

Immortal

LOVE STORIES WITH BITE



EDITED BY

P. C. CAST

with Leah Wilson



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Introduction

P. C. CAST

So . . . just what the hell is it with you teenagers and vampires? Huh? Okay, I have my suspicions. As with any mature, reasoning adult over the age of thirty who is also a parent, my natural inclination is to believe their allure has to do with . . . well . . . sex. I mean, come on! I'll admit to reading *Interview with a Vampire* the year it was released. I won't mention that year so as not to frighten you with my advanced age, but I will say I was sixteen the first time I read the book, and I was definitely tantalized and titillated by the overt sexuality of Anne Rice's vamps.

But while I'm taking this trip way back down Memory Lane, I find that I need to admit to more than just my age. If I'm being honest with myself, and with you, I have to add that the allure of the vampire is much more complex than simple lust. The truth is that vampire appeal goes beyond raging hormones and our baser emotions. I devoured Anne Rice's book and then went on to absorb Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's amazing Chronicles of Saint Germain not just because they were sexy—that's way too simplistic a reason. I got hooked on vampires as a teenager because I identified with them.

About now my adult readers are shaking their heads and thinking, *Cast has lost it . . . again.*

It does sound bizarre. How could a teenager in the '70s, or the 2000s for that matter, "identify" with vampires? Okay, stay with me here. When I was a teenager I understood vamps deep in my soul because, at the very core of my hormone-filled being, I believed I was immortal too. Actually, it was such an innate belief, one that went so hand-in-hand with zits and driver's ed, boy angst and prom, that it wasn't until I looked back in retrospect that I realized what really drew me to absorb all the vampire mythos I could get my hands on.

Think about it. The sensuality and allure of vampires must go beyond biting and blood. Come on! Neither of those things is particularly enticing, even when you add a hot, brooding guy or a sexy chick to the mix. But sprinkle in the ability to live practically forever and to be frozen physically in time so that you don't have to age, and you have a whole new thing. Vampires rebel against time, and they win! Teenagers get that. Because isn't rebelling against time, whether "time" is represented by wrinkles or a parent's disciplinary hand or death itself, what being a teenager is all about?

Of course it is. Or at least it mostly is.

Hopefully you're nodding and grinning and thinking, *Cast hasn't lost it. She's old, sure, but she hasn't lost it. Yet.*

Is it any wonder *Buffy* became such a phenomenon? On one hand, she personified the immediacy of being a teenager. Everything was so deliciously now with Buffy and the Scooby gang. For them, every day really might have been the end of the world. On the other hand, Buffy seemed invulnerable, even to herself, even after she'd died—twice! And who did she fall in love with? Vampires, of course. Yes, Buffy had mortal boyfriends, but she struggled with the fact that it never seemed to work with a regular guy her own age (and species). The characters of Angel and Spike were old, and admittedly, monsters, but Buffy identified and fell in love with them instead. Why? (I mean, besides the fact that they were both so *fiiiiine*.) As vampires, they symbolized everything that Buffy, as a teenager, believed would always be exclusively hers: immortal youth and the possibility of forever. And it worked! Spike and Angel hooked the audience along with Buffy, and whether we were fifteen or fifty we wanted to be with them too—to share in the allure of attainable immortality and forever love.

It's a theme I play with in my own young adult vampire series, the *House of Night*, which I coauthor with my daughter, Kristin. In our books the teenage heroine, Zoey Redbird, is changing lives and worlds—moving from her human existence to enter the world of vampires, where she will make the Change into an adult vamp, or die. During this Change Zoey struggles to maintain a relationship with her human boyfriend. In that struggle she's really saying that she isn't ready to fully embrace the magic and passion and foreverness vampires symbolize. At the same time, she's inexorably

drawn to the allure of the vampyre, which is best represented in the characters of Erik Night and James Stark, in whom she glimpses the possibility of forever. In later HoN books, add the presence of the mystical fallen angel, Kalona—who is, indeed, literally immortal—and the teenage angst as well as allure is really cranked up. It's scary for Zoey, but it also attracts her, just as it attracts the books' readers.

I think that's something else about the vampire mythos teenagers can especially identify with—the sense of fear that goes along with the promise of forever. It's much like the bittersweet fear you feel as you contemplate leaving home for the first time. It's something you desire—something you look forward to and dream about—but there's also a frightening sense of take-this-step-and-nothing-will-ever-be-the-same about it. And yet even that fear itself is exciting, compelling. Vampires carry that same sense of excitement about them. Sure, we can all push through our hesitation and reach for immortality, but perhaps only teens are willing to truly embrace it, because you're used to the big question mark that is the future and you still believe forever can be attained—that youth can really conquer death and love can be victorious over age and apathy.

Because that's really the heart of youth, isn't it? It's the magical possibility of forever that opens before all of us as young adults. When you're a teenager you've become old enough to see the promise of adulthood, you can practically touch the allure of freedom and the mystery of imagining what is to come, but you're also still young enough to believe that you can move through that future without changing,

without losing yourself and turning into scary cloned versions of your parents.

