

## THE WOLF HOUSE

### EXCERPT

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<http://thewolfhouse.net>

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### BETTE

Somehow, after summer, spring shows up again. In Rose and Tommy's front garden the roses bloom a second time, lush and heavy on their branches, and out behind Bette's house sour little oranges fall. Bette and Rose gobble all the mulberries they can reach with half-hearted climbing and their hands are stained dark with sticky too-sweet fruit pulp. For the first time, Tommy doesn't pick squirming silkworms off the mulberry leaves to keep comfortably in an ice-cream box until they're ready to spin their small sleeping bags and grow into white-winged moths.

Bette assumes he's grown out of it, though she doesn't want to ask and know for certain. It seems sad that such a predictable routine can just stop and not exist ever again.

They're sixteen but Bette feels like she's a million and like she's a kid all at once, and it's completely absurd that she and Rose are juniors and that in less than a year they'll be seniors, because in Bette's head they're still a pair of five-year-olds in plastic sandals who're scraping their elbows when they fall off their bikes. To be fair, Bette still has scraped elbows most of the time, but still.

Tommy's a sophomore, even though he and Rose are twins. When they were eight he got really sick and missed so much school that they made him do third grade again. Rose pitched a whole lot of fits to get them to keep her back, too, but the teachers and her

parents and everyone said she was too smart. Which is total bullshit, because she counts it as a victory if she gets a D in Chemistry. Her other marks are pretty okay, except for gym, but it's the principle of the thing. Bette has heard her rant on the subject on many occasions.

Tommy's health has never been all that great, even though it's half his life ago now that he got sick. Sometimes Rose and Bette remember to open the window in the basement if they've been smoking and Tommy's coming down to watch movies, and if they forget he makes a show of keeping his inhaler ready, which makes Bette feel like the shittiest friend ever.

Bette lives around the corner from Tommy and Rose, same as she has since forever. When Rose finally got permission to turn the basement into an art studio last year, they thought having movie nights during the school week would get easier, because Bette wouldn't have to climb the oak that reaches up to the second level of the house out the back anymore, but Rose's mom planted a whole bunch of new rose bushes along the side where the basement windows are, and Bette swears kind of loudly when she gets stabbed by thorns. So from a getting-grounded perspective, it's not any safer, and Bette's always getting injured one way or another so it's not like falling out of a tree would be some major disaster out of the ordinary. These days she goes with whichever method of breaking and entering appeals more at the time.

Tonight's Thursday and they've got that gross old couch Rose and Tommy's dad won't let Rose and Tommy's mom throw out folded down into a bed. Bette and Tommy are lying on it and eating handfuls out of this giant box of raisins Tommy stole from the cafeteria when he had detention there. Rose is down on the floor in front of them, futzing around with her markers and a copy of last year's yearbook. She's turning a photo of the soccer team into a collection of creatures with kettles and teacups and sugar bowls for heads.

"Did you know Audrey Hepburn was a ballerina when World War Two happened?" Rose asks, watching the screen of the tiny TV. Bette knows that Rose keeps meaning to save up for a better one, but her money always ends up going on art stuff or comics or horror magazines. "She used to do fundraising for the resistance in basements, and nobody could applaud her because the Nazis would hear."

"You are so gay for Audrey Hepburn," Bette says around a mouthful of raisins. "This is at least the third time we've seen *Breakfast at Tiffanys* this year. I think it's only fair we watch *Frankenstein* next, or whatever Tommy's favorite is this week."

"Rec. The Spanish zombie one," Tommy answers at the same time that Rose says "No, no, there's a theme, see, it's movies that made a significant impact on sunglasses fashion. We've got this one, then *The Lost Boys*, then *Terminator*."

Bette snorts. "You're so full of shit. Hey, that looks awesome." She leans over the edge of the fold-out, looking at the teacup-people. "Do me next."

"kay." Rose leafs through the pages until she finds one with Bette on it. "What do you want to be? Wait, stupid question." She starts sketching stitched-up scars across Bette's olive-skinned arms and legs.

The Bette in the photo has shoulder-length white-blonde hair, with an inch of dark brown regrowth at the root of the paleness. The school kept getting nasty because the uniform regulations have this whole big thing about hair not being obviously dyed or unkempt. So Bette chopped most of it off and put black through it, and now it curls around her face like a flapper's and the school is getting crappy at her for the cut instead of the color. Turns out the uniform regulations say girls have to have their hair a certain minimum length as well.

Rose sometimes tells her that it looks gorgeous, but when she tries to say that Bette always just rolls her eyes and makes a face, because Bette wants to be a badass punk and badass punks aren't meant to be gorgeous. She even pierced her nose with a thumbtack and put a ring through it, which is either the coolest thing she's ever done or the grossest, depending on how squeamish she's feeling on a given day.

"I want to get a tattoo just like that," Bette says, nodding at the lacework of sewn lines now decorating her arm in the photo. "That's amazing."

Rose shudders. Bette knows how much Rose hates pain. Rose even hates having to tug a brush through the knots in her hair because it hurts when she pulls, so mostly she doesn't bother and lets it knot.

