

## Chapter One

*I have been alive for two hundred years, and I have never met anyone like you.*

I sigh with longing as I flip through the glossy pages of a gossip magazine, looking at images of vampire celebrities and their chosen valentines. With their pampered lifestyles and gorgeous outfits, the human companions are almost as glamorous as the undead aristocrats.

I pause on the *Bite of the Week* photograph and pull it so close to my face that my nose brushes the page. The vampire and valentine couple is entwined on a couch at one of the many glitzy vampire balls, her legs on his lap, his mouth on her neck. A glimpse of his fangs makes me bite my own lip. The blissful look on her face makes me clench my thighs.

...And the smell of smoke reminds me that I'm in the middle of cooking dinner.

"Oh, shoot. Shoot, shoot, shoot." I toss the magazine on the counter, turn off the stove, and grab the handle of the pan, only to burn myself on the scalding metal.

Still... I may have burned my thumb and set off the smoke alarm, but dinner is done. And not just any dinner, but our celebration dinner for Declan finally getting a job offer now that he's finished his degree. I can't wait to surprise him.

I know he isn't the biggest fan of my cooking. I mean, let's be real, I'm not too crazy about it myself. But we can't exactly afford a big night out right now. I make enough to cover the rent and essentials, but only barely.

But he's finally made it to the finish line: a nice job that pays more than twice what I'm making at the diner. It took some time. He graduated last summer, and I was starting to panic after months of him declining job offers that "weren't a good fit." But the waiting paid off, and now it'll be my turn to sit back, relax, and figure out what I want for my own life. We'll find a

nice house, and my sister Maisy will move into our spare room while she starts at USC. She'll will never have to struggle and delay her dreams like I did.

Declan and I sat down and planned all of this out four years ago, when we finished undergrad saddled with student debt and realized our degrees didn't mean shit in today's economy. We made a deal: I'd support him while he got his MBA. And when he was done, he'd support me and my sister for a couple of years, while she gets started on her undergrad and I shoot my shot at a writing career.

My life has felt like a constant uphill battle for as long as I can remember. But now, the hard part is over.

Smiling at the thought, I serve up two plates of spaghetti, set them on our tiny IKEA dining table - which has a piece of cardboard stuck under one leg to balance it - and grab my magazine again as I wait. I skim through articles about *Most Eligible Bachelors at the Valentine's Day Ball* and *LA's Most Exclusive Vampire Nightclubs*.

God, I really hope he'll be in the mood tonight, because this stuff *really* gets me going, and we've been stuck in a dry spell for a while now. I know it's just because he's been busy and stressed, between finals and job interviews, but my vibrator can only keep me sated for so long.

I pour another glass of wine, debate about changing into lingerie before I remember Declan saying it makes him feel *pressured*, and flip to another article. I'm halfway through it by the time I realize that the food has gotten cold.

I frown, checking my phone. Declan said he'd be home by six, and it's nearly seven - even adjusting for the fact that I always set my phone clock ten minutes fast. With my chronic time management issues, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to finish dinner on time, but now

I'm more worried about *him*. He said he was just going to grab a drink or two with his classmates, but I know how things can get with those insufferable business bros.

Just when I'm about to call him, I hear the telltale click of the front door unlocking. I hide my magazine under a stack of bills and relax into my chair - but then second-guess myself and spring to my feet instead, whirling to face the door with a wide smile.

"Welcome home!" I call as he steps inside, splaying my fingers in a spur-of-the-moment jazz-hands sort of thing. I immediately regret my decision, but oh well, it's already happening.

Declan shoots me a weary smile. He looks tired and ruffled, in his slightly oversized blazer and lopsided tie, but still handsome. I fell in love with his floppy hair and big brown eyes the first time I saw him in high school, and I've adored him ever since. "Hey, Amelia. Thanks." He shuts the door behind him, and then pauses, sniffing suspiciously. "Is something burning?"

"Oh, uh-" I glance over at the kitchen, just to make sure. "No? I made dinner, though."

"Really? I was thinking we could order..." He pauses, catching the look on my face, and changes course. "I mean, I'm sure whatever you made will be great. That's really, uh, thoughtful. Thanks."