And that's what the vampires we fall in love with struggle to do too. No matter the mythos, whether we're lost in the world of Lestat, Edward and Bella, Angel and Buffy, or even my fabulous Zoey Redbird, our immortal enchanters all strive to maintain sense of self and find lasting love over the long stretches of their lives. In these struggles they take us with them and, perhaps, the journey is more magically real for those of you who are still young.

Come with me, will you? Let's pass through the realm of immortals again. I was dazzled by the variety and richness of the stories the wonderful authors in this anthology created. It is always a pleasure to visit Rachel Caine's Morgenville, and a familiar joy to be seduced by the magic of Tanith Lee's unique voice and vision. I was a proud mom, smiling at Kristin Cast's world in which vampires were created by the ancient Furies, as well as a satisfied reader. The conclusion of Claudia Gray's pre-Civil War story had me cheering. In "Haunted Love" I was pleasantly surprised by Cynthia Leitich Smith's plot twists and turns. Richelle Mead's "Blue Moon" made me breathless. Nancy Holder's post-apocalyptic vision took me on a wild, scary ride, and Rachel Vincent's vampiric siren was a cool addition to our mythos.

I invite you to join me in reading the magic within these pages. We'll be mesmerized by the allure of the vampire together, and by doing so—even if just temporarily—we'll all attain a measure of immortality.

Haunted Love

CYNTHIA LEITICH SMITH

On my way to work, I pass the worn-out white cottage where I lived as a little kid. The windows are boarded up. So is the door. I expect it'll be put up for auction. I expect it'll go cheap. Nobody's moving to Spirit, Texas.

Every year, the high school grads pack up and leave—one or two for college, the rest for jobs in bigger towns. And every other week, a crowd gathers at the funeral parlor to pay their respects to one of the old folks. Death is the most lucrative business in town.

It seems like everyone dies or leaves. But I'm not going anywhere. Spirit is home. It's the little piece of the world that makes sense to me, which, lately, is saying a lot.

"Cody!" calls a bright, female voice from behind me.

I ignore her. I've never been a talkative kind of guy.

"Cody Stryker!" exclaims the teenage daughter of the new mayor—the one who's going to turn the empty storefronts into antique shops and the abandoned houses into

bed-and-breakfasts and offer Spirit a future again, or so he says. "Wait," she pleads. "I need to talk to you."

I pause, turn. Did I say nobody moves here? The girl standing in front of me this evening is an exception to that rule. Last fall, Ginny Augustine and her folks arrived in Spirit after the bank foreclosed on their home in The Woodlands.

Typically, you have to live in town for at least a year before running for office, but nobody else wanted the job, so the city council passed a waiver and Mr. Augustine ran unopposed.

My glare falls to Ginny's hand on my sleeve.

She snatches it back. "I don't believe we've met before. I'm—"

"I know who you are." I begin walking again. Glancing at her sideways, I ask, "What do you want?"

I feel a faint flash of guilt when she blinks, startled.

"Well," Ginny begins again, "someone's cranky. Here's the deal: I'm going to handle ticket sales for you. Cool, huh?" When I don't reply, she adds, "You know, at the theater. Movies? Tickets?"

For the first time in more than fifty years, the Old Love Theater will open tonight at 8 P.M. After Uncle Dean's death, I sold off a third of his cattle, his antique gun, and his fishing boat to make the down payment. None of it was worth much, but neither is the Old Love.

It's reassuring to have somewhere to be on a night-to-night basis, though, to have another purpose beyond satisfying my thirst. To have something else to think about besides the night I faced down my uncle for the last time.

I keep going, trying to ignore how Ginny falls in step by my side.

At sixteen, she's girl-next-door pretty, medium height and curvy. Her teeth are even and pearly white. Long, honey-blond hair frames her friendly face. What with the powder blue baby T that reads *sassy* in rhinestones and her faded denim cutoffs, Ginny looks like she was born and bred in Spirit, like a real small-town girl.

When we reach the theater, she persists in following me around back.

Ginny leans against the door, coy, as I fish my keys out of my jeans pocket.

"Big night," she observes. "You nervous?"

"No," I lie, unlocking the deadbolt. Once inside, I add, "And I'm not hiring."

"Really?" Ginny asks, shoving a sandal-clad foot in the doorway. "You mean you're going to run the projector, pop the corn, restock the concession stand, ring up food and drinks, vacuum the carpet, change the toilet paper, and do . . . whatever managers do—paperwork and bills—all by yourself? Think about it, cowboy. How do you plan to sell tickets and handle concessions at the same time?"

On one hand, I don't want to encourage her. On the other, I don't need any trouble from her leaving pissed off. I don't need trouble—period. I wish she would just take off. "I'm not opening the concession stand."

"Well, there go your profits! You're charging—what?—three bucks a show? I know people around here are cheap, but do you have any idea what, say, electricity alone is

going to cost? It's summer. It's Texas. Think: air conditioning."

Honestly, I hadn't considered that. It's not like I have an MBA or anything. I just graduated from high school a couple of weeks ago. I used to mow lawns in the summer, but this will be my first real job off the ranch. I may have been over-ambitious.

"Plus," Ginny goes on, "insurance, taxes, and you might want to advertise the place as a tourist attraction. The founders of Spirit were key players in the early days of the Republic, and historical tourism is becoming—"

"Enough." She's a politician's daughter, all right. Opening the door wider, knowing I'll regret it, I say, "Come in. We'll talk."