Bette grabs another fistful of raisins and walks on her knees to the backrest at the head of the pullout, which she then sits on, wriggling her bare toes against the rumpled sheet covering the mattress. Her toenails are painted black, as always, and there's sticky residue of a lost bandaid bracketing an old scab on the inside of one shin.

"I want Frankenstein patchwork all over my arms, just like that," she repeats, gesturing to the currently ink-bare skin from her shoulders to wrists. "I wish people still gave a shit about Frankenstein." Her longsuffering sigh hopefully makes it plain that the lack of interest exhibited by the general population is a personal affront against her. "But there's nothing scary anymore about sewing a dead person's hand on your arm, or putting a new heart in a chest, or new eyes or lungs or anything. That Australian scientist lady invented those spray-on skin graft things and won tons of awards. Oscar Wilde was right when he said science is the record of dead religions. Frankenstein's not scary anymore because he came true."

Tommy rolls his eyes. "You can't quote Oscar Wilde to prove your point. The guy made a career out of saying things that sounded good and were totally meaningless once you thought too hard about them."

Rose swaps the DVDs over. "I really dig *The Lost Boys*," she says, ignoring the argument going on behind her. "If I wore skirts and dresses I'd absolutely get one just like the floaty, silver-threaded one that the girl in this movie has."

"See, now, vampires," Bette says, interrupting her argument with Tommy to gesture at Kiefer Sutherland on the DVD menu screen. "They're still scary, because blood's scary or dirty or whatever now. AIDS turned being queer into this giant freaky thing where you were in danger because the people you slept with might have this deadly infection in their blood, and if you got it then you're not properly alive anymore."

"You sound like a psych 101 student from 1987," retorts Rose, reopening the yearbook and beginning work on a picture of herself. "Anyway, I don't get it. Frankenstein's not scary because now we're all Frankenstein, but Dracula still is because only queer people turned into him?" She darkens her gray-hazel eyes to black in the photo, and neatens her straggly hair into soft black waves. "Should I dye my hair darker, you think? Anyway,

vampires aren't scary, they're sexy, duh. This one -" Rose gestures to the TV. "- is basically an undead John Hughes movie."

With a few strokes of her pen she adds tiny sharp fangs peeping over the plump skin of her lower lip in the photo.

"Neck-sucking is sexier than transplants, it's true," Tommy agrees. Bette throws raisins at them both.

"What're we doing tomorrow night? There's a new club opening downtown, but we've got a Chem exam on Monday that we should at least try to avoid fucking up on."

Rose squints at her self-portrait critically. "The vampire embellishments look pretty cool, but underneath I can still see boring old me staring up."

The Rose in the photo is dressed in the gray slacks, white shirt, black-and-white tie and red blazer of the boys' winter uniform. Bette knows that Rose hates wearing red; it makes her fair skin look ruddy. Now Rose colors over it with her black marker. "That's a small improvement, at least."

According to Rose, Bette looks great in red, because according to Rose Bette looks great in anything Rose has ever seen her wear. Bette's still in most of her uniform now, the red polo and black skirt of the girls' summer outfit, her white knee-socks under the foldout somewhere. Rose and Tommy usually change as soon as they get home, and are both in jeans and cruddy old band t-shirts now -- Blondie for Rose, Misfits for Tommy.

Tommy wears glasses, and Rose probably should as well, but she's managed to bluff her way through eye tests so far. Bette's got excellent eyesight and probably won't need glasses until she's super-old, which is probably for the best. She gets beat up enough at school as it is.

"Let's go to the new club," Tommy answers. "I told Michelle I'd see her there."

Rose and Bette learned long ago not to bother keeping track of whether or not Tommy and

Michelle are a couple at a given moment, so they don't press for details. Bette shrugs. "Okay. New club it is. The Chem stuff will all just be acids and bases anyway. Boring." Bette is revoltingly good at Chemistry, which she's perfectly aware is not fair at all. She's just as slack at studying for it as Rose is. She just *gets* it, that's all. It's one of the only things she can rely on to always make total sense to her.

"You'd need the full-on Jekyll and Hyde to keep you interested, right?" Rose teases. Bette nods.

"Yeah. But, see, science has ruined that one too, because altering your personality with drugs is normal now."

Tommy smacks Bette with a cushion. "Shut up, metaphor girl, I just want to see some monsters. Is that so much to ask?"

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The next day, Bette gets a detention in Math for sleeping, but the detention's in the library so it's no big drama. She knows the fucking alphabet, so she can shelve books fine, and finds the monotony of it relaxing.

Rose and Tommy are eating cornflakes in the kitchen when Bette gets to their place. Tommy's shirt is wrinkled and Rose has got a long purple bruise blooming like camouflage along the line of one cheekbone.

"They might not've jumped us if you'd been there," Rose grouses. "Safety in numbers."

Bette makes a face of disagreement and turns on the coffee percolator. "Nah. They'd've taken us all on. Who was it this time?"

"Jerrod and Bill and those football douches. I can't believe they still hit girls. They're such classy dudes."

"Did you guys use all the milk?" Bette grumbles. "Damn. Black coffee makes me crazy."

"You're crazy anyway," Rose answers mildly.

"And you're a fucking sexist. I don't want any different treatment just because I'm female," snarls Bette. "I can handle myself fine. Your mom's gonna lose it when she sees your face."

