eye in the reflection and saw her pale complexion like the cratered flesh of the moon, hanging heedless over the world that struggled below.

Begging for more, knowing that no matter the pain, no matter the cries, it would never be enough. It would never be what was deserved. Ropes squeezing burning lines around breast, and wrist, and ankle. Chair creaking with helpless hips writhing. Palm hot and slick as it met cheek hard enough to echo. Blood, cold and thick, running from a lip swollen with the memory of other blows. Weeping with cathartic climax as bitterly-delivered words scored wounds deep and oozing to punctuate the blows. Release and shame of the self came at the same time.

Kelly could feel the shallow valleys where the carpet remembered the travel of Wendy's desk chair. She bent to run her fingertips along the trail, and in her mind's eye saw the mortal in a ghostly, brisk display of creative effort. She watched the ethereal after-image move to and fro, adjusting this, touching that, typing something else. She crawled along the floor and ran her cheek along the tracks left by the casters and closed her eyes as she prostrated herself on

the ground Wendy walked on.

Breaking point as pleasure crests and fades. Pillowing breasts heaving in husking breaths, smeared with the blood of tears. Cold, clutching arms wrapped around warm, pounding ribs as weakness wins. Sobs wracking as soothing hand strokes the back of thick ringlets. Soothing sounds under wretched hitches of weeping apology. The care that never came no matter the pleas, before.

Kelly casually brushed her palms and knees off, passed a hand over her cheek and felt flecks of dust settle on her bare shoulder. She reached out and cut the power to the machine illuminating the room. The sudden darkness, and the concealment she felt like a shawl around her naked shoulders as it fell, soothed her. The door closed behind her as she stepped back into the hall.



July 15, 1999. 9:46 PM.

Kelly fumed as Milwaukee's lights coursed past the deeply tinted windows of the stretch limo. Behind the shield, Eric would navigate the trawling course until she made clear her destination. She opted not to. It felt good to be in the moving car, aimless and pacing like a cat in a cage. It soothed her, which at the moment was very important for a certain Mayor's health. He had, it seemed, found a line he would not cross and addiction be damned. His refusal had nearly cost him his life, and with his, her existence. The bar had been far too crowded for so casual a killing. Perhaps she should arrange for her next meeting to be more private...

Memories flashed like bolts of lightning in her mind's eye. Julie in tears, then terror as she pleaded for her life. The smell of dirt and dust in the air as Kelly was bowled over by a desperate woman, and the tang of her own tears on her lips. Dorst's lifted arm, the surety that it would end with the bark of a gun and a splatter of brain across her cheeks. She

felt sick. No, she wouldn't handle the Mayor so roughly. She didn't have to.

"Look, I appreciate everything you've done for me," he'd begun, and though he'd continued speaking, she hadn't had to hear the excuses that would follow. Pleasant apologies that rang so thin to her practiced ear that she had very nearly thrown her martini in his face. The forms of politick refusal never really changed, though they were practiced with shades of skill. The mortal's was nothing beside Edie's, or Lucina's. The seatbelt made a quiet sound of protest as she clenched her fist around it and she forced herself to relax the grip.

It wasn't that Kelly didn't understand his position. The party was pushing the Landlord Bill hard. With industry returning to the city, real estate was about to boom. They wanted their claws and money in deep before it happened. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place, and he had looked hunted enough that he knew it. He wasn't a fool; you didn't become a mayor of a major American city as a fool. He knew she had gained an incredible amount of weight, socially and politically, over the last year. He could hardly turn around without running into her name. But his party was his party, and their election funds put him in office. He was between two opposing forces that seemed ready and able to take his mayoral crown if they were not mollified.

More, he no longer felt as threatened by Kelly. She could see it in his eyes, and in the slow whirl of color that now and then shone over his shoulder or in afterimage across his gaze. She had been generous and his cocaine habit was very well fed. That made certain suggestions of association, suggestions that her public persona would not weather well. Where she had previously had cards bearing his gratitude,

fear, and addiction in her hand, now that the game had progressed she'd been forced to discard one.

When they'd met, she had been only a whisper in the halls of power. Now, with her face plastered all over MTV and her voice on the radio and her name in the newspapers, there was much more for her to lose in exposing their arrangement. Oh, she could construct layers of remove if they were necessary. His subtle implication of a willingness to let slip her own name if he should find himself behind the eight-ball failed to take into account the ancient forces he had no way of knowing about, but such endeavors were unnecessarily distracting and costly. They were for the moment, and he knew it, in an orbit of mutually assured destruction.

A frisson passed down her spine and Kelly jolted out of her thoughts. She hadn't shivered like that since she was a mortal, and it put her on high alert at once. She had a sinking feeling in her gut that was more than the residue of guilt at having considered murder as an alternative to political maneuvering. She was, in the moment before she did so, certain that she would see a car's headlights turning a corner half a block behind. She made out four silhouettes in the car and felt the threat as surely as if they'd leered menacingly at her. Kelly turned back to the interior of the car and pressed the button to bring down the screen.

"Where to?" Eric asked. She noted his mild impatience, tempered by the lingering caution of her mood as she had left the bar. She used to—still did, sometimes—look at Lucina with that wariness.

"We are being followed, Eric," Kelly replied smoothly. Her ire was fading as the Beast rose. There was blood in the water, and like a nictitating membrane, her inherent lust

for violence and destruction was closing over her heart and hardening her to it. She felt cold inside. “Do you happen to have a gun handy? I left mine at home.”

The chauffer’s cap came off in the same sweep of arm that saw him reach across to the glove box and pull a small black automatic free. He flicked his gaze up to the rearview and aimed the whirling toss of the gun expertly across the back of the stretch.

Kelly snagged it two-handed out of the air and gave it a quick, practiced once over. No serial number, safety off, round in the chamber. She didn’t know the trigger sensitivity and kept her index finger laid across the guard as she set the pistol in her lap.

“Got ‘em,” Eric announced. “Sorry, I don’t know how I didn’t pick that up sooner. They’re good, how’d you spot them?”

Kelly didn’t answer, because she couldn’t. She didn’t know why she had felt the need to look over her shoulder, nor the source of the frisson. It had just been a premonition of danger and though it had discomfited her, she was glad to have felt it. “What do you want me to do?” Eric was asking after a moment of her silence.

“Head toward Vernan and Blockside,” Kelly replied calmly. Eric’s eyes flashed shine in the mirror as they flicked at her. “You want to head to the Barrens? That’s twice as far as the house.”

“I know. Be calm, don’t let them know they’ve been spotted. Stick to the surface streets.”

He nodded into the mirror and turned his eyes back to the road. Kelly shifted slightly on the seat so that she could watch the headlights in the rearview. The gun felt heavy and cold in her hand and lap, and her thumb caressed the slide.

With Eric, she might be able to handle four. It would depend on how they came, she thought, and whether they were kindred. She realized she was waiting with anticipation for them to try to make a move on the long car and tried to tamp down her eagerness.