Ginny quiets as I lead her through the service hallway. It is hot in here. Muggy.

I wonder what, if anything, she knows about the building's tragic history, its lingering reputation. A teenage girl—Sonia Mitchell—was found dead in a storage closet in 1959. Another girl, Katherine something-or-other—Vogel maybe—went missing for good. She was new in town, like Ginny, and her body was never found. Both girls worked at the theater. And again, like Ginny, both girls were sixteen.

Everyone hereabouts has heard the story. Partiers have busted in over the years, too, and every now and then a whole pack would run out hollering about a ghost.

There's no denying that the theater has an eerie quality to it. Over the past week, I've seen the letter "S" written in the dust and wiped it away again and again. Once or twice, I

could've sworn I heard a soft voice coming from somewhere in the building. Enticing, musical, feminine . . . I'm starting to hear it in my dreams.

As Ginny and I enter the lobby, I don't give her the satisfaction of cranking the air conditioner immediately.

Instead, I take in my new business, trying to see it the way tonight's customers will. It's a grand old place with a huge antique crystal chandelier, built when cotton was king. Granted, the gold and crimson wallpaper is faded, and the blood-red carpet is worn. So are the red upholstered seats in the screening room—both on the main floor and up in the balconies. But there's still a romance to the place, a whisper of the past.

Besides, my mom loved it. Every time we passed by, she'd say the Old Love was a ghost of the glory days of Spirit, a reminder of who we'd been and could become again.

"Do you know how to run a register?" I ask Ginny, gesturing.

She's already playing with it. I only have one, set at the ticket counter. It's an older model that I ordered off eBay.

"Hmm," Ginny says, scanning the lobby before brightening. "I know! We can lay out candy and popcorn on the counter, post prices, and provide a box with a slot in it so that people can pay on the honor system. Like at the library for folks with fines on overdue books."

That wouldn't work in most places. In Spirit, it'll do fine.

"There are some boxes in my office," I say, impressed despite myself. After a pause, I add, "Why do you want this job anyway?"

Ginny shrugs. "I could use the money."

That makes two of us. The thing about living forever, I suddenly need a long-term financial plan. And, I realize, so far as Ginny is concerned, there aren't any other jobs within walking distance. I bet she used to have a flashy car. I bet it was repossessed.

I can't help wondering if there's more to her being here than that. Not to be conceited, but I'm fairly good-looking. I've got Mom's blue eyes, and they stand out against my deep brown skin, slick black hair, and the sharp features I inherited from whoever was my dad. I'm wiry but solid enough from working on Uncle Dean's ranch.

Outside Spirit, girls are always flirting, not that I know what to say back.

The locals, on the other hand, they pity me. When my mom died, everyone said what a shame it was for me to be orphaned at only ten. They saw my bruises in the years that followed. And they knew what Uncle Dean was like.

For a long time, I thought sooner or later somebody would report him to social services—a preacher, a teacher, the school nurse—but it never happened.

I guess most folks were as scared of Uncle Dean as I was.

Ginny is looking at me with an oddly knowing smile, and I realize she's waiting for my decision. I can't help thinking she may be useful. I can't help wondering if she has a boyfriend. But spending quality time around that flesh-and-blood girl is intrinsically problematic. The flesh is a problem. The blood is a problem. At any given moment, it's a toss-up which is worse. "Okay," I say. "You're hired."

The chandelier rattles, distracting us both.

“Drafty,” Ginny says, glancing around. “But where’s it coming from?”

She asks too many questions. “I turned on the air conditioner.”

It’s a lie.



After a ridiculous amount of negotiation, I agree to ten cents above minimum wage, send Ginny home to change into a white button-down shirt, black slacks, and black shoes, and tell her to come back in a couple of hours.

Unlocking the door to my cramped office, I’m less than thrilled to realize that I may need to hire a second person. Someone local. Quiet.

Within the next few years, I need to sew up an understanding with the good people of Spirit. They may not know what I am, but they’ll figure it out over time. On the off chance that Ginny’s daddy’s “revitalization” plan works, I’ll be here for generations. I need to reassure them that my presence is no more threatening than the fact that Edwina Labarge collects snow globes or that Betty Mueller talks to her dead husband or that Miss Josefina and Miss Abigail have been “roommates” for more than thirty years.

I’ll need front people, I realize, so that the customers who drive in from nearby towns don’t notice that the “young” owner never seems to age.

Amber Smoke

KRISTIN CAST

From their place in the bowels of the Underworld, the Furies, Daughters of Night, summon their son. They are skeletal winged creatures, the black of rotting flesh thinly stretched across their hunched, quivering bodies, not much more than flesh sacks barely able to contain the power of each of their morbid talents.

“Alekossss, come.”

He was birthed eons ago from the womb of vengeance, conceived by jealousy, and grown in constant anger. Bred to defend mortals, he was sent from their underground realm to the world above, and there, away from their poison, he learned compassion. At first only so that he could mimic and blend. Later, after centuries, humanity took hold within him, causing the Furies unending confusion with their errant son, this man who grew up and away from them.