He follows me over to the table, sits down, and digs into his spaghetti. It's cold at this point, and was never a five-star meal to begin with, but honestly? I think I did pretty good, for me. "Maybe we could watch a movie or something tonight," I suggest between bites. "Have some... private time? You know?" I waggle my eyebrows, but stop as I catch his expression. "I mean, no pressure, I know you've been tired lately, but..."

I trail off and nervously shove spaghetti in my mouth. Declan sets his fork down. He clears his throat, looks at me across the table, and says, "Amelia, I think we should talk."

I choke, cough into a napkin, and set my utensils aside. My heart is pounding as I look over at him, my eyes nervously darting to a splotch of what must be spaghetti sauce on his collar. I feel a hint of anxiety - but mostly the rising giddiness of expectation. This must be it. The big heartfelt speech I've been waiting for ever since I started supporting him. The moment he *finally* tells me how much he appreciates everything I've been doing for him over the years, and apologizes for all of the ways he's let me fade into the background while he focused on his education and career. He'll tell me he did it all for me, and now me and my sister will both get to live easy for a while. I'll forgive him, we'll kiss, have some passionate and long-needed sex. Maybe we'll even talk about our marriage timeline again. I didn't exactly anticipate this conversation happening over plates of bad spaghetti, but still...

"What is it?" I ask, trying to keep down a smile.

He sighs. His expression goes unreadable, and a sick, panicky feeling lurches in my chest a moment before he says, "I think we should break up."

For a second, I think I couldn't have heard him correctly. Surely he did *not* just say that. I can't seem to wrap my head around the words. My head feels like it's full of static.

I plaster on an awkward, panicky sort of half-smile, and squeak out, "What?"

Declan looks at me with those big brown puppy-dog eyes I fell in love with five years ago. "This is really hard for me."

"What?" I ask, again, dumbly.

He sighs. "I know you've been feeling the same way that I have. That we've practically become roommates over the last couple of years."

I shake my head wordlessly. It hurts to look at him. I look down at my own hands in my lap instead, rubbing one finger over the throbbing burn mark on my thumb. There's some truth to

what he's saying. But it's only because I've been so busy single-handedly supporting us. I work long, weird hours as a waitress in a twenty-four-seven diner, and handle most of the cleaning in the apartment, too. I haven't had the free time to write a word in years.

And I'm not the one who stopped trying. Dec always brushed me off saying he was too tired from class or had to study.

So why is *he* the one breaking up with *me*?

"It seems like you have no time for me anymore," he says, and I look up sharply. "For us, I mean," he corrects himself, as if that makes it better.

"Dec, *all* of my time is spent on us," I say, still too confused to be angry yet. "I work for us. I clean for us. I cook for us."

He makes a little grimace down at his plate of soggy spaghetti, and it finally sparks some anger through the haze of my shock.

"Because that was our deal," I say, my voice rising. "That I would take care of everything until you were finished with school, and then..." And then he was supposed to take care of *me*, let me explore the dreams I've put on the backburner. And more importantly, he was supposed to help my sister. I paid our rent, did all of the chores. I wrote his goddamn resume. All for... this?

"I know we made a lot of plans," he says. He's still using that mild, oh-so-reasonable tone that makes me want to fling my plate of terrible spaghetti at him. "But things change, you know? Feelings change. *We* 've changed. We're not the same people that we were when we first got together five years ago. At least, I know I'm not."

Same reasonable tone, but the jab at me is clear. Because it's true: I'm still stuck in the same dead-end waitressing job, still wearing the same thrifted clothes. He's the one that's going to come out of this with a degree and a future. The future that was supposed to be *ours*.

If it was just me he was screwing over, then... fine. I'd deal with it. But it's not just me. I think of my sister, who already accepted her offer at USC and hasn't been able to stop talking about how excited she is to get out of our parents' stifling house and come live with me. How am I supposed to tell her that it's not happening anymore? How am I supposed to watch her struggle the same way that I have, all because I couldn't keep my promise to support her?

"Right," I say. My anger is still growing, sharpening, and I'm thankful for it. At least it stops me from sinking into self-loathing. I can feel myself on the verge of drowning in despair, so I cling to the lifeboat of rage. "Because when we met you were living on mommy and daddy's dime, and now you're living on mine. Such *progress*. Such *maturity*."