The old Budweiser factory, furnaces cold for the last five years, loomed over the street even from behind several hundred feet of open parking and loading space. The stacks sat like a trio of pillars supporting the sky and Kelly spared the place a glance. Its sorrowful emptiness was enough of a reminder of what she had yet to do that she could suppress the Beast's desire to face and destroy her pursuers. Fighting was dangerous, and death was all too often assured for one of the combatants. A glance in the mirror told her they were still there.

"Coming up on that intersection, Kelly," Eric warned with a glance at her. "What then?"

As the last of the tumbling fence surrounding the plant passed the window beside her, Kelly judged them to be only a few minutes out from the outskirts of the city. She reached for the other small machine with which she killed and pulled her cell out of the purse beside her on the seat.

Two rings, tinny and electronic, and then a gruff voice answered. "This is Eddie. Speak."

"Eddie, it's Kelly. I find myself in need of a favor, and since I helped you out with that Big V thing and happened to be in your neighborhood..."

"What the fuck are you doing in *my* neighborhood, Patterson? Doesn't just crossing into the Barrens lower your net worth?" Kelly's eyes half-lidded at the light jab, but she wasn't in the mood for ribbing.

"If you're too busy, Eddie, I'm sure there's someone else I

could call.”

“No, no,” he hastened to assure. “What do you need?”

“I seem to have picked up some unwanted attention, perhaps you could delay them a few minutes.”

“What kind of attention?” Kelly described the car and the glimpse of its occupants she had had. “Alright, how many minutes?”

“In my practice, I have found that fender-benders often can be quite taxing when one or both parties don’t have insurance,” Kelly replied casually, and flicked her gaze up at the mirror again. Her index finger stroked the curve of the trigger guard, on the edge of plunging into it.

“Alright, I gotcha. Where at?” Kelly gave him an intersection a few more minutes beyond and hung up. Now, there was but to wait.

“Remind me to stay on your good side,” Eric murmured into the windshield, low enough that a mortal would have missed it. She was not constrained by such mortal frailties. Kelly’s tongue stroked the line of her fang, and she watched with anticipation for the destruction that would come from behind. The car drove on.

The light was turning red as the limo cruised toward the indicated intersection, but Kelly instructed Eric to go through. Even if the street weren’t deserted in this part of town at this time of night, he would have without question, and his foot never touched the brake as they approached. The car behind put on a sudden burst of speed when it became obvious Kelly’s driver was about to run the red. Kelly’s grip on the pistol tightened and she felt like a coiled spring eager for release. Maybe Eddie would fail, and it would fall to her to put them down that dared to test her. Dimly, she hoped he would.

The long black car slid through the intersection without pause, and the smaller sedan behind started through. Disappointment and elation warred as the pick-up truck crashed into the tail end of the sedan and spun both vehicles to a stop in the street. The scream of tortured metal was a poor substitute for the screams of the wounded and terrified, though she didn't acknowledge that fact to herself. "Pull up here," she instructed, and the car moved for the curb at once. She rocked as it came to an abrupt halt and turned to watch the incident over an arm lifted over the seat.

Eddie was climbing from the pick-up truck, and though the wave of his arms and the lean of his aggressive posture was exaggerated to her practiced eye, it seemed to have the appropriate effect on the four clambering, shaken, from the sedan. Mortals, then, she thought. No kindred would be so bruised from an impact like that. One looked to be nursing a broken arm, or sprained wrist. Kelly's tongue found her fang again but paused as a scowl tensed in her brow. The four did not seem like gang bangers, or hitmen, or even a team of ghouls.

The driver was a long-haired man in khakis and a polo shirt, and around his neck hung what looked like a camera viewfinder. He had his hands up, apparently trying to mollify the shouting Eddie. He was, she thought, lucky that Eddie's rage was a show. A Gangrel unleashed like that would make short work of him. His passenger, the woman with the arm cradled to her midsection wavering on her feet on the sidewalk, was dressed in business casual, and the way she had salvaged a briefcase from the wreck even as shock seemed to be setting in spoke of a practiced assistant. The two climbing out of the backseat were bringing hardware with them, but it was far too bulky to be a weapon. Rather,

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they seemed to be arguing with each other about how best to tend the mangled video camera.

“Shit,” Kelly said quietly. She turned back to the front of the car and hunched forward to pass the gun back to Eric. Her thumb found the safety without thought before she gave it over, and his found it again before it went into the glove box. Kelly heard the click of it as she was hurrying out of the car.

“—the fuck do you mean, it was an accident?!” roared Eddie, and the long-haired man flinched back. “You ran the fucking red! And now my truck is trashed! Who’s gonna pay for that shit? You think I got money for insurance in this economy?!”

Kelly hurried her step. The long-haired man was too distracted to notice, and the two from the backseat had their attention on the camera and their own spat, but the woman saw her. She swayed, blinking at her arm cradled into her belly and then at the case, as if trying to sort out how to grow a third arm. Kelly was only a hundred feet away when she seemed to decide to leave the case and took an unsteady step toward the gowned figure clicking down the sidewalk. Kelly lifted a hand and stopped her before she made it more than two steps.

Eddie’s tirade faltered as he glanced over and saw Kelly approaching, and the confusion that flickered across his craggy features would have been plain to anyone not too intimidated, distracted, or injured to pay attention. Thankfully, Kelly thought, at the moment that was only her. She gave him a ‘play along’ look and came up to put an arm around the woman’s shoulders. At first the mortal seemed grateful, and turned to smile over at Kelly, but the gratitude withered and for a moment the woman didn’t

seem sure whether she wouldn't rather be far away from Kelly.

"Are you alright? That looked terribly frightening," Kelly soothed, and applied just a touch of her Presence to ease her past the moment of withdrawal. "You look hurt; do you need an ambulance?"

"What? Oh, I ..." She cut her glance over her shoulder at the long-haired man, and Kelly could see her searching for direction that never came. "I should..." she trailed off and trembled in Kelly's arms like prey.

"Here," Kelly urged. "Have a seat. You're shaking, poor girl." She deftly guided the mortal to the curb and had her sit before Kelly's fangs did more than edge toward extension. When she set the case beside the seated woman she paused to inhale the aroma of vulnerability oozing from her.

"Let me just call my boss, okay?" Long-hair was saying as Kelly shut the woman out of her awareness and turned toward the shouting. "She can sort all of this out. I'm sure they'll cover your repairs."

Kelly could hear the fear in that admission. They would, she was sure, if this matter ever reached their desks, handle the costs of Eddie's aged truck, but heads would roll—his, specifically, they both knew—over the cost incurred. Particularly since Kelly herself was now on the scene.

"Excuse me," Kelly cut in gently, and glided in between them as gracefully and lightly as on any ballroom floor. As if she were not edging herself closer to the smoking wreckage of cars in a blighted neighborhood in the middle of the night. She turned her back to the mortal and pulled a card from her purse. "I'm sure there's no need to get upset. I'd like to pay for your repairs personally. Please, just

call my office at that number tomorrow and we'll sort everything out. Enid will be happy to make any payment arrangements you require. Cash, even, if it suits your mechanic of choice."

Kelly held her conciliatory smile and gracefully aloof posture while Eddie went through the motions of grumbling about the situation. He pocketed the card and, with a lightly mischievous twinkle in his eye, said at last, "You got a pen? You'll need to know where to have it towed, and I'm gonna need cab fare. I got to get to work."