Alekos appears, his Herculean body glowing from the descent, the return home. “Yes, my mothers?” He steps down from the ledge he was summoned to, his torn jeans dragging through the souls of the doomed as he strolls toward the three creatures in the dark. He can hear their wings rustling with the excitement of his return. Although he had been there only weeks before, they had not seen him in years. Time ticks by slowly below. As he approaches, they gently grab him and lead him farther into the nothing, farther from the whines of the tortured.

“Ssssit.” They command. He sits and puts his feet nonchalantly up on the table.

“The longer you’re up there, the more disgusting and human you become.” Their throats click and rattle as they speak as one.

He removes his feet and snaps his fingers. Oil lamps flicker on, revealing a cave wet and putrid with chaos and death. The three figures huddle together staring at their son across a crude stone table on which sits a bouquet of night-blooming moon flowers the delicate color of infants’ flesh. Slowly they begin to rock back and forth as if they are one and not three. Their eyes are dark and endless, and drip with the blood of the tortured. The snakes in their hair alternate between attacking and caressing one another.

“The Fates have decided. Her cord iss being cut tonight.” At first they speak as one, then break apart, finishing each other’s thoughts.

“You musst find her,”

“give her life,”

“sssssve her,”
 “sso ssshe can”
 “give usss”
 “vengeance.”

The Furies click with amusement as his mind is flooded with pictures of a beautiful young woman: long chestnut hair, chocolate eyes, olive skin, and a black dress. They have chosen her for him. He blinks and stands. Alekos knows he was only there for this—the gift of his mission. It is now time for him to depart, and for the first time in centuries he feels nervous, excited, alive.

“Thank you, mothers.” He turns to leave. “Oh! Furies, mothers.” He glances back to see them still swaying. “Where do I find her?”

They close the black holes that served as their eyes, grip each other tightly, and send their too beautiful son to the modern world with the sounds of their shrieks echoing their farewells.



Stop and stare. You start to wonder why you're here not there.

Ryan Tedder’s melodic voice came booming out of my black cell phone, waking me from a much-needed nap. I groped around my nightstand unsuccessfully for my glasses. Seriously blind as a bat, I quickly gave up on reading the glowing caller ID box. Instead I flipped open the phone.

“Hello?”

“Oh my God, Jenna. Were you sleeping?” The annoyed tone picked me up out of the dream world I was loitering in and threw me back into reality.

“Bridget? No! Sleeping, me? No!” I perkily pretended.

“Good! Well, I was just calling to remind you to bring your camera tonight. We’re going to have so much fun at Taylor’s hotel party! I can’t wait! Being seniors is sooo much fun! What are you wearing?”

“Umm, I think my little black strapless dress with my mom’s new gold shoes.”

Bridget sucked in air. “No way! Those new strappy heels from Saks? That is so not fair! We’re going to look super hott, like always. Ugh, hang on, my mom is yelling at me.” She moved the mouth piece of her cell away and I could hear her muffled whines at her mom. “*Okay, Mom.* She wants me to tell you not to forget your cell phone because that gross serial killer guy just killed someone else. Well duh, he’s a *serial* killer, jeez. Sorry, she is so protective and weird. But anyway, I have to go finish getting gorgeous. See you at the Ambassador at ten! Love you, and don’t forget the digital!”

The line went dead. *How is she always so happy?*

I stood up, stretched, found my glasses laying on the floor next to my nightstand, and looked at the clock: 7:57 P.M. *Crap. No time for a shower.*

As I sleepily wandered the five feet from my bed to my ocean-themed bathroom, I could hear my mom screeching at me from her room down the hall. “Jenna! Do you know where my gold strappy shoes are? I just bought them and

they've already *mysteriously* disappeared." She walked into my room and looked around.

I poked my head out of the bathroom door, my hair falling straight into the toothpaste I had just squeezed onto the brush. "Mom! If you're going to come in here anyway, *why* do you have to yell at me from down the hall?"

"Saves time. Which I don't have much of. Paul's going to be here," she looked down at her watch, "in less than an hour. So?"

"Oh, umm, nope. Haven't seen 'em. Sorry." I hardly ever lie to my mom, she's too good at catching me, but this was different. It was the first party of my senior year of high school, and I had to look the best. And I'm sure Paul had seen them already. She's been with the nerdy mortician for like six months. Besides, gold is hot right now, ask anyone.

"Hmm, well, if you see them let me know." She wasn't looking at me; instead, she continued to take inventory of my room.

"Yeah. Okay." I sighed trying to keep the annoyed *I'm running late too* tone out of my voice. I stuck the toothbrush into my mouth.

She started to leave, and her dark curls bounced around her shoulders, making her suddenly look a lot younger than a forty-something-year-old mom. She paused at the door. "And Jenn, don't forget to take Mr. Pepper. He's in his spot by the front door."

Oh Lord, Mr. Pepper. Ugh. I want to actually be popular this year, not be known as "the girl who carries around pepper spray."

I finished brushing my teeth, put my contacts in, and stood staring in the mirror at my messed-up locks. “Up-do!” I decided.

I began wrapping my fingers around my tangled hair in an attempt to turn it into an intentionally messy low pony when the cute Ryan Tedder again blared through the room. I quickly clipped up my hair and glanced down at the sink where I had set my phone. “Connor!” The picture of his goofy smile, sandy shaggy hair, and gray eyes made my stomach jump.