"I'll put concealer on it."

"Oh, like you own concealer." Bette gulps her coffee, ignoring the burn in her throat. "How you doing, Tommy?"

Tommy shrugs. "Fine, I guess." He turns to Rose. "I borrowed your Batman."

"The new issue?" Rose asks. Tommy nods. "Okay. Lemme know what it's like. I haven't had a chance to read it yet. Who's playing tonight? Is anyone playing tonight? I hate it when it's just a DJ. They turn it up too loud and it's boring and shitty."

Bette giggles. "You're such a stereotype. Batman comics in the basement and you hate going anywhere fun."

"No, no, I hate it when it sucks. Seeing bands is fine," Rose protests, shaking her head. "I need a cigarette. Come with me?"

Tommy sighs pointedly. "I guess I'll go up to my room. Alone. Shunned. Abandoned."

Bette pats him on the shoulder. "Buck up, little camper. You'll be able to laugh over our graves when we die before you."

"But that's still so far away." Tommy sighs again. "Come get me before you go?"

"Of course, dork," Rose promises. Tommy walks to the door through to the entryway and staircases, then pauses and digs a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket.

"Ms Rush told me to give you this." He hands it to Rose. "Have fun murdering your lungs."

The basement smells a little funky after being shut up all day, but Rose is used to the smell and Bette loves having an excuse to whine and bitch. They have matching lighters, cheap black plastic ones that Rose has drawn tiny winged skeletons on with silvery paint. Rose lets her cigarette droop indolently between her lips when she's not inhaling, but Bette likes the feel of her own held secure by the knuckles of her outstretched fingers. It makes her feel worldly and effortlessly elegant, instead of the awkward way she usually feels, which is more like she's ill-fitted inside her own skin.

"What's the flier?" she asks Rose, blowing out a thin stream of smoke.

"Huh?"

"The paper that your brother gave you ten seconds ago. Jesus, Rose, what's your deal? You're even vaguer than usual."

Rose opens the paper as she answers. "I dunno. General ennui, I guess. I'm bored. So who's playing tonight?"

The paper is one of the photocopied ads for school musical tryouts, same as the ones that've been stuck in the halls all week. Below the date and time for auditions Ms Rush has written 'Rose - give it a try!'.

"A new band. I haven't heard anything about them yet. Then Remember the Stars."

"A band you don't know about? I'm shocked, and a little alarmed." Rose grins crookedly. Bette punches her on the shoulder.

"I said 'yet', bitch. And just because you're a shut-in freak doesn't mean there's anything weird about how many bands I see. Is that one of those dorkass things about the musical?"

"Yeah." Rose shoves the paper into the pocket of her slacks. "It might be okay. Maybe I'll



try out."

"You hate being the centre of attention. Being onstage generally necessitates that." Bette taps her cigarette into the chipped mug Rose uses as an ashtray. "You know what we should do? We should start a band. You sing, and Tommy can drum, and I'll do bass. We'll find someone to be guitar and we'll be set."

"I don't know if Tommy's ever held a pair of drumsticks, so I'm at least a little bit concerned that you haven't thought this through."

"Please, it's drumming, how hard can it be?"

Rose rolls her eyes. "You know you're a cartoon character, right?"

"Yeah, but you're the one who's friends with me, so joke's on you." Bette plants a gloss-sticky smooch on Rose's cheek. "Let's go breathe on your brother and make sure he gets to his skinny hipster playdate."

## **JAY**

As these things go, Jay is having a really good night. The band in the corner looks conservative and boring in their expensive dark suits, same as everyone else here, but they're playing jazz and it's actually good for a change. The usual quotient of assholes has been rude to him, the kitchen staff snapping and harried and harsh because they're overworked, the guests out on the ballroom floor alternating between ordering him around and acting like he's invisible.

Daughters and sons sometimes get dragged to these things with their parents, and sometimes they give Jay small skewed smiles as they take portions of finger-food off his serving tray, as if to have a moment of connection and shared boredom with him. As if he has anything in common with them.

Tonight he's had that moment with two of the guests, early in the evening. With a pair of skinny, pretty sisters, who hung out on the balcony of the ballroom with him for a few

minutes in their pale, petal-like party dresses. They offered him some pills but Jay doesn't like chemicals; he prefers pot but none of them could risk going back in smelling like smoke. Later the elder of the two sisters, the blonde one, found him again and they went to the cloak room and among the coats and wraps that smelled of Chanel and Yves St Laurent and Ralph Lauren and other rich dull perfumes named for rich dull people she said quietly "I'm Jenna," and he said "I'm Jay," and they kissed for a while. The taffeta of her dress rustled like crumpling paper when he touched it, and she had a tiny rebellious tattoo of a fairy on one shoulder.

Jenna gave him her card as they went back to the party, clothes carefully straightened and cheeks still flushed. It had her name and number, email and screen-name listed, and a picture of a fairy in one corner.

"Drop me a line," she said, and went to find her sister, and Jay went to the kitchen to get another serving tray.

They'd left hours ago, though, the sisters, and now Jay's mostly just waiting for the night to be over so he can go home and get some sleep. It's been a really good night, but it's had its best and he's getting a headache. He wishes he'd taken the pills when they were offered.