The look he gives me is so full of condescending pity that it makes me feel sick to my stomach. "Jealousy isn't a good look, Amelia."

"Jealous-" I bite off the word, grimace down at my plate of food, and then raise my eyes to glare at him again. I'm done trying to make myself small and push away my anger. I deserve to be angry.

I focus on that splotch of red on his collar, trying to feel some petty glee at his expense. But upon a closer look, I realize it isn't spaghetti sauce at all.

"Is that *lipstick* on your shirt?" I ask.

Declan flushes as he follows my eyes to the damning red against his white collar. "No, it's-" He pauses, fumbles, seems to think better of the obvious lie. "Listen, Amelia. We haven't slept together in *weeks*."

"Three months and six days," I say. There's a faint but growing buzzing in my ears, and I feel like I'm watching this scene play out on a television screen rather than living it. It's just so...

so *cliche*. Like something that would happen on one of those shows he makes fun of me for watching. “Because you reject me. Constantly.”

He winces. “I was going to tell you, I swear...”

The rest is lost in the buzzing. My mind is somewhere far away, wondering how the hell I got here. The past is easier to think about than the vast, dark expanse of my unknown future alone. A future where I’m stuck in dead-end jobs and never have time to write again. A future in which my sister has to suffer and struggle the same way I have. A future in which I have to tell her that I’m going back on my promise to support her through school. Declan goes on, talking about some woman he met in his program, and how he cares about me but isn’t in love with me anymore, and blah, blah, blah.

“I’ve wasted my life on you,” I blurt out, cutting him off halfway through a thought. He stops with his mouth open, blinking at me, and I slowly raise my eyes to meet his. “I... I can’t believe I was so stupid.” I know I’m not a perfect person. I can be messy and forgetful and easily distracted. I’m a god-awful cook. But I know that I deserve better than this. “Get out,” I say. The words come out quietly, but they’re still enough to earn a startled look from Declan.

“Huh?”

“Get out,” I say again, louder. “Get out of my apartment.” I’m the one who’s been paying the rent all year, after all.

The look he shoots me is wounded - but there’s something else underneath. Something smug. “Actually... I’m sorry, I wasn’t going to bring this up, but... The apartment is in my name. Remember?”

I blink at him, ready to argue. I’m the one who pays all the bills and deals with the landlord, but... oh Jesus. This is *student* housing. We *had* to put in under his name because he

was the only one enrolled at the university, and this was the only place we could afford that was close to campus.

“Oh, God,” I say. I sink down in my chair and put my head in my hands.

“I’m happy to let you sleep on the couch for a couple weeks,” he says. “But…”

I let out a small, helpless, defeated laugh.

I am well and truly fucked.



## Chapter Two

God, I'm such a cliché: sitting on the LA metro with no destination, a single, sorry suitcase clutched on my lap. I'm still too numb for the sadness to really hit, so instead I mostly feel... lost.

As my phone buzzes, I'm reminded that there is *one* thing that's certain: I have to tell Maisy that I don't have a place for her to stay anymore. Just seeing her name light up my screen makes me feel sick. I decline the call, lean my head back against the window, and try not to panic. Around me, life goes on. Other passengers chat with each other, or watch videos on their phones, or hum to music. A couple argues loudly about what movie to watch. A drunk slumps over and snores with his mouth open. But I feel far away from all of it, like I'm trapped in my own bubble where time has stopped.

I built my life around Declan, thinking that I was setting the foundation for a life *together*. It's been years since I tried to imagine a future that didn't involve him. And now, here I am, suddenly picturing myself as an old woman alone. The future stretches out in front of me in a horrifying stretch of bleak, joyless, lonely years.

How do I recover from this?

Returning to my hometown with my tail between my legs is not an option. I never thrived in the rural Midwest, and my parents' belief in crazy conspiracy theories has grown even stronger than their belief in the church over the last few years. I know how much they'd judge me for this. Especially since I'd have to go from no contact with them to calling and begging for a plane ticket across the country.