“Hey.” I answered casually, pretending not to be excited.

“Hey. I thought you’d never answer. What are you doin’?”

“Nothin’.” I rolled my eyes. *Nothin’? I am so lame.*

“Oh, well, that’s cool. I just wanted to see if you’re coming to Taylor’s thing tonight. There’s gonna be a DJ, and his older brother’s bringing vodka and beer and stuff, so it should be pretty awesome.”

Of course I’m going. It’s only like the biggest social event of the semester! “Umm, yeah. I think Bridge and I’ll probably make an appearance.”

“Good. I’ll definitely look for you then.”

“Definitely. See ya tonight.” I hung up before I could start rambling about my undying love for him. *Oh my God he’s so f-ing hot!*

I fought off the urge to call Bridget and babble semi-hysterically about Connor actually calling me, and instead trotted to my closet on a wave of happy he’s-almost-my-boyfriend thoughts, where my black Tinkerbell cocktail

dress hung waiting. Then I began digging my mom's cute gold shoes out of hiding from under my dirty clothes.

Sadly, Mom chose that instant to prove her radar wasn't fading with age. Thankfully, she knocked on my open door, giving me a split-second of warning.

I jumped. "Mother!" I tried to plaster on an innocent smile as I jerked around to look at her.

"I'm not yelling this time. Ew." She looked at the wad of clothes I'd grabbed to camouflage her shoes. "Don't tell me you're wearing something dirty to your little get-together thing tonight."

"No, Mom, I'm just looking for my, uh, headband. You almost made me pee on myself."

"Sorry. Anyway, Paul's here so I'm heading out on my *date*. Maybe I'll even have a little sex. Hehe." She made herself giggle and turn red as she left me with that disgusting mental picture.

Oh barf! Is everyone having sex except me? I stood up and thought about Connor. *Wait! It's been an hour already?!* I whipped around to face the clock: 9:03. *Shit.* I frantically dressed myself, found the shoes, and ran into the bathroom to put on my face. Luckily, it only takes a little eyeliner and mascara to bring me back from the dead. I checked my phone: 9:21 P.M. *Okay, shoes, and then the thirty-minute drive to the Ambassador.* The shoes, however gorgeous they may be, took about twenty minutes for me to buckle. I'm not a contortionist; feet aren't supposed to bend like that. Stupid (gorgeous) shoes.

I ran downstairs, grabbed Mr. Pepper and my gold clutch, checked for lip gloss and my ID, and nearly tore the

key hook out of the wall in my efforts to bolt out the front door.

“Please start.” I sent out a quiet prayer as I ran down the front sidewalk, crunching autumn leaves on my way. I got in and turned the key to my 1969 cherry-red Mustang. It’s a super cute car, it just doesn’t always run.

Vrrrrrooom. “Success!” I took off down the street and got about five miles away from my house before my super cute car died. I dropped my head against the steering wheel, banged it a few times, and felt around the passenger seat for my cell phone. “Of course, you forgot it, Jenna. And the camera! Dammit! Bridget’s gonna be pissed!” I slouched down in my seat, smashing the puffiness of my dress, and silently cried for my mommy.

As if my mom had miraculously appeared, her words trickled in through my tears: “Jenn, use your bus pass, you silly girl. I got it for you because your car kind of sucks.” *Well, duh.* I stopped crying and checked my eyes in the rearview mirror. Thank God for waterproof eye makeup and close bus stops. My mom’s gold shoes were definitely not made for walking.

When I got to the bus stop I chose to stand alone while three other people crammed themselves on a bench made for two. *This would be so much easier and way less gross if I had just remembered my phone. Now I have completely passed being fashionably late and entered the “you think you’re too good to actually be here” time. And what if Connor is dancing with someone else?!*

“It’s you.” A male voice broke through my internal rant. *Great. I haven’t been here ten minutes and I’m already getting hit on by a bus person creeper.*

“Well, I’m glad you think so.” I crankily angled my back toward him and turned my attention to my clutch and my friend Mr. Pepper. *I have got to get a new car.*

“You don’t understand. You’re—”

I could feel him getting closer so I shoved my hand into my clutch. “No *bud*, I don’t think you understand! If you say another syllable in my general direction,” I whipped out the pepper spray so the Mr. Pepper label was clearly visible, “I will spray this right in your—holy hell!”



I sucked in enough air to oxygenate a small country as I shot off of my pillow.

Stop and stare. You start to wonder why you’re here not there.

My hands were shaking so badly that I could hardly open the phone. “Hello?”

“Hey Jenna! I was just calling to remind you to bring your camera tonight. We’re going to have sooo much fun at Taylor’s hotel party! I can’t wait! Being seniors is sooo much fun! What are you wearing?”

“My black dress with my mom’s new gold shoes?” Huh? What? I rubbed my face, trying to reorient myself.

Bridget gasped. “No way! Those new strappy heels from Saks? That is so not fair! We’re going to look super hott, like always.”

I interrupted her rambling, “Is this a joke, Bridget?”

“Jenn, you know I take fashion and parties very seriously. Are you okay? You’re weren’t sleeping, were you?”