Glancing around to make sure he won't be caught at it, Jay escapes back out to the balcony for a breath of air. The park the next block over is a lightless blotch, and most of the office buildings are dark now. The hotel ballroom is on the tenth floor, just high enough for Jay to consider what he'd think about in the airborne seconds on the way down.

"Don't jump," a voice behind Jay suggests. Jay damps down irritation at having his moment of quiet interrupted, and turns.

The vampire is taller than Jay, and if he was human Jay would think he was about twenty-three or twenty-four. If he's a guest at this party he's probably much older than that, because vampires with influence and power are almost always old vampires. That much, at least, Jay hasn't forgotten.

"Climbing over the handrail would be too much trouble," Jay replies, leaning his back

against said handrail. "Is there something you need my help with?"

"You're the food, are you?" The vampire gestures to the serving tray which Jay has put down on one of the small wrought-iron tables scattered along the balcony's length, a fraction too late after the words. Jay snorts.

"Only if you buy me dinner and a movie first," he says dryly. The vampire tilts his head a little in surprise, giving Jay a second and more searching look.

"You're welcome to try the appetizer if you want, though," Jay goes on, picking the plate up and holding it out. "It's quail wrapped in bacon. I've been told it just tastes like dark chicken meat."

"You haven't tried it yourself?" The vampire makes no move to pick up any of the food. Jay would have been very surprised if he had.

"Not allowed," Jay explains. "I'm Jason. Jay." He puts the tray down and holds out a hand. The vampire takes it and shakes. Vampire skin is cool and soft, and Jay had forgotten how lovely it is to touch.

"Blake," the vampire offers in return.

All vampires are beautiful, and Blake's no exception. His hair is a deep brown and curls at the nape of his neck, and makes the dark of his eyes look less uncanny. Fair-haired vampires always stand out as strange more obviously, because of those dark, dark red irises. He's tall and what a certain type of English teacher might call 'imperial slim', almost as thin as Jenna and her sister, but he died just old enough that his body had time to grow into its shape and so he wears it elegantly, not with the almost clumsy coltish charm of the girls.

His suit is charcoal and simple enough that Jay guesses it must be very expensive, and his shirt is a warm bone color which gives a little life to the whiteness of Blake's throat and face. His eyebrows and nose are straight, his teeth slightly crooked when he smiles along with his handshake. His canines are just a fraction longer than a human's, and taper to sharp points.

"You smell like a girl's perfume."

Jay laughs. He can't help it. "You really suck at pick-up lines."

Blake's smile gets wider, and Jay can't help glancing at his teeth again, either. He's got poor impulse control at the best of times, and while it may not be the best of times, it's still a pretty good night.

"I can't tell if your hair is like that because you've been kissing someone, or because it's meant to look like that," Blake goes on, sounding genuinely perplexed. "There's an awful lot of... stuff in it." He steps in closer to Jay, into Jay's personal space, on the pretense of getting a better look at Jay's hair. "There's some carpet lint here, you know. Cloak room?"

"Cloak room," Jay agrees, mouth dry. Blake smells really, really good, like expensive shampoo and laundered clothing and warm dark.

"Pity." Vampires breathe when they speak, because their voice boxes don't suddenly change design when they stop being human, and Blake's breath ghosts on Jay's cheek with the word. "I rather fancied the mental image of your tryst taking place out here on the balcony, under the stars."

Jay forces himself to break the intensity of Blake's eye contact and looks up. "Under the cloud cover and smog, you mean. It's a little too public with the party going on inside, anyway. Anybody could come out and see."

Blake's thumb presses lightly into the dip below Jay's lower lip, tilting his face back down so they're looking at each other again. Typically, vampire lips are pale, barely darker than the skin around them, but Blake's are flushed and full and almost red, and his eyes catch the light like a cat's.

"What about a private room? This is a hotel, after all. There are balconies with no interruptions on many of the suites."

Jay feels drunk and giddy, almost dizzy, lightheaded. He forces himself to blink, and the

tiny movement takes supreme effort. The giddy feeling fades, a little. His heartbeat feels fast and heavy in his wrists and throat.

“I have to go,” Jay makes himself say, stepping away from Blake before he can change his mind. If he’s getting eaten by a vampire tonight then that’s seriously shitty luck, but Jay’s not going to fall swooning into the arms of death like a Hammer Horror starlet.

He tells the head waiter that he feels sick. He’s not sure if the lie is convincing, but he doesn’t really care. If the worst thing that happens tonight is that they dock his pay, he’ll call that a victory. He changes out of the mandatory outfit the wait staff is forced to wear and back into his own clothes, jeans and a fraying t-shirt from some underground band. Jay thinks the shirt might’ve belonged to Michelle originally, but he stole it long ago. Jay knows better than to think that he can throw a vampire like Blake off a hunt this easily, but he’s. Well. He’s not dying in an ugly uniform for a job he doesn’t like, at least. That’s something.

## **BETTE**

The new club is made out of a modified cinema. The original movie theatre went bust when TV came along, and it lay empty and decrepit until it got bought in the seventies and turned into a club. Then the club went bust, too, and it went back to showing movies until it got sold again and closed down for renovations eight months ago.