But staying in the city feels pointless, too. I could call up a friend and crash on their couch for a few days, but... then what? I've never liked LA. I was only here for Declan. I was willing to put up with the daily grind and the traffic and the ridiculous rent prices when I thought it was temporary.

So where the hell does that leave me? Where the hell am I supposed to go?

My eyes snag on a poster on the other side of the subway. It features a gorgeous young man lounging on a huge canopy bed with a glass of wine in one hand. His white shirt is unbuttoned beneath an expensive-looking suit jacket. His eyes are half-closed, his slender neck arched to reveal the puncture marks on his pale skin. The very image of decadence and sin. I know what he is even before I read the text on the ad. *A valentine*. A vampire's companion.

These ads are everywhere, of course. New valentines are always in demand, and LA is a hotspot for finding them. Some people travel here just in the hopes of being hired as one. But it's been a while since I looked at an ad closely. I never would've considered such a thing when I was with Declan, of course; he would guilt me about even enjoying books and TV shows about the lifestyle. Like most sex work, valentines occupy a niche in society that is both admired and reviled at once... but, whether people speak of them with desire or disgust, it's always underlined with jealousy.

Valentines dedicate their bodies to their vampire patrons - including, of course, frequent blood-giving. In return, valentines are pampered and cherished. Given the best food and drink and clothing, and brought to high society vampire parties that are otherwise inaccessible to humans.

Right now, this ad feels like a sign. I've always been interested in vampires and valentines; I can still remember the throb of desire I felt just watching someone being bitten on

that show earlier. It's probably a ridiculous thing to dream about, but... right now, what do I have to lose by looking into it?

It's probably a pipe dream, but it's better than no dream at all. I find my hand wandering to my own neck, touching the sensitive skin there. Wondering what it would feel like to feel teeth sink into my flesh. Perhaps the thought should be frightening... but the thrill it gives me is more pleasure than fear. I have always wondered what it could be like. Like most girls, I grew up obsessed with vampire romance books and movies, pored over the gossip magazines filled with sordid details about the undead aristocrats and their luxurious, secretive lifestyles.

But I never went any further than that. Never truly considered the lifestyle. Instead I chose what I thought was the safe option... and look how that turned out for me.

It's crazy to be seriously considering it. I can picture Declan's sneer, my parents' glowering disapproval. Even Maisy would be shocked. And yet... what more do I have to lose?

If I was a valentine, I'd be the opposite of broke, for once in my life. Their life is luxurious... and *lucrative*, from what I understand. I'm sure it's not quite as glamorous as the magazines make it seem, but still, it's obvious Valentines make good money. Even if I only did it for a year, it'll give me enough money to fulfill my promise to Maisy and a step up with rebuilding my life.

Before I'm even aware I've made the decision, my phone is in my hand, and I'm typing out the contact number written at the bottom of the ad.

I hold my breath as the line immediately connects – only to let it out in a disappointed sigh as I get a canned message that they are *currently closed to applications*. But before I can lose hope again, I notice a tiny sticker beneath the poster in the shape of a red rose. *The Valentine Society*, it declares itself in pretty cursive.

The ad looks so small beside the giant poster. One corner is peeling off and the color is fading. Never thought I'd see the day I relate to a sticker, but here I am.

And I've got nothing to lose, so I type in the number and try again.

"Valentine Society, Lissa speaking."

I'm surprised at the instant response, but I suppose I shouldn't be. It's early February, after all, which means we're quickly approaching Valentine's Day - the biggest vampire event of the season. And vampires, I've heard, are always hungry for new blood.

The thought should make me feel uncomfortable, like we're prey to them. But instead, I can't help but think of how good it would feel to be desired like that. The shiver that goes through me has nothing to do with fear.

"Um, hi. I was wondering if you guys are..." What's even the proper word? "Hiring?"

A small pause. "First of all, some common questions: No, we are not affiliated with any of the vampire courts. No, we do not guarantee patronage. No, we are not a matchmaking service. What we offer is training and chaperoning for new valentines." She says it with the air of someone who had repeated these words a thousand times, but it might as well be gibberish to me.

*Training?* I didn't know valentines needed training. But I bite my lip, unwilling to give up now. "So... that's a yes?"