The mischief fled his eyes when Kelly's flashed, but she held her smile. Eddie cut a glance over her shoulder as if worried the mortal might sense the tone of Kelly's icy gaze through the back of her head. "Of course," she crooned. "I'll be happy to provide."

Fingers dipped into purse again to retrieve moleskin and engraved pen, as well as a billfold. A few moments later, and a hastily-faked phone call ordering a cab to an intersection up the road, Eddie was off and Kelly watched him go for a moment as she marshalled her temper. A final, needless heave of breath to settle herself and she turned back with a sympathetic smile on her painted lips to the now-clustered and somewhat embarrassed-looking mortals.

"Thanks, that was starting to get a little intense," said long-hair, as he pulled his pony tail around his shoulder and smoothed it in the gesture of a practiced compulsion.

"I'm certain he was merely concerned about his truck. They do not, after all, grow on trees, and this *is* Milwaukee," Kelly soothed and moved away from the wreckage to the curb toward them. A slender-fingered hand, cold as the grave and her without the reserves to safely conceal that fact, extended toward long-hair. "Kelly Patterson. Pleasure to

meet you, if perhaps in less than ideal circumstances.”

He took her hand and Kelly nudged with her Presence again to tug his attention away from the start at the chill. “Is everyone alright? That looked like something out of a movie.” She let her gaze drift to the pieces of camera being held by the young men in the baseball caps, and they cast their eyes down self-consciously. Long-hair winced.

“I’m sorry, Miss Patterson,” long-hair admitted. “We know who you are. We were following you. It wasn’t really supposed to...” He trailed off and stroked his pony tail as he scowled at the wreck ticking its way toward cool in the intersection.

“Following me?” Kelly asked, and lifted a brow. She thought she managed an expert portrayal of surprise, but the bleary-eyed assistant blinked at her with a small frown of confusion. “Are you paparazzi, then?”

Another wince, and a prick of curiosity from Kelly. “The label sent us to capture some biopic footage, but they knew you wouldn’t be thrilled at the idea and so...” He trailed off with another stroke of his hair. The hiss of skin on dry and split ends irritated her, and some quality of her expression must have betrayed that as he jerked his hand away from the pony-tail suddenly.

“Oh my,” Kelly replied. The trembling woman stepped back from her without seeming to notice. She was pale with shock and pain. “And how long have you been following me?” she inquired, searching back through her memories to any recent opportunities for exposure. The assistant squeaked and Kelly’s gaze slid slowly to hers, unwarmed by the polite smile that curved Kelly’s lips.

“We only started tonight,” long-hair admitted. “We...” He trailed off and Kelly turned her attention back to him but

it was one of the younger men who answered.

“*He* said he was sure you would be at your office, so it wasn’t until we heard your car was spotted at the bar that we could pick you up. Only, like, thirty minutes of reel by now.” He seemed to be coming out of the blush of shame at being caught and took half a step toward her. “Hey, where are you going anyways? This place is a dump.”

“I guess you could say I’m slumming,” Kelly deflected, and turned back to the assistant. “Are you sure you’re alright? Maybe we should get you to a hospital.” Long-hair and his cohorts finally seemed to notice the woman and her arm. The guilt they showed her lasted far less than that which they had shown for being caught in their tail. “Let me have my car take you to Milwaukee General, just in case. I’ve seen a few personal injuries that only develop after the shock of the collision wears off.”

Kelly lifted her arm and waved the stretch closer, and Eric backed it expertly along the curb until it was only a dozen feet away. The red wash of tail lights painted the scene with a scarlet veneer, and the mortals looked at her uncertainly. Long-hair reached halfway to his pony tail and stopped, then licked his lips. “We’ll, uh, we’ll just get a cab. No need to trouble yourself. I’m sure you have somewhere to be.”

“I do,” agreed Kelly, and gestured to the collision. “Here, arranging the towing.”

The courageous one blinked at her and gave the area another look around. By now, there were the indications of life slinking out of the woodwork to peer at the scene. He looked back at her and scowled, “Here? Are you sure?” Kelly answered him with a tight smile.

“We didn’t all grow up with silver spoons in our mouths,” she answered. “I’ll be fine. I’ve heard they’re more afraid of

you than you are of them,” she added in a lighter aside. He looked at her seriously, as if of her, he could believe it.

She waved to Eric, and with cap back in place, he hurried out of the car to her side. “Let’s see these good people to a hospital, shall we, Eric? And make sure that camera is securely in the trunk. I’d hate for pieces to become a hazard in the event of another accident.” She colored her caution with a weighted look and Eric gave a nod. The camera and its film would never find its way back to the crew.

Her driver helped the mortals into the back and took the assistant and her case up to the passenger seat beside him. Kelly watched it glide away from the curb as she called to have the wrecks towed away. Despite her petite frame, signs of wealth, and solitude, none of the vaguely menacing bodies that slunk around the edges of her perception seemed eager to test the reason for her confident bearing.

July 16, 1999. 8:07 PM.

“Sandy Sherman,” answered the tired-sounding voice. Kelly glanced at the clock on her bedside table. It was barely eight.

“Long day, Sandy?”

“Kelly! Oh, I’m sorry,” she brightened. “No, I just...” She trailed off in a sigh. “Look, I want to apologize for the camera crew. It was a decision made over my head, and I told them it was a bad idea. They just aren’t ... used to someone not wanting the spotlight time that comes with a hit album.”

“It’s not even silver yet, let alone platinum. I’d hardly call it a hit album. It’s alright, Sandy. I don’t blame you...much,” she added in a tone three shades lighter than she felt. “Just let me know next time they send someone, will you? I’ll

make sure they get me from the best side.” Sandy laughed, though it was short and somewhat forced.

“Will do, Kelly. But I don’t think they’ll be trying that again. Cease and desist letters have that effect, at least until legal finds a way around them. I sometimes think they forget you aren’t just a pretty voice.”

“I’d like to think I’m a fairly pretty face, too,” Kelly replied, to another brief laugh from Sandy.

“Yeah, that too. Listen, I know this sounds kind of shitty of me, but...” Sandy trailed off, uncertain and embarrassed to Kelly’s keen ear.

“Go ahead,” Kelly urged.

“Do you know what happened to the camera? The operators said they put it in the trunk of your car on the way to the hospital and swear up and down they never got it back.”

“Oh? I wouldn’t know. I stayed on the scene to call a tow truck. But you know those types, Sandy. I’m sure one of them is just shopping whatever footage they have to some celebrity gossip rag for a quick payday.”

“Hm? Maybe...” Sandy said, but Kelly knew she wasn’t content with that explanation. She would have to be content with none, then, Kelly thought. “Anyways, it doesn’t really matter I guess. They said they never got anything useful.”

“Pity,” Kelly answered dryly and Sandy’s answering chuckle was weak.

“Uh, was there something you needed, though? I’ve been babbling, but you were the one to call me.”

“Nothing much, Sandy, I just wanted to know if you had any numbers for me on merch sales,” Kelly lied.



June 3, 1999. 9:51 PM.