The sign above the front entrance has “Entartung” painted on it in bold black script, with thinner letters underneath reading “Long Live Degenerate Art”. Bette can see that the projection screen from the old theatre is still up on the wall, a blank white rectangle against the newly-papered high black walls.

They get in free because Tommy knows the guy on the door, a college-aged Samoan dude who gives Tommy a smile that is way, way too much information for Bette and Rose. Seriously, Tommy and his friends could be a really slutty mafia if they wanted to be, they’ve got connections in every industry that counts: they get free tickets at all the late-night horror movies, they know pretty much every single waiter and waitress in the greater metropolitan area, they can usually get into clubs without paying the cover.

The security dude draws thick black Xs on the backs of their hands, the standard sign for “we’re underage, don’t give us alcohol”. There’s always a mark of that sort on Bette’s hand; she’s not away from live music for long enough for the old ones to get scrubbed off completely before a new one takes its place.

"I know your parents are, like, progressive and shit, but they did explain to you that you don't have to share your special magical intimate privacy with every single person you think is cute, right?" Bette teases as they head inside. The place is still mostly empty, but everyone who's there seems to be having fun, so it'll probably fill up as the evening progresses.

Tommy shoots her a puzzled look. "Huh?"

Bette shakes her head. "Never mind." She'd probably sleep with a heap of people too, if she knew how to be chill about it like Tommy, but mostly she thinks guys are jerks and so it's a better use of her time to fight with them than to think about the best ways to get them interested in sex, and they don't typically want to have anything to do with her after she's broken their nose or cracked their teeth anyway. Bette would rather just hang out with Rose and go see bands and stuff like that. Sex is pretty overrated.

Tommy wanders off to where Michelle is chatting to one of the band techs by the stage. Michelle and Tommy are both skinny-hipped and deadpan and monosyllabic. Michelle’s dad is black and her mom’s white, and her skin is on the darker side of in-between. She wears her hair braided back in cornrows, the severe style making her wide-lashed eyes look even more striking. Tommy’s got one of his hands on her shoulder, stroking the skin of the side of her neck with his thumb.

"Sex is so completely overrated and lame."

Rose pats Bette on the shoulder. "I'm sure the guy on the door would help you out if you asked."

"What? No, no, I'm... sex is lame. That's all I meant."

Rose shrugs. "Wouldn't know."

Bette can feel her eyes going wide. "Seriously? Okay, I guess the special privacy talk sank in for one of you, after all. Seriously?"

"Can we not?" Rose looks embarrassed. "My virginity is not a topic of public discussion!"

The opening act is putting their stuff together onstage, two lanky dudes fiddling with the microphones and drums, and a tall girl wearing an oversized red hoodie which is so big on her that only a few inches of black hemline show of her short dress. She has the hood pulled low on her face and is biting her nails as she talks to a middle-aged, neatly-dressed guy with a thinning salt-and-pepper ponytail.

"That must be the owner," Bette says, nodding toward him. Rose follows the direction of her gaze. The guy leans in and pecks a kiss on the tall girl's forehead, patting her shoulder like he's encouraging or comforting her. "I guess that's his kid. How awesome would that be, to have a dad who owned a club? She doesn't look any older than us and she's opening for Remember the Stars."

"She looks nervous." Rose sounds sympathetic. The girl is still mostly obscured by her hoodie, so they can't see her expression, but her posture is most certainly not that of someone feeling at ease. One of the lanky guys gives her the thumbs up and sits down behind the drum kit. The other picks up a guitar bearing remnants of old band stickers.

The girl nods, unzipping her jacket as she climbs the stairs, discarding the hoodie behind her as she steps into the stage area.

"We are The Cretins And Whores," she says, not bothering to approach her microphone. Even without help, her voice carries through the club's high-ceilinged space easily; bold, a little deeper than expected, and carrying traces of a European accent.

It's the perfect voice for her painted red lips, her white, sharp-chinned face, and her loose coal-black hair, her short satin dress and her heavy boots and ox-blood bass. "Thank you for listening."

"I'm in love. I'm going to marry that woman," Rose tells Bette with total seriousness. Bette rolls her eyes, just a little.

"Are there any brunette girls on the planet that you're not a total queermo for?"

Rose pretends to ponder the question seriously for a long beat. "You?" She grins, and grabs Bette's hand. "Come on, come with me. I want to go meet her after they finish."

"Okay, okay, god, don't pull my arm out of its socket, you violent little psychopath," Bette complains as she's dragged along.

The band are okay, not great, though Bette doubts Rose would notice if they were the worst band on earth with the way she's staring starry-eyed at the bassist. The bassist is easily the best player in the band, but she seems more interested in having fun than being good, bopping her head and ginning and, after the first song, winking at Rose.

"Don't have a heart attack," Bette warns, laughing, as Rose pretends to swoon.

They play five songs, all essentially forgettable but the last, which is when Rose's bassist steps to center stage, and the band launches into a raunchy, grinding version of "Anything Goes", the girl's smoky voice growling out the lyrics like she's daring the half-interested crowd to try to stop her from doing whatever the hell she wants.

"I could never sing like that," Rose says, awed, as the song ends and the band thank the audience for listening. Bette punches her on the arm.