Binge

RACHEL VINCENT

“I need to sing.” Andi screwed the lid onto a bottle of dark red fingernail polish. “Come with me?” Her voice was light, intentionally empty, but I heard the underlying desperation. The aching hunger. No one could hear Andi like I heard her.

I went still, staring at the back of the new Disturbed CD’s case without really seeing it. “Andi. . .” After I’d nearly been trampled the last time, she’d said I wouldn’t have to tag along anymore. She’d *sworn* she wouldn’t ask.

“I really need this, Mallory.” Blue eyes pleading with me, she flipped onto her stomach on the mattress, careful not to let her wet toenails brush the bedding. “Look.” She shoved long, dark hair back from her face and ran one finger beneath her left eye. “I could fly to China with these bags, and my hands were shaking while I counted down my register drawer yesterday. And you see how limp my hair is? I’m withering. I can feel it.”

Did you know a siren can actually starve from silence? It's true. And talking won't help. Neither will standing in the middle of a crowded school hallway, listening to the secrets, the lies, and the general chaos. A siren suffers from her *own* silence, when she goes too long between feedings. And while I loved her voice, in that moment, I would have been grateful for a little quiet from Andi.

"You're not withering. You just hate math, and you stayed up too late last night." And her hair was flawless, as usual. Thick and wavy, with a truly unnatural shine.

She rolled her eyes. "You sound like Ty."

As much as I loved Andi—we'd been inseparable since the first day of fifth grade—I often felt sorry for her brother. Being her best friend was practically a full-time job, so I could only imagine how frustrating it must be for a normal twenty-two-year-old guy trying to rein in a sixteen-year-old siren. Especially considering how quiet and easygoing Ty was. Sometimes I wondered how they could possibly share a mother.

There are no male sirens, and since Ty's dad was human, so was Ty. Andi was a siren, just like her mom, but we had no idea who or what her father was. Her mom had never felt inclined to elaborate beyond the usual, "You're better off without him."

Apparently she was better off without a mother too, because when we were thirteen and Andi's siren appetite began to approach full-strength, her mom had dropped her off at Ty's apartment, and neither of them had heard from her since.

“Look, it won’t be like last time, I swear.” Andi tucked a lustrous strand of hair behind one ear. “I’ve been working on my focus. On singling one person out of the crowd. It’ll be different this time.”

I shoved the CD bin beneath her nightstand and sat cross-legged on the carpet, frowning up at her. “Didn’t Ty say he’d take you out this weekend?”

“Yeah, but he said the same thing last weekend. He doesn’t understand. And even if he remembers, we’ll wind up somewhere really lame, like a honky-tonk talent show. The audience is eighty percent geriatric, all wearing bandanas as a fashion statement.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you were really withering, I don’t think you’d be so picky.” She had to feed to survive. I understood that. But could she really be so hungry again already?

Andi shrugged. “I feel guilty feeding off old people; they’re close enough to death on their own. Besides, it’d take three old ladies to equal the energy in one ripe eighteen-year-old body.” Her eyes flashed with excitement, and her grin was contagious.

But just because my bruises had faded didn’t mean I’d forgotten them. “Last time some jerk shoved me into a sliding glass door trying to get closer to you. I’m not ready to fend off another hoard if you get carried away again.”

She frowned. “I told you, I’ve been practicing.” I didn’t answer, so she sat up on the bed, crossing arms beneath her breasts. “I’m starving, Mallory. I’ll go without you, if I have to, but I could really use some backup.”

Which was exactly why I'd always tagged along before: to keep Andi from making any new friends. Or fans. My job was to step in and shut her up once she'd had enough, before she could turn any of the listeners—a.k.a., human energy drinks—into desperate, fiending addicts or future mental patients. That moment usually came between the last notes of the crowd-favorite song and the first notes of Andi's own personal melody. When a siren starts singing her own lyrics, it's time to go. Or at least put earmuffs on all the humans.

I'm particularly well-suited to be her backup because a siren's song cannot hypnotize most non-humans. I am *leanan sidhe*, so Andi's singing has no effect on me.

Well, that's not exactly true. Her singing astounds me. The beauty of her voice makes me ache with longing and burn with jealousy, all at the same time. But it doesn't flash boil my brain, or overload my circuits, or whatever it is she does to make humans fall crazy-in-love with her while she slowly drains their energy. Andi can't feed off me, and I can't be hypnotized by her. I'm the only one she can trust to help her stop before things go too far.

We're a perfect pair. Truly twisted sisters.

"Besides, you know you want to get out of here." She was grinning again, and I wished I was as immune to her smile as I was to her voice. "Otherwise we're looking at a bowl of popcorn, an all-night slasher-fest, and a pizza around midnight, if we're feeling adventurous."

Well, she had a point there. The summer was half over, and we'd done nothing more exciting than serving fast food

for minimum wage. My mom would be back in a few days, and our month-long sleepover would be over.

Andi read my decision in my eyes, and she was already grinning before I spoke. “I guess we may as well have one last hurrah.”



I don't know where Andi heard about the party. Maybe from some guy at work. Maybe from some guy on the street. Maybe from some built-in party guidance system whispering inside her head. All I know is that there's always something going on somewhere, and Andi always knows how to get there, even if we have to drive halfway across Texas.