Monaghan tugged at the collar of his monkey suit. He hated these fundraising things. People thought there was a lot of money in politics, and Monaghan supposed that wasn't always a myth, but most of the wealth went straight into campaigns. Which was, of course, why he got into the business. He'd run four campaigns since starting his firm and won three of them. The loss barely counted, anyways. Some mayoral hopeful in a town just large enough to count as a city. None of those could afford his rates anymore, so he didn't worry too much about what that candidate did to his resume.

He looked around at all the bored people milling around the reception room, wondering what miniscule portion of foreign crap they'd be fed at five grand a plate. He tried to pick out the ones who could be good for more than the mandatory minimum donation of fifteen gees. Pickings

seemed thin. Monaghan scowled. Milwaukee was supposed to be deep rust belt red. Why did these donors seem to be eyeing his client like a pariah? Well, that was why he was here, ostensibly working for Kuper. Market research. He could make do with the paycheck from a city councilman's campaign, but a mayor's? There was another Porsche in that.

There were, of course, the usual collection of eccentrics. More of them than usual, and at least some of those didn't seem to be eye fucking Kuper. The eccentrics, Monaghan had come to learn, tended to lean hard to the right. Where had that one been, he wondered to himself as he swallowed champagne. The one that had dressed like he'd walked out of some ponce play like *Les Misérables* or something. God, his French accent had been wretched. The fruit—Meunier had been his name—could talk however he wanted to, though, and Monaghan would have kept on smiling at him so long as the checks kept coming. “What do elections go for these nights?” he'd asked. Where the fuck was that party? He couldn't really remember. He *did* remember the hundred and fifty grand on the check the guy had had someone cut. “These nights.” Those words had stuck out. Fucking weird way to talk.

“Oh shit,” Kuper grouched at his shoulder. Kuper liked to grouse things. Kuper was always grouching something. “Don't look now. That bitch Patterson is here.”

“Who?” Monaghan asked and exchanged his empty flute for a full one as a guy in a tux that looked a bit more expensive than his own carried a tray past. “Does she donate big?”

“Yeah,” Kuper said. “But blue. I don't even know why she's here. She could sink the donor lists tonight. Some people

are starting to call her the Kingmaker, but she's getting all the wrong people crowned. I still can't figure out how she stays in tight with the Republicans like she does. Must have some kind of guardian angel."

Monaghan let the bubbles of the champagne tingle on his tongue as he considered her. She seemed to disappear at times into the crowd, several inches shorter than most of them. Her frame was slight, barely a handful of tit, but at least she looked like she had hips and an ass you could grab onto if you bent her over a desk. Jesus, what did it say about him that even his fantasies revolved around work these days? Whatever. She was attractive enough, but he got the impression he didn't want to try to fuck her. There was something about her, like she was giving him the cold shoulder from across the room before she even noticed him. Monaghan didn't like feeling like he wasn't good enough to talk to someone, so of course he drained his glass in one long swallow and switched it out for a full one.

"You know her?" he asked and shot a glance at Kuper. The councilman hesitated. "Alright, so what's she got on you?"

"What? Nothing. No one has anything on me." Even if he wasn't just on the hook for the Mayoral run, he would have dumped Kuper. There's only one person you don't lie to, and that's your campaign manager.

"Alright," Monaghan said derisively. "Well then, stop looking like she makes you want to piss yourself and introduce me."

Kuper choked on his swallow of champagne. When he finished spluttering he demanded, "What? What do you want to meet her for? I told you, she's deep into the Democrats."

"Grow a pair. You obviously think you're going to have

competition for your seat this cycle, or I wouldn't be here. I need to know what that competition looks like. Now are you going to introduce me, or did you want to pay me just to be a set piece?"

Kuper groused, but Monaghan wasn't listening. He followed the man through the crowd, pausing a few times to give obligatory greetings to guests. Monaghan kept half his attention on the petite blonde in the clinging black gown. She seemed to know what she was doing in sabotaging Kuper's campaign. Monaghan watched as she moved from one eccentric to the next, spoke to each briefly and congenially. Like one of their own. Worse, those bastards seemed to *defer* to her. At least most of them. That guy in the fucking *overalls* and bowtie looked at her more like ... an equal? Fuck, this was going to be a strange run. One for the books.

A lawyer wanting a judgeship nomination in exchange for a laughably small donation wandered away and Monaghan tugged Kuper down to hiss in his ear, "Get me over there *now*, or you won't have a goddamned cent to run with!" Kuper winced, but whether from the force of Monaghan's grip on the back of his neck, or from the content of his words wasn't clear, nor did Monaghan care. Kuper straightened when released and the line they cut was more direct.

By the time Kuper was pushing politely past the last obstacle, Monaghan had pumped him for as much information as the man had and could be coaxed to give up. Fucking lawyers. If he had a dollar for every time a lawyer gave him a headache, he'd never have to run another campaign. Harvard lawyer, or so Kuper said he had heard. Some hotshot, hush-hush partner in her firm. Mob? Maybe. But mob *never* leaned left. He felt his features settle into

the oft-practiced smile enhanced by several thousand dollars' worth of dental work. He could win an Oscar on that smile, if they gave them out for one role played perfectly.

She had moved beyond the noticeably fucked up guests and was talking to the Jap. He didn't know who had invited a fucking slant to a Republican fundraiser, but God bless them for trying, he guessed. As long as it didn't end up a soundbite on tomorrow's news. Monaghan strained to pick up their conversation as they approached and sought a smooth ice-breaker like any expert salesman. Was she speaking fucking *Chinese*? Who the fuck was this woman?

As if she could hear his thought, too soon to hear his footsteps, she turned to face him and Kuper. The light catching in her brown eyes, giving them flecks of amber around the edges, took his breath away. From a distance, he'd thought she looked boyish from the short-cropped hairstyle. This close, her gloss-painted lips full and curved in a cordial smile, her skin like pale silk he longed to touch, the studious intensity of her glittering eyes was anything but boyish. He cleared a lump in his throat as he realized Kuper was stammering his way through an introduction. The way her gaze slid from Kuper to him at the sound was subtly unnerving. This woman was gorgeous—he was *definitely* going to be jerking off thinking about her later—but that look in her eyes was terrifying.

"Jimmy Monaghan," he jumped in when Kuper seemed to forget his name in her eyes. He stuck his thick-fingered hand out toward her, and suddenly found himself absurdly self-conscious of the thick callouses on his palm. "But everyone just calls me Monaghan. Or Boss."

What the fuck was he saying? This woman was not going to

be impressed by his staff. Laugh, damn you, he forced through the shock of embarrassment at her not-quite-patronizing smile. His laugh was too late, and too forced. Her hand was as cold as ice when she put it in his. The strength of her grip surprised him, and though he jerked his own grip firmer to match she made no sign of pain when he over-reacted by several pounds.

“Kelly Patterson,” she answered, and good God in His high chair, her voice. Monaghan cleared his throat again and jerked his hand back.

“Nice to meet you,” he managed. “Jake’s been telling me all about you.” He didn’t fully realize what she was doing until it was done, but with half a step and a fraction of a turn of her attention, she included the slant in the conversation. Whatever. If it gave him a shot at getting into those skirts later, he’d play nice with the immigrants.