"Whatever. Your voice is great."

The bassist is winding cables into a haphazard coil when Bette and Rose approach her. Bette elbows Rose forward, making a small noise in the back of her throat which she hopes effectively conveys "talk to her, seriously, I promise she won't set fire to your hair or



rip your throat out or break your legs or anything scary". Rose throws a nervous, slightly cranky glance over one shoulder at Bette, and then turns back to the girl.

"You're great," she manages to say, voice squeaking a little with nerves. Bette grins. So does the girl.

"Well so are you, for saying so. Thank you. I'm Gretchen."

"Rose, and this is Bette."

Bette gives a wave, staying a step and a half behind Rose. "Howdy."

"I wasn't sure about being the first ones up here on the new stage, but it didn't go so badly," Gretchen says, coming down the stairs to the main floor level where Bette and Rose are. She retrieves her hoodie on the way, knotting the sleeves of the jacket around her waist to keep it handy. The impromptu belt pulls her dress up shorter, revealing more of her white, soft-looking thighs.

"Are you guys new? I haven't seen you play before," Bette offers, knowing that keeping a sane and socially acceptable conversation going with a stranger isn't Rose's favorite thing to do, even when said stranger is cute.

Gretchen nods, pushing her long hair off her shoulders so it falls darkly down her back almost to her waist. "Yes. Assembled just this afternoon, which is why we weren't very good. Aaron and Joey are Ewen's sons. It was their idea to do this, after they heard that there was only one band lined up for the night. I guess there are perks to being the children of the owner."

"We saw you with him before the show. We assumed that it was you who was his kid," Rose admits. There's a faint and utterly charming blush creeping up her neck and cheeks.

Gretchen touches her arm lightly as she answers.

"No. Ewen is the son of my grandfather."

"Your uncle, then?"

Gretchen mustn't have heard Rose's words very well -- the volume of the crowd is picking up to a pretty steady din around them now -- because it takes her a second to answer.

"Yes, my uncle, of course. That is a beautiful design." She's gesturing to the scrap of paper tucked into the clear plastic front of Bette's shoulder bag. It's a picture of a bird, a sparrow done all in blues and made out of a patchwork of squares in different shades, stitched together with visible lines. Like a ragdoll, or a Frankenstein monster. Bette's had it in the there pocket since forever.

"Oh, yeah. Rose drew that. I'm going to get it as a tattoo as soon as I'm old enough," Bette explains.

"You're a very talented artist," Gretchen appraises. Rose wrinkles her nose.

"I'm not that great yet. I want to be, one day."

The conversation lulls, Gretchen and Rose just staring at each other with slightly goofy smiles on their faces, and Bette's between thinking it's adorable and thinking that it makes her want to vomit.

"Rose was wondering if she could have your phone number," Bette prompts, because what are best friends for if it's not being totally mortifying all the time?

"Oh!" Gretchen pulls a tiny, sleek little cellphone out of a seemingly impossible pocket in her clingy dress. "Right. Yeah." She presses a few buttons, obviously looking through the

stored list of numbers. "Sorry. I always forget my own number because I go through phones so quickly. I lose them all the time. Do you have your phone, or a pen and paper?"

Rose never charges her phone. Bette gives her shit about it, and Tommy seems baffled that anyone can survive without a keypad in their hands, especially someone so closely related to him. But her habits stay exactly as they are, absent-minded and infuriating and quintessentially Rose.

"Oh, I, um," Rose stammers now. Bette takes pity, and comes to her aid.

"Here, put it in mine," she says, handing the phone over. "Take mine too, if you want. I'm usually near Rosie outside of school hours."

"Thank you." Gretchen busies herself with the process of swapping the numbers.

"Do you go to school?" Rose asks. Gretchen shakes her head, still looking down at the phones.

"No. I write a little. My family has money, so. You know," she says, as if Bette and Rose could have any idea what that kind of life would possibly be like. Bette can't even imagine what it would be to exist without worrying about money and bills and how to earn enough to stay alive.

"Gretch," one of the boys from the band says, nodding his head toward the backstage area. "Come on, Dad says he wants us cleared out so Remember the Stars can set up. Come get your bass."

"It was great to meet you," Gretchen says to Rose and Bette, touching Rose on the arm again and then repeating the gesture to Bette. "I'll call. Or you can call me. I forget to get things done, sometimes."

When she's gone, Rose squeezes Bette's hand in her own. "Oh my god! Did that really happen?"

Bette laughs. She can't help it. Rose gets crushed easily, but Bette's never seen her actually follow through to getting a number before.

"Yeah, it really happened, and now the two of you are going to get married and have a million adopted babies and be sickeningly cute together."

Rose giggles, blush still firmly in place on her usually pallid cheeks. "I'll settle for a date, to start with," she says.

Remember the Stars are, as always, good. They're better than good, and Bette doesn't say that about many of the bands she sees. Bette sees kind of a lot of bands, because she goes to see the bands she likes as often as she can, and they're usually playing with two or three other bands, and if she likes one of those other bands she'll add them to her 'see often' list, and it just branches and branches and branches off like that.