"It's late in the season." Another pause. "But we're open to applications, yes."

### Chapter Three

I'm sweating once I arrive at the address, both because of the walk from the metro station and the anxiety roiling in my gut. I peer down at my phone and up at the gigantic, wrought-iron gate in front of me. Behind it waits a picturesque Victorian-style house, all pitched roofs and towers and stained-glass windows. There's no official sign, but this is exactly what I'd picture a vampire's house looking like. Sexy and gothic and a little bit spooky.

I bite my lip and consider turning back one more time. Then I picture the disappointed-but-unsurprised looks on my parents' faces when I walk in the door with nothing but a single suitcase in hand, and Maisy's expression falling when I tell her she's on her own in L.A. I gather my courage and jab at the intercom button near the gate to announce my presence.

The gate silently slides open, and I walk inside. A woman waits out on the wrap-around porch. She's dressed smartly in a pencil skirt and silk blouse - and she's not a vampire, judging from the tan skin and warm pink of her cheeks. I guess she could be in spray tan and makeup, but from what I've seen, white vampires love to play up their natural pallor.

"Amelia?" she asks, and I nod mutely. I'm tongue-tied with nerves already. She stands for a moment with her hand propped on her hip, eyeing me. "I'm Lissa. Welcome to the Valentine Society. Benjamin will meet you in the parlor."

*Will you walk into my parlor, said a spider to a fly,* my brain supplies unhelpfully, sending a trickle of unease down my spine.

I swallow hard. This is normally where I'd make some kind of dumb joke to alleviate tension, but I'm too anxious right now to make a single squeak. Instead I meekly follow Lissa through the door. She shuts it behind me, and I stare around at the foyer. It looks more modern

than I would've imagined, sparsely decorated but still speaking of expense, with real hardwood floors and beautiful paintings adorning the walls. I stop for a moment to stare up at one – an image of a dark figure standing over a beautiful young woman's bed – before Lissa clears her throat and gestures for me to follow her.

The parlor holds a large, round table holding a delicate floral tea set. The table is accompanied by a lovely velvet chaise and matching chairs. The window has heavy curtains drawn across it, so the room is lit only by an array of old-fashioned sconces and a chandelier up above.

“Oh my God,” I blurt out as I step into the room. “This is... unreal. Like something straight out of a book.”

“Yeah, I suspect that's what he's aiming for,” Lissa says, looking unimpressed by it all. Then her brusque attitude shifts as she shoots me the smallest smile. “But don't tell him I told you.”

“Don't tell me what?”

My laugh shrivels in my throat at the sound of an unfamiliar, British-accented voice behind me. I whirl around, one hand pressed to my chest, to find a man standing in the doorway that leads further into the house. He wasn't here when I walked into the room, but I didn't hear him arrive.

*Vampire.* I know it instantly, intuitively. I've never been this close to one of them before, but it's like my body knows it's in the presence of a predator. My pulse rises and hairs stand up on the back of my neck. The man doesn't look like the cliché idea of a vampire, with his golden-brown skin, black beard, and round-rimmed glasses, but there is an unnatural stillness to him that makes me shiver.

“Lord Benjamin Acharya,” he introduces himself, extending a hand without moving forward. He leaves it to me to cross the room and take his hand in mine. With someone else, it could be a power play; but judging from his gentle grip and the way he looks at me, I suspect it’s more that he’s trying not to alarm me. I must look awfully jumpy; and honestly, I am - even the shock of his cold fingers makes me have to stifle a gasp. It’s like my brain has finally caught up to what my heart decided on, and is screaming at me that this is a mistake.

“Amelia Burton,” I say, barely managing more than a whisper. Somewhere deep in my brain I know I’m making an absolute fool of myself, shaking like a leaf over a perfectly polite man who happens to be undead, but I can’t seem to regain control of my body.

Benjamin eyes me for a moment before gesturing to the table in the center of the room. Every movement he makes is polite, and slow, and yet my muscles tense every time. “Please, take a seat.” He glances at Lissa. “I’d appreciate it if you could stay for a few minutes.”