“Has he,” she replied curiously. Monaghan had never really known a voice he’d call ‘graceful’ before tonight, but he honestly couldn’t put another word on it. Her voice *sounded* like grace. He wondered if she talked dirty when she fucked. “I assure you, at most half of the worst bits are true.”

Monaghan realized he was nearly aghast to hear her demurrals. Kuper had called her a bitch, but the senile old fuck must have been thinking of someone else. There *was* that look in her eyes, but Jesus wept, there was no way this woman could be the enemy. “So, you must be the ringer I heard was coming in from Madison.” He blinked and registered her assertion.

“I don’t know about a ringer, Miss Patterson.”

“Kelly, please. We’re all friends here.” His eyes ticked to the chink and when she didn’t waver he continued.

“Kelly, then. Thanks. Anyways, I can’t say I’m much of a ringer. More of a new kid on the block. Jake said your practice was local ... family in Madison?” Maybe that was how she knew the money. Harvard wasn’t cheap, either.

“No, I had dinner with Senator Kohl the other night,” she answered with a lilt of fingers. “She mentioned the Mayor was most distraught to have lost your counsel. She mentioned hearing you were coming here for a campaign but ...” Her gaze ticked to Kuper, measuring. She made a moue that made Monaghan’s sack tingle. “Well, I’m not one to judge by rumor. I’m certain someone merely got a wire crossed somewhere about who you were coming to manage.”

Dinner with the Senator. But she hadn’t been in Madison. He’d only left a few days ago, and the Senator had been ... Jesus, Monaghan’s in with the Senator’s office had her in Milwaukee for one night late last week. He blinked. Had the *Senator* come to Milwaukee just to see her? Couldn’t be. Why didn’t he *know* this woman?

“I’m plagued by rumor and reputation in equal measure, it seems,” he managed to say at last. “I’m surprised to meet you here, though,” he admitted. “I hear you’re on the wrong side of the fence.”

“Now it is my turn to be victim of rumor and reputation,” she countered. “While it’s true that I have recently supported several Democrat candidates and policies, I’m no enemy to business. I own one myself, after all. I admit, I’m crashing this party. I didn’t receive an invitation to respond to, and so will have to skip out before the dinner portion, but I *did* manage to arrange for an invitation or two for some friends of mine.”

“Well Kuper,” Monaghan said, and clapped his client on

the shoulder. The thinner man almost slobbered champagne over his wrist. "I think we have a double agent on our hands."

"Hardly," she answered with a laugh that rang like a bell. Jesus, he had never wanted a woman so badly as he did this one. "But I like Councilman Kuper, and I think he is, for his riding, the best candidate for the city. So, I thought I'd lend what help I could to his re-election efforts, even if the next election isn't for quite a while."

Monaghan knew in that moment that his fate dangled in her hand. She knew he was here doing research for someone else's campaign. She knew that the wrong word to Kuper about him, at the right time, would end with him blackballed not just here in Podunk Milwaukee, but maybe in the state. The flipside to never lying to your campaign manager was that your campaign manager was trustworthy enough not to lie to. That meant not ditching candidates mid-run.

"Good to get an early start on these things, you know?" he asked carefully, and the way the gentle smile widened slightly he knew she understood the undertones. "Why don't you make an appointment with my office sometime? We'll have lunch and I'll bore you with details about my work."

"I may just do that, Monaghan," she agreed, and his heart leapt at the idea. "In the meantime, I wanted to introduce Mr. Xu. He is one of Milwaukee's most recent industrialists. His plastics plant will be ready for operation in the next month. Unfortunately, there remains a small zoning matter to resolve, something about space for a parking lot expansion as the plant will require roughly twice the number of employees as the previous owners had. I was

wondering if we might ...”

Monaghan didn't notice when he fell under the spell of her words. He barely noticed when the slant had almost no accent and for fucking once he could understand one of them. What he did notice was how she got Kuper promising to bring up the zoning approval—without leaning on implied blackmail even once—and Monaghan himself practically begging to make sure he did it at the next meeting. He *also* noticed when she had Xu cutting a check for seventy-five grand. Later, he would run through the agreement and realize that she'd slipped in a city-funded basketball park. His head was spinning and he felt like she kept trying to drown him into acquiescence with those big, brown eyes by the end of the meeting. He felt wrung out, like he'd just been through the last three hours of a close election waiting for the final tally, but the meeting couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes.

“I think you all have your lovely meal to attend soon,” she was saying as Xu was walking away smiling and thanking Kelly for letting him give an exorbitant donation. “But I wanted to make sure you met an old friend of mine, first. Party crashing, remember? I'm afraid I'll have to go before the appetizers arrive. You really must meet my friend, however. Mister Detonas? Yes, hello again. Let me introduce Councilman Jake Kuper and his campaign manager Jimmy Monaghan.”

Monaghan took in the fruit standing in front of him, and if the apparent value of his suit was any indication, this man had pockets about as deep as the fucking Monarchy. He felt his skin crawl under the too-intense stare of the man's eyes, but he held onto that smile even if he had to pucker hard to do it.

He was grateful for the opportunity to look back to Kelly when she continued, “Mister Detonas and I were *just* discussing the importance of proper journalistic representation in a campaign, and how the wrong media choices can break an otherwise assured election. Don’t you think that’s so, Monaghan?”

Who the fuck was this woman?

June 7, 1999. 1:39 AM.

The sleek black car rumbled past the corner again. Windows were tinted too dark to see a driver, but you could feel her watching you through them. Peg shivered.

“She’s looking for someone tonight,” Click said. “Man, I’m glad it ain’t us.”

“Too fuckin’ right,” Peg agreed and reached for the joint Kev had been hogging. “Pass it, fuck wit.”

Kev snorted a restrained cough and passed the spliff. Peg took a hit, inhaled deeply, and held it. When she had been little she’d loved those Attenborough nature shows. The sound of the car slowly prowling the blocks was like the tigers when they would growl in the grass. Given the choice, Peg was pretty sure she’d rather have the tiger out there, but if you put a gun to her head she couldn’t tell you why. She let out the smoke and took a second, smaller hit, and then passed it to Click.

“I heard,” Kev said, somewhat breathlessly from holding his lungful. Guy was going to get fucked up. This was that new shit. V leaf. You didn’t need to hit it that hard. “She talked a cop into killing himself because he tried to give her a ticket.”

“God, that’s such obvious bullshit,” Click complained in a

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constrained voice. He passed the joint back to Kev and Peg kept her eye on the boggart this time. "You're a fucking idiot. No one can, like, talk ..." He paused to let his breath out in a gush. "Someone into killing themselves. It's, like, impossible to make someone do something they don't actually want to do."

"Maybe the cop was suicidal," Kev countered defensively. Peg reached out and took the joint carefully. It was burning low, and she'd just scrubbed off her callouses for all the good it did. Kev didn't fucking notice. She hit the roach and passed it on as Kev continued, "But Gerald over on Beecher said he heard it from a Rat Packer."