If more math involved concrete examples of this sort, Bette would probably be passing it without the usual pulling-teeth sensation that it takes to get through her homework. Who even thought of that as a simile anyway, 'pulling teeth'? It's fairly horrifying, as images go. Bette's never had teeth pulled, but she remembers when Rose had to get a root canal and then that didn't work and they had to just yank the whole molar out. It had been totally revolting, a little rotten tooth in a zip-lock bag, and Rose's eyes had both gone bruised-black like she'd broken her nose or something. Actually, it was all pretty excellent and cool, but still. That didn't mean it hadn't been totally revolting.

Bette's shitty at math, which is funny, because she rules at Chemistry. Chemistry is like math, if math had any kind of practical application whatsoever in the real world. Which, okay, it does, but not all that often. The branching good-bands tree in Bette's head is the first time she can think of in the recent past when knowing how to count past four has been useful at all.

Remember the Stars are one of the best local bands. They're too good to just be local, but Bette's given up trying to find logic in the randomness of which acts hit it big and which ones stay at the level of playing tiny clubs.

The lead singer, Lily Green, flashes the still-side-stage Tommy and Michelle a giant bright grin as she steps up to her microphone. Lily's hot, in a too-cool-for-you way that Tommy and Tommy's loser friends all think is, like, icy and sophisticated and whatever but is actually kind of pretentious. That's what Bette thinks, anyway, but Tommy says she's just being a bitch because Lily is who Bette wants to be.

It's true enough that Lily's short spiky hair, dyed bright red at the front and black at the back, is excellently cool, and that she's got three rings through one dark eyebrow and thick black eyeliner and mascara and her lips are pale pink and her skin is just a shade or two darker than Bette's own olive complexion, and her clothes are always effortlessly stylish in a funky alternative way and, okay, maybe Bette has a tiny bit of envy going on, but that's only because Bette knows in her gut that she would make an awesome rock star if she ever got the opportunity to prove it.

Lily's got the charisma and the voice, but it's the musicians who make Remember the Stars a cut above the other bands Bette regularly goes to shows for. The drummer, Will Cooper, is steady and reliable and solid, but then sometimes he gets a smirky little grin on his face and does some incredibly fancy and flashy riff on his kit that sounds like it belongs on a classic metal album. He's tall, especially beside Lily (who's short, but not quite as short as Bette, which is another thing Bette envies her for), with light brown hair and the kind of peach-colored skin Rose would probably have if Rose ever left her basement voluntarily.

Anna, the bassist, is possibly technically hotter than Lily, but she doesn't do the flashy, show-off, frontwoman stuff that gets Lily noticed by every set of hormones in the room. Anna's got blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail high on the back of her head, and deep red lipstick, and glossy red nails, and a little red dress that shows off her long, long legs. She likes to be barefoot onstage, and her toenails are red too. The guitarist, Russ, is the oldest member of the band -- Bette thinks she heard Lily tell Tommy once that Russ is twenty-eight. He's darker-complected than Will but has similar features; Bette's not sure if

they're related or if it's just coincidence. Tonight Russ is wearing a Nirvana t-shirt, which looks faded enough that he might actually have bought it while Kurt Cobain was still alive. Bette wonders if Russ has ever thought about the fact that at least half the kids who come to his shows weren't even born when "Nevermind" was released.

Their music is rocky with a little more pop in it than Bette would usually listen to, but Lily's smarmy charm carries them through the cheesier lyrics and the more obvious melodies. Mostly, Bette likes them because they're fun. It's impossible to associate Remember the Stars with anything more serious than nights out with friends and giggling and dancing around and having a good time, and Bette appreciates that. There's too much depressing shit in the world as it is; she doesn't need to spend her time listening to stuff that'll make her feel even worse about the world.

The other great thing about Remember the Stars is that their fans -- with the exception of Tommy's little poser crew who like to spend their time looking disaffected off to the side of the stage -- like to have big noisy happy dance pits at the band's shows. Bette loves nothing else about life nearly so much as she loves throwing herself into a throng of people who will throw themselves at her right back, all of them jumping and pushing and laughing and letting all their energy and aggression out in a way that feels a lot more creative and satisfying than the fights Bette gets into at school. Contrary to what most of the people at her school think, she likes dancing a lot more than she likes punching asshole jock losers.

## **JAY**

Jay walks a block and a half from the hotel to his bus stop, which is one of the brick-walled shelter sort with a seat and a trash can and half-faded tagging sprayed on the timetable. Jay's heartbeat stutters (if he's being honest, the truth is that it hasn't gone back to normal since he walked away on the balcony) as he approaches the bus stop. Blake is already there, leaning elegantly against the wall. He's got an honest-to-God top hat on now, the same subtle dark grey as his suit, and soft-looking light grey gloves on his hands. He straightens as Jay approaches, and nods hello.

Jay is an expert in the art of blanking people. It's one of the core skills required to be truly

cool; how will people know that you're better than them if you don't pointedly, icily ignore them? So he knows the power of his dull, deliberately unseeing gaze. He can make prom queens crumble and develop spontaneous eating disorders from the barest glance.

Blake just stares right back, demanding eye contact, and smiles a little. Eventually Jay gets bored of the contest, and breaks the moment by looking away.