That's the first rule of survival: Never eat where you live and never hit the same place twice. Eventually someone will notice if people always get sick when you sing to them, especially if there's no hangover to blame it on the next morning. The food poisoning excuse only works once.

“So, this is a private party?” I said when Andi turned off the highway onto a narrow, well-paved road, an hour from our one-horse, dead-end town. “What's the plan? You just gonna climb up on the table and start belting out show tunes?”

Andi laughed and pressed a little harder on the gas as her excitement crested. “Hardly. Though that might work if I get desperate. There's supposed to be a Rock Band tournament.”

I pulled down the passenger side visor and touched up my lipstick in the lighted mirror. I wasn't siren-gorgeous; for me, looking good required effort. “Rock Band? Seriously?”

Though she would never have admitted it at school, Andi was pretty good on the plastic guitar; she played against her brother for cash once she depleted her paycheck. Ty wouldn't let her sing, of course, so she played guitar against his drums, and beat him about seventy percent of the time, even with them both playing on expert.

But she was flawless on the mic.

"I think that's it on the left. You ready?"

I nodded, and she slowed to a stop at the end of a line of cars on a dark residential street, her glittery eye shadow sparkling in the flood from a streetlight overhead.

When I got out of the car, I could hear sound leaking into the night from the house ahead: a heavy bass beat with a crunchy guitar riff and angry, staccato lyrics. The clock on the dashboard said it was after eleven, but the night felt new, and suddenly I was high on possibilities, though I hadn't come to feed. Chances were slim that I'd find a satisfying meal at some random party anyway—my skills were harder to define, my appetites much more difficult to satisfy than Andi's. But I shared her excitement. Being with Andi was a rush. Even when she wasn't singing, she exuded confidence and exhaled charisma. People wanted to please her, and I was no exception.

As we clacked our way up the sidewalk toward the well-lit house on the corner, I felt powerful, beautiful in my own right with Andi's arm linked through mine. I'd have a couple of drinks and a couple of dances, and retreat to the back of the room and monitor the show while she fed. Then it'd be just the two of us again, rehashing the play-by-play on the way home.

Andi wouldn't need to drink; she was high on anticipation alone for the moment, and after she sang she'd be stuffed and buzzed on human energy, but physically sober. Why had I resisted in the first place? The plan looked good, and we looked *great*. Everything would be fine. Better than fine.

Andi rang the doorbell. The right half of the double front doors swung open, revealing a guy in a frat T-shirt. He had dark hair, broad shoulders, and a plastic cup of beer. His eyes widened when he took in first Andi, then me. He stepped to one side and gestured for us to come in.

"Don't you want to know who we are?" Andi asked as we brushed past him, and I swear she was half-singing already.

"More than you could possibly imagine." He swung the door shut, and Andi eyed him like a snake about to strike.

"I'm Andi, and this is Mallory."

His eyes narrowed, and he glanced at the closed door. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen last week," Andi lied, then tossed her head toward me. "Her birthday was in April."

That last bit was true, but I'd turned sixteen, not eighteen.

Our host grinned like a hyena. "Ladies, my name's Rick, and you can crash my party any time you want." Rick led us through a large room packed with people dancing, laughing, and drinking, then into the kitchen. "What can I get you to drink?" His wide-armed gesture took in a two-countertop spread of snacks and drinks.

Andi took a soda and I let Rick pour me a beer, then we wandered into the main room just as a new song began to

play. “What’s with the toys?” Andi said, eyeing the neglected Rock Band setup in one corner.

“We’re having a tournament. Want to play? We can start you off on easy. . . .” Rick angled us toward the set-up while she pretended to think.

She shrugged, as if it didn’t really matter. “I might give the guitar a shot. And I sing a little too.”

I nearly spit beer all over them both.

“We’ll get started as soon as my little brother gets here with the second drum set. So we can duel.” Rick mimed smashing the high hat with his empty hand.

“Sign me up?” Andi asked.

Rick nodded like a bobblehead doll, and Andi and I wound our way through the mass of dancing bodies while he scribbled her first name onto the bottom of a list on a yellow legal pad.

“See anything interesting?” I asked, as Andi’s gaze roved the room like she was looking over a buffet.

“Him.” Andi grabbed my arm. “The one in the cowboy hat and boots, against the wall. He looks *yummy*.”

I shrugged and finished my beer, then set the empty cup on an end table. “They say presentation is everything in fine cuisine.”

“Exactly.”

“I was kidding.”

“I wasn’t.”

As she watched the cowboy in anticipation, I sent up a silent thank-you for the fact that I hadn’t been born a siren. I wouldn’t die if I didn’t feed. But I wouldn’t truly

live either. Though my body was nourished, my soul felt half-starved.

“See you when it’s over?” she mumbled, eyeing her intended meal like a tiger eyes raw meat. She’d already forgotten I was there, but only because she knew she could trust me to stop her before she drained the poor guy like some kind of mystical vampire. Our system was tried and true, if a little lopsided. I got a night out, a few drinks, and a designated driver. She got an emergency off-switch—someone to keep her from killing everyone in the room if she got carried away.