"No man, like," Click said. He sounded like he was going to go on one of his Encyclopedia Trips. Shit was cool, sometimes, but Peg wasn't mellow enough for it now. Not with Her cruising the blocks. "The CIA did all these, like, experiments with mind control in the sixties, man. MK Ultra? And they found, like, brainwashing random people into being, like, assassins wasn't possible. Plus, they gave a bunch of acid to students and people without telling them."

"Imagine? Fuckin' would've stayed in school if they done that," Kev announced gleefully. He sobered. "No, but seriously man. You seen her. Shit gets weird when she shows up."

"Least she got Corillo to lighten up," Peg admitted. "I heard that was her, anyways."

"Yeah," Click agreed, pointing at Peg. "It was Chevy's, like, sister or something sucking him off when she showed up, wasn't it?"

Peg nodded. Georgina wasn't a great person anymore, not since she started hitting the rock, but there was a time. She dug a half smoke from the pack in her pocket. "Yeah, that

was G. Said he'd been coming around and smacking some of the girls around, trading freebies to stay out of the can. Said he even shook down Kenny Q for an eight-ball couple of days before that, too."

"Fuckin' idiot," Kev said. "Fuckin' *cop*."

"What'd she say happened?" Click asked, as if Peg hadn't already told the story three times before. That was okay, though. Everyone had to take turns talking, and you all heard the same stories over and over because you didn't talk to hear news. You talked because the night was pretty fucking scary when it got too quiet.

"So, G says Corillo showed up and made them line up so he could pick which one he'd be 'busting' that night. You know how it is with the girls and the cops, they just go along. It's easier, right? Can't run in those shoes anyways." The two nodded as if Peg had delivered sage advice from the mysterious throne of her womanhood. She shook her head and went on. "So, he pulls G out of the line and drags her around the corner. Rough, you know? Couple of the girls were going to call Razor but didn't 'cause it was Corillo. Cops get to play a bit rougher, you know?" More nods of rapt attention.

"So Corillo's got her back there behind this dumpster, and he was still wailing pretty good on G even though she was going along quietly. G says he usually didn't get hard without being a bit rough, but he was over the top, you know? She's got to work still, and it's not like he pays.

"So anyways he's got her on her knees, and he's fucking her in the mouth when this little blonde chick just shows up out of nowhere. Says something like, 'Alright, scumbag, you're coming downtown.' G swears it sounded like it was right out of some kind of action flick. Goofy as fuck, but,

like, serious, you know? Serious enough that Corillo starts begging. Shit like, ‘Oh man, please don’t tell my wife! You know what they do to cops in prison!’” Her small audience laughed.

“Fuckin’ guy deserves it,” Kev pronounced heartily.

“Right in the fuckin’ cornhole!” Click added with a hitch to his laugh.

“You two going to shut up and let me tell it, or what?” Peg waited for the contrite apologies before she continued.

“Anyways, so she pulls out this big ass gun. G said she thought it was going to blow a hole in the wall, points it right at his dick, and makes him empty his wallet. Not just that but makes him count out each bill right into G’s hand. Whole time that hand cannon is dead steady on his junk.”

Click gave a low whistle. “You remember when Ziggy’s got knocked over?”

“Remember like three weeks ago? Duh.”

“Shut up, Kev. Whatever. I heard she was talking to people about that. Even that guy, Scut.”

“The weird guy that moved in over the Golden Castle?” Peg asked. That guy gave her the creeps. He was always so twitchy. Kind of a shame the weed he slung was so damn good. Click nodded.

“That’s the one. Anyways, after she talked to a bunch of people, that cop got busted or something, and the guy they’d accused got off his charges or whatever. Then, like, yesterday I was talking to Franco over at Ventnor, and *he* said he heard that guy got like fifty mil from the city.”

“No fucking way,” Peg shot incredulously. “Franco’s full of shit and so are the people he talks to. The Riverside Seven? Those guys are batshit. You know the stories.”

They did, and well enough that a beat of uncomfortable silence stretched out between them. No one could think of the stories about how the Riverside Seven were supposed to have broken out of Riverside Asylum without a healthy dose of fear. Shit was like a ghost story. You didn't mention that shit unless you didn't want to sleep that night. Peg was glad when Kev broke the silence.

"I heard people call her the Senator."

"Why?" Click asked. That was his favorite question, and that often grated on her, but this time she wanted the answer, too. Unfortunately, Kev just shrugged.

"Dunno," he admitted. "But I heard it from Jelly over at Milligan's the other day. She said she heard it from that Scut guy, that he'd let it slip once that he could maybe get the Senator's help with something she wanted."

"Senator? That's fucking weird," Peg said. She didn't know why, but the title made the woman seem worse. "Who's the fucking President, Batman? What kind of senator threatens to shoot a cop's dick off with a Dirty Harry gun?"

"Just telling what I heard," Kev said impassively. He only got defensive when he was lying. And he'd invoked Jelly. You didn't talk about Jelly when you were spreading bullshit. The fucking Senator.

The purring growl of the engine turned the corner down the street and Peg looked over. She was dazzled momentarily by the brilliant, low headlights but she didn't need to see beyond them to recognize the Viper coursing the street. The cock-shooting-racecar-driving-corruption-busting fucking Senator. Peg shivered again.

June 18, 1999. 11:02 PM.

Henry was, as usual, faintly surprised the speakers were keeping up with Kelly's voice. He was really glad Mitch had poured that extra money into the sound system once Tuesdays started taking off. Man, did she have some pipes on her. She could belt out Aretha Franklin, and twenty minutes later sing Aerosmith sweetly enough to make a man cry. And it didn't hurt that she was pretty hot to look at. Henry felt a blush rise to his cheeks and he buried his face in his beer. He was remembering watching raptly as she basically dry humped that girl she came in with on her table a while back. Man, she was such a fucking rock star.

Henry never had many friends in school, but there had always been the records, and later, the cassettes. His friends were Jim Morrison and Jimi Hendrix. Or Janis. He loved the balls in Janis's voice. Kelly's was that and more, though. She had range like he'd never heard before. Henry knew voices. Henry had never thought a human voice could exhibit that kind of range. Henry, in many ways, was deeply in love with Kelly's voice.

"Get you another?"

Mitch's voice startled Henry. He looked up quickly and felt shame blooming hot in his cheeks. Hotter, since they had already been fairly flush. "U-uh, yeah, Mitch, sure," he answered, despite having a half a bottle of cold beer in his hand. Mitch smiled his bartender smile and turned away, releasing Henry from the barbed trap of social interaction. It was worth the couple bucks the beer would cost, and he'd have bought it anyways. It was only her first song; she'd gotten a late start.

"Henry, isn't it?"

Henry almost lost his half a bottle of cold beer as he fumbled it. Mitch had distracted him; he hadn't been watching which way she went from the stage. She was talking to *him*. She knew his *name*. That realization sank in and Henry felt his heart leap into his throat. He clutched both hands around the bottle that had almost found a messy—and attention getting—end as he jerked around to face her.

Kelly was less than six feet away, separated from him only by a barstool. Her jeans hugged her hips and shaped her legs, the tears in the denim exposing flawless strips of pale flesh. The t-shirt she wore under the studded leather jacket left her midriff bare, and Henry suddenly wondered what it would feel like to run his tongue around the gentle dip of her belly button. Henry couldn't smell anything on her but leather from the jacket, not even the tinny edge of women's deodorant.