"What." Jay keeps his voice so flat that the word isn't even really a question. "You're going to follow me around until I go somewhere private enough that you can kill me, is that it?"

"My calendar has no appointments for tonight, apart from the party we're already done with. Stalking someone as delightful as yourself sounds gloriously entertaining."

"Delightful," Jay repeats scornfully. "You can't think of a better word?"

"Monotone, maybe," Blake concedes. "A little inflection won't be the death of you."

"I think you're generating quite enough inflection for the both of us."

Blake's eyes narrow and Jay smirks. If he's about to get murdered by a bloodthirsty creature of the night, at least he's going down getting in a few good jabs.

His phone buzzes in his pocket and he pulls it out, ignoring the way Blake's still watching him unwaveringly. The message is from Michelle: *u done w/ work yet?*

*y*, he texts back. *anything going on?*

"Why don't you just telephone each other? Or don't those things come with that feature anymore?"

Jay rolls his eyes at Blake. "You're hilarious. Couldn't you at least pretend to be classy and mysterious, just for a little while?" It's just Jay's luck to get eaten by the lamest vampire ever.

"Only if you'll wear a white nightgown and pretend to be a blushing virgin," Blake counters.

Jay sighs, his phone buzzing with Michelle's next message.

*we r @ coffeshop nr natalies. usual people. u missd remembr the stars. meet us?*

It vibrates again before he hits reply.

*lily green hit on tommy.*

That makes Jay laugh out loud, then shake his head in response to Blake's quizzical expression. "A friend of mine. Someone in a band we like was hitting on him. Everyone hits on him. He's got magic pheromones or something crazy like that."

"What about you? Do you hit on him?" Blake asks. Jay shrugs.

"Yeah. Sometimes. Oh, what, you're going to judge me for being slutty? You're planning to kill me, what do you care about who I am?"

"You know, Jason, most people are significantly less blasé about their impending deaths than you seem to be."

"I'm fifteen. That's longer than I thought I'd get," Jay tells him before turning back to the phone's message display.

*can't*, he writes back to Michelle. *got plans*.

*k. c u @ school.*

Jay looks down at the message for a few long seconds, letting himself have a moment of regret that he's never going to have a chance to hang with his friends again. Then he shoves his phone in his pocket and says "fuck it."

"Something wrong?"

"Maybe I'm not as blasé about dying as I thought I was. I know you don't care, but I was doing pretty okay here. I've got a scholarship to my school. I bet there are a bunch of



dumb kids that the teachers would love for you to get rid of instead of me."

"Bargaining is horribly tacky," Blake replies in a lightly scolding tone. "And my dear boy, it was you who introduced the idea of my killing you into the conversation. There are far too few truly interesting people in this world for me to waste them on so dull an end as dinner."

Jay blinks, surprised for the first time in a long time. "Really."

"Or maybe I'm just saying that to give you a false sense of security," Blake says, holding his gloved palms up as if weighing his options. "Perhaps I take especial pleasure in dashing hopes."

"As well as the especial pleasure you take in the sound of your own voice, you mean?"

Blake laughs, his head tipping back enough to expose a length of his own pale throat above the crisp line of his collar. "Quite."

"So if you're not going to bite me, what's with the stalker routine?"

Blake smiles. Jay can't help but shiver the the sight of the sharp, sharp points of Blake's incisors.

"I don't remember saying anything about not biting you."

Suddenly Jay's shoulder blades are slammed against the brick side of the bus shelter, Blake's hands on his shoulders pushing him back hard enough to hurt. The back of Jay's head bounces against the wall as well, stunning him for a split second and making him grunt in surprise and pain. The sound dies in his throat, strangled into a gurgle, as Blake's fangs break the soft skin below Jay's jaw.

Jay's knees buckle but he doesn't fall. One of Blake's arms is curved around Jay's side to his back, a palm splayed across his spine and keeping his body held close. Jay tries to struggle, to raise his own hands and push, but his arms and legs feel leaden and his head swims, throbbing with the pulse of his heart. All he can see with his head tipped back like

this is a streetlight and some power lines, and they're swimming in and out of focus. The sound of Blake drinking, delicate wet slurps, seems to fill Jay's brain up and shove everything else out.

It hurts more than anything Jay can remember but it feels stupid that he should be trying to remember anything other than this moment, it feels stupid that he ever cared about school or music or friends or anything that isn't the harsh wet-penny smell of his blood staining into his shirt and the way Blake's jaw moves against Jay's neck with each swallow.

Blake pulls away, moving his mouth down nearer to the slope of Jay's shoulder, and bites again, even deeper than the first time. Jay's eyes roll back behind his lids, lashes fluttering.

After a long time - or maybe not that long, because Jay's still alive, there's still blood in him, and he whimpers in protest as Blake pulls away - Jay is carefully sat down on the bus shelter bench. He tries to open his eyes, to say something, but everything's starting to go gray and still.

"Blast," he hears Blake says, somewhere very far away. "I truly didn't intend... I didn't know you'd be so sweet. I'm sorry, Jay."

Jay wants to tell him that it doesn't matter, that it's just one of those shitty things that happen in life, but the gray around him is getting darker and, as he feels Blake's arms lift him again and carry him away from the shelter, Jay's eyes close completely and he's gone.