Lissa sighs, and smooths her skirt under her as she sits on the chaise. I take a seat beside her, my movements awkward and stiff, like I’m a marionette rather than a person. God, what is *wrong* with me?

“Your nerves are perfectly normal,” Benjamin says, as if he can read my mind. I guess he *can* hear the nervous pitter-patter of my heart. He sinks into a seat opposite me with a smooth grace, pours a cup of steaming tea into a porcelain mug, and slides it across the table to me. “Have some chamomile. Give yourself a few minutes to adjust. First time meeting a vampire, I presume?”

I nod, wrapping one hand around the cup but not able to bring myself to drink yet. Lissa’s arm brushes mine. Despite her brusqueness, her presence steadies me, especially since she seems perfectly at ease around Benjamin.

“Right,” Benjamin says. He pours himself a cup of tea, as well. Then he takes out a vial from his pocket, uncorks it, and pours the red liquid into the tea. *Blood*, I realize with a lurch of my stomach.

He seems oblivious as I watch him stir his tea with a tiny spoon. He’s all nonchalance, like he’s adding sugar or cream instead of human blood. But I guess this is perfectly routine, for him. He raises the cup, takes a small sip, and finally looks at me over the rim. He swallows, sets the cup down, and nods.

“You’re doing well,” he says, even though I’ve broken into a cold sweat. “Vampires are a natural predator of humans. Your bodies have evolved to fear us. Some have stronger reactions than others; they will panic and flee immediately from our presence. Others are too squeamish, and will be ill at the sight of blood, let alone one of us drinking it.”

“So you’re saying I have weak survival instincts?” I croak out.

He smiles. “Maybe so. But it’s a boon, given your interest in this line of work.”

I relax despite myself. So I’ve passed the first test. Maybe this idea wasn’t as crazy as it first seemed. Once I no longer feel like my heart is in my throat, I manage a small sip of tea. It’s nice and hot, with a mellow sweetness. My pulse gradually slows.

“Very good,” Benjamin says. He nods at Lissa, and she stands up. Part of me wants to ask her to stay, but I know I am being tested, and so I bite my tongue. My nerves surge up again once it’s just me and a vampire in the room, but still not to the extent they were when he first entered.

“Now, Ms. Burton,” he says. “First of all, I’d like to thank you for contacting us. The Valentine Society is a new endeavor of mine; this year’s Valentine’s Day Ball will be our debut into vampire society. I set out with the intent to make this line of work safer for valentines, and part of that is that I am particular about who I will sponsor. With only one week until the ball, I



must inform you that I'm looking for something very special indeed if I'm to bring you there with so little training."

"So no pressure or anything," I squeak out.

He smiles. "I'd like to ask you a few questions to begin with. What attracted you to this line of work?"

"Well, I, uh-" I start, and then stammer, suddenly unsure about what the protocol is. "Am I supposed to call you 'my lord,' or something?" I know that all vampires consider themselves nobility, since each of them has a trace of blood from the original vampire: Count Dracula, descended from King Attila of the Huns. I hadn't really thought about it until I was in the presence of one.

"Benjamin is fine," he says. "Some vampires are sticklers for that sort of thing, but I find it all a bit embarrassing, if I'm being honest."

"Okay. Benjamin." I brush my hair out of my face, stalling for a few moments as I try to think of a good answer. This is an interview, but not the kind I'm used to. I don't even know what they're looking for, really, other than reasonably good looks and a pulse. Should I be formal, or honest? Can vampires really tell from your heartbeat if you're lying? Do half-truths count as lying?

"There's no one good answer," Benjamin says. "There are many reasons that people come to this line of work, and regardless of what yours is, I will not judge you. I am simply trying to get to know you better."

"Right. Sorry." I laugh, a little breathless. "I guess the truth is that I've always found this kind of thing fascinating. As a little girl I loved the gossip rags, the romance novels, all of it. I still watch *A Day in the Life of a Valentine* every Friday." Heat rises to my face. Maybe I

shouldn't have admitted that. I try to redirect my nervous blathering. "But there was always some reason not to try it myself. Always some safer option to take."

"So why are you here now?"