Which was not beyond the realm of possibility. There was no limit to how much energy a siren could drink, or to how long she could live as a result. Even once she’d gotten what she needed, she could never be glutted, or even pleasantly full. The only thing that stopped a siren from binging was self-control. Unfortunately, Andi hadn’t developed much of that yet.

“I’ll be here. . . .” I whispered, but Andi was already halfway across the room. She may as well have been halfway across the galaxy.

She’d barely said hi to the walking Slurpee when the front door flew open on her left, revealing a tall, lanky young man with a dark shadow of stubble on his chin and a set of plastic drums under one arm, the foot pedal dragging the ground at his feet.

The crowd broke into applause, shouts of “Evan!” tossed around like confetti at a parade. Rick took the drums from his brother, and someone else handed Evan a beer.

Andi and her prey followed Rick to the corner of the room, where she helped plug in wires and adjust the surround sound settings while the crowd buzzed around them. This was evidently a regular thing for the locals: get drunk and play real songs on fake instruments with two hundred of your closest friends. And they'd accepted Andi like one of their own. It was kind of scary.

And it happened everywhere we went.

"You look like you need a drink."

I jumped and turned to find Evan—he of the plastic drum set—leaning against the wall on my left. I fumbled for a smile and he held out a clear plastic cup half-filled with ice and fizzing soda, but the scent said he was offering me something stronger than Coke.

I had no idea what else was in the cup, but I took it. No matter what this human predator was after with his cheap alcohol and easy grin, Andi was the most dangerous thing in the room, and I was immune to her particular brand of poison—no matter how badly I ached to sink into her song and forget about everything else.

"Thanks." I took a long sip from the cup, and bad vodka scorched a path down my throat. The stuff we snuck from Ty was much smoother, but considering I was underage and crashing someone else's party, I'd take what I could get.

Evan nodded and drank from his own cup, staring out at the room full of writhing bodies like we knew each other well enough to share a comfortable silence.

My next sip went down easier, so I took a third. The trick was to drink enough so that I didn't hate Andi when

she started singing—wasting unfathomable talent on a room full of humans who could never truly appreciate her—but not so much that I couldn't stop her before her lyrics became too dangerous for their fragile psyches.

Usually two drinks was plenty. But as I watched Andi laughing with her cowboy while she helped Rick adjust the guitar strap over his shoulder, jealousy scorched a trail up my spine. Two wouldn't do it this time. Two wouldn't even come close.

Because no matter what she said, Andi didn't need me like she needed the cowboy. On our own, we would never be enough for one another.

I drained my cup, wincing at the fresh burn, and Evan laughed out loud. "Not new at this, are you?"

Instead of answering, I held out my empty cup.

He set his drink on a nearby end table, where a bottle of vodka stood next to two sweating cans of Coke. "I didn't bring ice, but the soda's cold." He popped the tab on the first one and half-filled my cup.

"I'll take it however I can get it," I said, then flushed when I realized how that sounded.

Andi's laughter rang from across the room as he poured, and I tilted the bottle up, giving myself a stronger dose of liquid patience and tolerance. I was going to need plenty of both.

But as usual, when Andi started singing a few minutes later, I forgot how irritated I was. How jealous and . . . forgotten. I got lost in the song. In the beauty of the melody, the poetry of the lyrics. The perfect shape of her mouth as it

formed each word. The guitarist fumbled, and the “percussionist” sounded like he was trying to beat the drums into submission, but Andi was flawless. Exquisite.

In the middle of the first song, people stopped dancing to listen. To watch her. She sang “Bring Me To Life” better than Amy Lee. Clearer. Cleaner. More visceral. And when the next song started, she moved effortlessly into a lively country shitkicker about revenge on a wife-beating husband.

“You like music?” Evan asked, and I forced my eyes to blink, then focus on him.

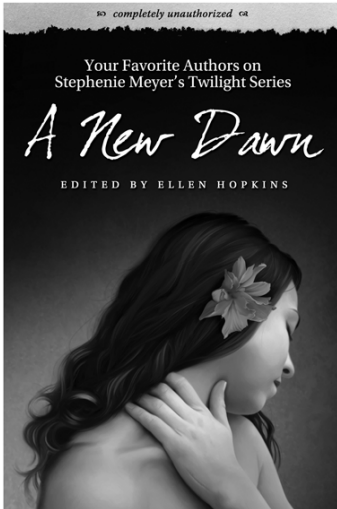
Like a fish likes to swim. “Looks like everyone does.” All eyes were on Andi. The rest of the fake band practically faded into the background. She could have carried the song all alone.

By the time Pat Benatar started in on her infamous “Heartbreaker”—Andi must have chosen the set list—Evan had gone silent beside me, absently sipping his first drink, tapping his fingers on the wall at his back. The crowd was dancing again, some people singing along, but Andi saw none of them. She watched her living snack like he was the only one on the planet, and he stared back at her like she’d invented sex and promised him the first taste.

She wouldn’t sleep with him. She’d come to satisfy a different kind of appetite, and by the time she was done with him, he wouldn’t be able to stand up straight. Anything more complicated than that would be impossible for the next couple of days, until he’d regained some energy.

But he’d live.

Andi had to feed to keep from literally wasting away, and she thought it was more humane to take a little bit from



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