"I ... S-sorry," he stammered and felt his ears set alight. "I didn't mean..." What didn't he mean? To almost drop his beer? To stare? To be noticed by her. "Yes," he tried again. "Henry."

His tongue felt sandy in his mouth and he jerked his bottle up to try to relieve the parch. The neck chinked hard against his front tooth and he winced as he swallowed.

"Careful, Henry," Kelly said with a kind smile. How could her voice be so musical, even just when she spoke? He'd never spoken to her before. "Tough economy to need dental work in. What do you do?"

Henry glanced over at her table. She'd been alone tonight, and there was no late-arrival to draw her attention from him as she leaned against the bar. Mitch delivered a short glass of whiskey to her elbow and the smile she gave him was

genuine, but perfunctory. Her somehow too-intense brown eyes were back on him after barely a moment.

“I ... I work a press in the barrel plant,” he said, and felt ashamed at the mundanity of his life. He felt like he was wasting her time by telling her. “It’s nothing important. Sorry.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” she countered gently and lifted her glass to watch him over the edge and sniff lightly at it. Only she didn’t sniff. She just held the glass close to her nose, as if the scent was so strong that just that much was enough to inundate her. “You guys work hard for your money, and without you Milwaukee never would have thrived like it did. My parents were blue collar. I know what they did to provide.”

“Sorry,” Henry said again and looked down at his bottle. He blinked at seeing the second one nearby and then remembered Mitch and reached awkwardly for his wallet.

“No, please,” Kelly said. “Let me.” Before he could find his voice to protest she had made a gesture to Mitch down the bar and put his beer on her tab.

“Sor ...” Henry began and then sighed. “Thank you. It’s okay, though, you didn’t have to do that.”

Her laugh was bright and he flinched from it until he realized she wasn’t laughing at *him*. Once the instinctive withdrawal faded, he heard the music in her laugh, too. “I know, Henry,” she said and laid her fingers on his shirt sleeve lightly enough that he barely felt the touch below it. “There’s very little I *have* to do, and I put all of that off as long as possible, as a rule.”

He felt himself smile at her wink and almost laughed at the small joke. His mother had always said he had a horsey laugh, though. He tried not to use it. But there was

something about Kelly that made her mood infectious, and it almost slipped out against his will. He swallowed beer to force the last of it down.

“I have to admit, I’ve been a bit curious about you,” she said in the tone of admission as she slid onto the stool next to him. He turned hurriedly into the bar so that she wasn’t sitting between his spread legs and quashed the impulse to apologize. Their shoulders were almost touching. He wondered if he would feel the hard seams of the jacket or what he thought must be the soft warmth of her skin.

“Curious? Why? I’m ... I’m nobody,” compared to you, he left unsaid.

“You’re here every week, all alone, you never get up and sing and the only time you applaud is for me. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you were a spy.”

“A spy?! No, I just... Sorry,” he finished lamely. A woman like her probably liked spontaneity.

“I’m flattered, Henry. I like devotion in my fans.” He blinked over at her and her smile was genuine and definitely not perfunctory. He felt his balls tighten and his stomach plunge several hundred feet in a heartbeat.

“I ... I love your voice,” Henry blurted all of a sudden. He wanted more than anything, in that moment, to make that smile widen. “It’s like an angel’s.”

Henry felt himself stiffen against the fly of his jeans as her teeth gleamed in the beaming smile. “Cute *and* sweet,” she said. “You are a diamond in the rough, Henry.”

“Oh, I’m not ...” he began, but then the words choked off as he realized he had been about to argue with her. He didn’t want to contradict her. He cleared his throat. “Thanks,” he said weakly, and stole another glance at her smile. God, her eyes were so intense. It was like she never

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blinked.

“I hear things are getting pretty rough at the plant,” she said as the wattage on her smile toned down and she lifted her glass to drink from it. She licked her lips and Henry’s heart thudded hard enough that he felt faint. “Some people have gotten hurt recently, haven’t they?”

Henry nodded and looked down at his beer. Kelly tilted her head a bit so that she could look him in the eye from the side. “Tough time to be looking for a new job, too, right?” Henry nodded again and looked back at her just so she didn’t have to crane.

“Yeah. Just got to go along to get along sometimes. It’s not so bad.” But it was. Henry wondered every day if it wasn’t safer to live on the street than keep the job. He’d almost lost his hand a couple times thanks to that damned busted rod.

“You want to split some wings with me? I can never eat the whole basket and I don’t like sitting at my table alone.” Henry blinked over at her.

“You want me to sit with you?”

“Of course I do,” Kelly said with a warm-toned smile. “Plus, I need your help with the wings,” she added in a conspiratorial stage whisper. “Mitch will think I don’t like them if I send some back to the kitchen.”

As Kelly leaned back from him the light caught her eyes just so, and they flashed like doll’s eyes. Her too-smooth skin and porcelain-white teeth gleamed dryly in the overhead lights. For a moment, Henry was back in his mother’s doll room. Row upon row of dead but seeing, always seeing, eyes stared down at him. Painted lips smirked their doll’s smiles down at him, and bared teeth as white as Kelly’s. *Don’t go with her. She’s one of the dolls. She stares like the dolls.*

Henry swallowed hard and felt a clammy sweat break out across his upper lip.

Henry swiped it aside with his cuff and stared hard at Kelly. Her smile was warm and inviting, not the polite smirks of the dolls' smiles. Her teeth were not *quite* perfectly straight, unlike the rows of teeth on the dolls. Her eyes *were* intense, but they looked at him in a way that no doll ever did. In a way that no woman ever did. They looked at him like they wanted him.

Henry forgot about the dolls and stood from the bar to join Kelly at her table. Henry forgot to be self-conscious for a while and talked with Kelly, until she sang again and sang just for him, she said. Henry told her all about the busted rod, and how Ungman his supervisor kept threatening people with unpaid overtime if they talked. Henry told her how much he loved Janis, and how Kelly's voice was even better.

Later, when she walked him to his car, Henry told her how much he wanted to give every part of himself to her if that was what she wanted, so long as she kept touching him like that.

June 19, 1999. 2:30 AM.

"I'm telling you, she's Lucina's unacknowledged childe."

"It's amazing how much shit you're full of, even though you're dead."

Justine leaned back and let Clutch and Ganon argue. She'd tell them to get over it and fuck already, but they just got back from that. She'd fucked a few times since the Embrace herself, but it wasn't anything like the blood. Justine just felt more frustrated after. She didn't get what the two of

them got out of it. They were probably bonded to each other. Maybe that changed it, but fuck her if she was going to take that kind of plunge with another Blood Brother.

“Nothing else explains it. Did you ever hear of her before that whole werewolf killer thing?”

“He’s got a point,” Justine said, but only to add a log to the pyre of conflict. Maybe one of them would lose it this time and there’d be a good ol’ fashioned slugfest.

“Fuck off ‘he’s got a point,’” Clutch spat back. “Yeah, he does, right on the top of his tiny little head.”

“Fuck you,” Ganon spat back.