"Because the safer option turned out not so safe after all," I say. "And I'm so tired of just scraping by. I want something better for my sister. I want..." I take in a slightly shaky breath. "I want something better for myself. So I just feel like... fuck it, I guess. I want to do something just because I want to, not because I *should*."

He nods, his expression thoughtful. "So the lifestyle appeals to you?"

"Yes," I say, emphatically. "It just seems so romantic. The luxury, the social scene... even the danger of it. It just makes me want it more." I bite my lip, cheeks warming. Maybe that was a bit too honest. "I probably sound unhinged."

"Not at all," Benjamin says. "Trust me when I say that all vampires are grateful that humans like you exist."

"People with little to no survival instinct?" I joke.

"People who enthusiastically consent to meet our needs," he shoots back with a sliver of a smile. I blush more deeply, but don't argue.

"So..." I cock my head. "Is this the part where you bite me?"

He chokes on his tea. "Well... yes, I suppose so. You certainly seem... calmer. Let's see what we're working with."

My heart is leaping in my chest again - with some anxiety, yes, but mostly with excitement. I slide over to make room on the chaise. No matter what he says, I still feel like a bit of a freak for being *excited* at the thought of being bitten... and more than a little turned on. I hope that his heightened senses don't work quite like they do in spicy novels.

Benjamin settles beside me, leaving a few inches of space between us. He takes a small metal kit out of his pocket and sets it on the table: I spy a sanitizing wipe, bandages, and a vial of smelling salts, along with a second vial containing a thick dark liquid

I reach up and brush my hair off of my neck, tilting my head to the side, but Benjamin stops me with a raised hand.

“*Never* offer your neck to a stranger,” he chastises. Then, seeing my expression, he reaches over and carefully brushes my hair back over my skin, soothing the sting of the reprimand. “It’s dangerous. Far too easy for someone to over-indulge,” he says, still firm but gentler now. “And it is also highly intimate. Better saved for someone you trust.”

“Right,” I say. “Then, where...?”

“The wrist is standard.” He reaches out, gently takes my hand in his, and flips it over to expose my pale blue veins. “May I put my other arm around you?”

I nod. He holds my wrist with one hand, and slides his other arm around my waist.

“Sometimes people faint,” he says. I stare up at him, meeting his dark eyes. He’s so businesslike about this, but my mouth has gone dry, my heart thumping a rapid beat in my chest. I knew what I was getting into, but now that the moment is here, I’m more nervous than I thought I would be - and more excited, too.

My heart skips a beat.

“May I bite you now?” he asks, lifting my wrist to his mouth.

I’m so enamored by the sight of two canines sliding out from behind his slightly parted lips that I almost forget to answer. His fangs gleam in the light, white and sharp and all too enticing. “Yes,” I breathe.

“Try not to tense,” he murmurs. His voice is thicker and has the slightest hint of a lisp with his fangs out. “It will make it hurt more. Take deep breaths. In through the nose, out through the mouth.”

I suck in air and let it out slowly, trying to heed his advice. “Easier said than done,” I mutter. “Like when they tell you to relax when they’re about to stick you with a big-ass needle and- *ah.*”

An involuntary noise escapes me as he sinks his teeth into my skin. There’s a bright burst of pain in my wrist and then- and then-

Pleasure. It floods my veins like a drug. Heat rises to my face, and my head goes a little bit fuzzy. Tension oozes out of me until my entire body feels loose and relaxed, like being tipsy but way better.

“Oh, damn,” I mutter. Everything’s going hazy around the edges. Holy shit, am I actually swooning? I didn’t think that happened in real life. Benjamin’s hand tightens on my waist, his arm holding me steady even as my body goes liquid and boneless in his arms. I can feel his tongue pressing against my skin, the *pull* as he drinks from me, the pulse of my own heartbeat. An ache between my thighs throbs in rhythm with it, and I bite back a moan.

Then the pressure of his fangs disappears. The heady rush fades a couple of seconds later. I stiffen, cheeks burning. I was always turned on by the thought of being bitten, but my god, I still didn’t expect it would feel *that* good. I’m breathing a little hard, and it takes a few moments for me to sit up straight again.

But my pleasant haziness fades as I glance over and notice the look on Benjamin’s face - brow furrowed, lips slightly puckered, like he just sucked on a lemon. Except he just sucked on *me.*

“That bad?” I ask, chuckling nervously.

He smooths his face into indifference. Still, the silence ticks on for an uncomfortable couple of seconds. He takes the dark vial from the kit, puts a drop on a small cloth, and dabs at the puncture marks on my wrist.

“This is vampire blood,” he murmurs. “It has healing properties.”

But I barely notice the sting or the fascinating sight of my puncture wounds closing within a couple of seconds. I’m too busy trying - and failing - to read Benjamin’s expression. “*What?*” I burst out. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no.” He swipes his tongue over his teeth, which are all smooth again, his fangs retracted into his gums. “It’s just that your taste is very... distinct.”

I let out an uncomfortable giggle. “Gee, you really know how to butter a lady up.”

“It’s... hm,” he says. “Certainly unique.” He pulls a black handkerchief from his pocket and dabs at his lips, though I don’t see any blood on them. “I’ve never tasted anything quite like it.”

“In a good way?” I ask, my voice creeping higher along with my nerves.

“There is no good or bad, when it comes to taste. It is all a matter of preference,” he says.

“That’s a bullshit line if I’ve ever heard one,” I say. Doubly so when I notice he leans over to take another sip of his tea and swirls it around his mouth, as if to wash the taste of me from his tongue. Panic flares in my chest, and erupts in more nervous words. “Is there something wrong with me? Am I... diseased?”

“No.” When he says it this time, it feels far more honest. “I didn’t taste anything medically wrong with you.”

“So I’ve just got bad blood? Am I all rotten inside?” Of all the issues I anticipated with this plan, *that* was not one of them. I didn’t know it was even possible.

He sets his tea aside, folds his hands in his lap, and scrutinizes me. I squirm, and bite back another retort, as he considers for a few long seconds.

“Your taste is... different,” he says. “I cannot deny that it may be a challenge to find a match for you. I can think of one or two patrons to whose palates you *may* appeal, as a novelty, but...” He shrugs. “I will not lie to you. I am not sure if the life of a professional valentine lies in your future.”

My heart sinks. Despite my nervous questions, I still wasn’t ready for him to say *no*. I thought there would be more steps to the interview, at the very least. I thought I was doing well, passing his tests - and even more importantly, I *liked* being bitten. He had to notice that. How is it possible that I could taste *so* bad that it wouldn’t even matter?

And this was my last, desperate attempt at salvaging my life. That thin thread of hope has just been snipped. So what am I supposed to do now?

Yet, just as I feel a surge of heat behind my eyes that promises an embarrassing rush of tears on its way, Benjamin continues, “However, I do think your blood is distinct enough that many would like to sample it. So, if it is acceptable for you... I would be interested in sponsoring you for attendance at this year’s Valentine’s Day Ball.”

I suck in a breath, heart soaring again, but he holds up a finger. “As I said, I can’t promise a long-term position. This would be a contract for one night only.”

My teeth worry at my lower lip. One night? It’s far from the luxurious life as a pampered valentine; this feels more like being a cheap hooker. Speaking of cheap... “How much would that pay?”

He purses his lips, face creased with thought. “One week of crash-course training, and working a Valentine’s Day Ball... hm.” He taps a finger to his chin, and then looks me in the eyes and says, “I’m prepared to offer five thousand dollars.”

I blink at him. Blink again. “Say what?”

“I’m not interested in negotiating. You’re a unique case, and that’s what I’m willing to pay, so-”

“Yes,” I say, before my common sense can make me second-guess myself. “I’ll do it.”

Five thousand dollars for one night... I’d be willing to do just about anything for that price, let alone something I’ve just learned that I very much *enjoy*. But even as I break into a grin, there’s a little voice in the back of my head whispering that I should’ve anticipated this. *Of course they only want you for one night*, it says. *Declan didn’t want you, and the vampires don’t either. You’re a short-term thing. A fling, and nothing more.*

But... five thousand dollars is a lot better than nothing. It’s more than enough for a rent payment for me and my sister while I figure something else out. I’ll tell work I’m sick for the week, or something. So when Benjamin offers a hand to shake, I take it.