“Anytime, anywhere.” They grinned at each other and Justine faked a gagging sound. They rolled their eyes at her, but Clutch let it drop and continued. “No, that flakey asshole Stefan’s her sire. You seen the way she looks at him? Fuckin’ *hates* that guy. No one hates anyone that hard if they’re not their sire.”

“She’s got a point,” Justine added helpfully.

“Yeah, ‘cause that proves anything,” Ganon countered. “Lucina *obviously* gave Kelly to Stefan to raise because she didn’t have permission to sire when she took Kelly. You think that never happens?”

“It still doesn’t make any sense. Lucina was *Primogen* when Kelly was sired. They don’t have to get permission.”

“What? Of course they do! The *Black fuckin’ Prince* just asked permission. Or did you forget how hard Akawa was losing his shit over that?”

“Just a fuckin’ act,” Justine offered as answer. “He’s been playing nice with the elders lately, the two-faced fuck. Just putting on a show to say he’s toeing the line these nights.” God, she hated that asshole so hard. He thought he was so

goddamned cute with his gag outfits. She never saw *him* out on the front lines, throwing bricks at a museum. Of course, Akawa and Wrecker made sure *no one* was out doing that anymore.

“No way Kristian would stick with him if that was the case,” Clutch said matter-of-factly. “No goddamned way. Guy’s not going to tarnish his rep playing lapdog to an elder butt buddy.”

“Yeah, can you fuckin’ imagine that?” Ganon answered. Them agreeing was not the right direction to go in, so Justine let it drop no matter how much she wanted to lash out at the opposition. These two *clearly* hadn’t put together how fucking brainwashed the Anarchs had ended up since Kelly showed up. Fuckin’ tourist dropping by in her stupid car to play Nines like she had a fucking clue.

“Whatever. You still haven’t proved how you know she’s Lucina’s,” Justine redirected.

“I mean, isn’t it obvious?” He looked between Justine and Clutch and apparently found no affirmative in either of their eyes. “C’mon! What are you, stupid?” Now *that* was more like it, Justine thought. Clutch’s fangs came out and Ganon backed off, much to Justine’s disappointment. “Sorry. I mean, though, seriously. She’s what, like, two nights old practically? Who’s ever heard of a fledgling Seneschal? It’s not like Lucina’s ever been known for her progressive outlook. She’s no more friend to the Anarchs than Detonas or Hrothulf.”

“Shut up, man!” Clutch protested, looking around wildly. “He’ll fuckin’ hear you.”

Justine snorted. “The fuck does he care about a bunch of young bloods? Even if he *could* hear when someone said his name.”

“Jaqueline told me he could,” Clutch offered petulantly. “I’m not going to question a Warlock about this shit.”

“Maybe Patterson’s just that badass,” Justine said, though it stung to say it and she scowled in response. “She *did* take down Parovich single-handed.”

There was uncomfortable silence as they all considered that. Fledgling or not, Patterson *had* pulled off some legendary stunts. Justine thought she was an uppity bitch that was just using the Blood Brothers, but that didn’t mean she dismissed Patterson as weak or stupid. She got Akawa wearing a monkey suit for Christ’s sake. That was something even Merik never managed.

“Being badass never got anyone to being Seneschal. Decker’s been a badass for a hundred years and he still spends more time out here in the fringes than downtown,” Ganon pressed. He was smug enough that even if Clutch didn’t want to deck him, Justine did. With some effort, she tamped down the Brujah rage to its usual constant simmer. “No, she’s got to be someone’s childe. Maybe it isn’t Lucina, but Lucina makes the most sense.”

“I bet it’s Jason,” Clutch offered pensively. Justine shook her head.

“Nah, I was working security at a thing, some ... whatdoyoucallit. A musical, but it’s all in foreign.”

“Opera.”

“Yeah, opera. I saw her up in the balcony caught up like any other Degenerate. She’s no Lunatic.” The others seemed to take it without argument, and then the sound of a heavy fist impacting flesh drew all their attention.

Wrecker was cradling a broken-fingered hand to his stomach, and Akawa was rubbing his jaw, and the two of them were leaning into one another hard enough that

Justine was a bit surprised there weren't sparks or flames flying between them.

"Gonna be a long week," Ganon said quietly.

"Yeah," agreed Clutch somberly.

"They'll get over it," Justine said and turned away. Still, she didn't fight the urge to hunch down a little, get small in case one of the two of them decided to take their fight out on someone else. She'd heard Kelly had taken Wrecker's punch like an Anarch, but it wasn't an experience Justine was interested in replicating.

"It doesn't matter who sired her, anyways," she continued when the other two had decided they'd rather avoid notice as well. All three kept their voices down a few notches. "What *does* matter is the bitch has us chasing our tails instead of fucking up some asshole elder's salon."

"Haven't you heard? Not doing that's the only thing making sure we keep living the high life," Clutch countered sourly. "You should see the place she's in these nights. Fucking Taj Mahal."

"Ain't you happy with your moldy basement anymore?" Ganon chided and Clutch flipped him off.

"She's got us doing bitch work and acting like bitches. Wrecker tried to play it off like he turned her down, but I don't think she even called the Blood Brothers for the Gracis thing," Justine said. Clutch and Ganon could be talked into actually *doing* something once in a while. She just had to bait them properly.

"Surprised she didn't handle it herself again, snag another blood hunt prize. I heard she got the house for the last one," Clutch said.

"No way," Ganon countered. "She got released. By her fake

sire. That was her claim.”

“Carna let slip to Wilder a while back that Patterson’s got permission to sire,” Justine corrected. “You’re both wrong. And ugly.” She rolled her eyes at the pair of middle fingers that went up simultaneously. “Still doesn’t matter. We gotta make it clear we’re not bitches.”

“Yeah? You let me know how that conversation with Wrecker goes. He still drops fang whenever someone reminds him how she did him dirty last time we made too much noise.” Ganon made a no way gesture to punctuate his statement. “I’m gonna find another city to be in when you have that little chat with him. Still probably end up with bits of you on my coat when he splatters you for it.”

“Whatever, chickenshit,” Justine sniped, but she didn’t miss the voluminous look Clutch and Ganon shared. They would think about it, at least. Maybe talk about it. That was enough, for now.



Kelly Patterson sat behind the broad mahogany desk perched fifteen stories over the city below. The glass walls of her office refracted the warm, if dim, illumination of the banker's lamp set at the top of the blotter. Outside the bank of tall windows, the wind screamed past the glass. Icy granules of winter's touch skittered across the reinforced surface of the panes in her sharp hearing.

It was a rare thing, she thought, to be able to enjoy a few moments of peace in these troubled nights. She clung to it and traced the line of her faint reflections in the glare of the glass-walled spaces. It seemed to her as if she were watching herself emerge from the ether as she traced the reflections from furthest to nearest. As if a piece of her were coming forward to confront her.

What dark prophecies of the future might such a reflection impart, she wondered. Or, perhaps, it would be the burden of memory brought to hang around her neck like a millstone. Would she be gently ground to a smoother finish with rasp and sandpaper, or would new form come in gross distortions as hammer and chisel sheared pieces of her away? Kelly sat, and waited to learn.