

BOOK TWO OF THE NIGHT'S DREAM SERIES

DANSE MACABRE



THOMM QUACKENBUSH

1: The Vampire Matthew

He watched the girl, her hands clasped and eyes downcast, a tendril of hair tickling her nose in a way she found conspicuously difficult to ignore. Shoots of grass peeked through the dirt before her, barely visible in the remaining sliver of sunset. He could nearly smell her unease. This cemetery was no place for a girl like her.

He did not disguise his footfalls, so total was his confidence in her self-absorption. He relished the hunt, even more than the moment of capture. *Almost more*, he amended. In his daylight life, he had once read that packs of chimpanzees will chase a monkey for miles only to dash its head against a rock and eat its brains. They do not need to prolong the chase, they do not even need to eat the brain for sustenance, but it gives them pleasure akin to what he felt now.

As he slunk through the forest at the edge of the graveyard, keeping his prize in sight, a thorny branch slid over his arm, cutting through his thin, black leather shirt. He unraveled an exotic curse under his breath to a deity who could not care less, but reveled in the garnet gleam of blood, even if it were his own. He found no sight more beautiful, more sensual, than freshly spilled blood.

Ashlei rose from the grave and walked down the rocky path that connected the seclusion of the cemetery to the main road. She would not make it to the gates alive, but she had no way of knowing. She was absorbed, as Matthew assumed, but not in herself.

She visited Virgil's grave once a week during summer break. It was not that she knew Virgil, but she could not stand the thought of his being there, alone and forgotten. People had visited at first, after his murder. When it was reported, there had been the predictable slew of prurient attention. Once that cursory interest ebbed, so did the visitors. His soul may have been consigned to the Kingdom of Heaven, but she could not overcome the idea that he lay under six feet of earth. Virgil's was not the only grave she visited; a few of her great-grandparents were buried here. She would pray over them, petitioning Christ and the saints to tell the souls of the departed that someone on Earth still cared about them.

She felt a connection with Virgil. She had passed where he was gunned down

only a few minutes before it happened, on her way to see her then-boyfriend, Eliot. For weeks after, this speculation, this "what-if" obsessed her. He had grown up near her, though she had gone to the parochial school while he suffered through public schooling. Ashlei had never spoken to Virgil, which made her vigil for him all the nearer to Christ's mission. She would tend to the souls of the least of man, cry for the death of a boy she would never know. In another world, had he not died so young, she hoped they could have been acquaintances.

None of her friends, not even those in the campus Christian coalition, understood how this death affected her. Everyone was spooked by it; Annandale was a peaceful place, the only real conflict occurring between the art and engineering majors—and that was more a healthy competition. In Virgil's death, Ashlei was reborn. After the first visit to his grave during spring break, she gave up drinking and the infrequent cigarette, reconfirmed her broken promise to remain abstinent until marriage—over frustration of Eliot, who left her soon after for some basket case. She liked to think she had adopted Virgil as a guardian angel, though he would do her no good tonight.

Matthew descended the path behind her, watching the unsteady and alluring sway of her hips. She stumbled and gasped, grabbing the overhanging bough of a gnarled tree for support. He almost laughed at her obliviousness. She looked delectable—russet hair, a curvy figure, and no make-up to cry off. She did not need make-up, even if he could better imagine kissing her unrelenting mouth as her lipstick smeared red against his face. Her nails were unfortunately long, though. He could not allow any evidence of her on his body, and he certainly could not return to his lair with claw marks on his face. That would piss his girlfriend off, and she hardly put up with his being a vampire as it was.

As he was about to spring out of the woods and claim her, the straps on his bondage pants snagged. Turning around, he saw a lanky woman stepping on them.

The figure rasped, congested, "You wouldn't be thinking of hurting that poor girl, would you, possum?"

Matthew felt revolted with awe. "N-no, I was just..."

"Time to play dead," the figure continued before he could finish, placing both hands on his face and twisting his head until there was a snap. He fell like a puppet, his

straps torn free.

"Such a virtuous girl will be perfect," the figure finished to deaf ears, wiping Matthew's pancake make-up off her hands and striding toward prey.

2: The First Colloquium

"You didn't think it was going to be that easy, did you?"

Roselyn's eyes fluttered open. Over her loomed a lean girl with something sharp in her hands.

"To make omelets," her roommate Shane prompted. "You told me last night that making good omelets was hard. But look at the awesome breakfast goodness I made. Gaze, if you will, at the artistry of egg and cheese. Gaze!"

Roselyn turned her back to Shane and muttered, "It's Saturday morning. Why are you waking me up on Saturday morning? And..." The memory returned to her. "I was drunk when I told you that. I thought we agreed nothing I said when I was drunk counted? We shook on this."

"In twenty-three minutes, it will be Saturday afternoon, lush. Now look at my omelet, damn you! Look on my works, Mighty, and despair!" Shane walked to the other side of Roselyn's bed and pushed the cast-iron skillet toward her face. Inside lay a huge yellow mass speckled with red and green, as well as what looked and smelled to be half the spices in the kitchen.

"Why do you hate the poor, hung-over girl?" Roselyn asked.

"Because the poor, hung-over girl called me 'foul monkey-toed devil child,'" Shane answered with a smile. "Then she insulted my cooking skills just because I made Cajun-style blackened pancakes. So I spent *all night* practicing recipes. Now get up, laziness!" She stood on one leg and prodded Roselyn with her other unshod foot. Shane then noticed Roselyn's bare shoulders and took an apprehensive hop back. "Are you wearing pajamas or going commando?"

Roselyn adjusted the straps of her silk top in reply. "I know you don't *need* to sleep, but you could use it. You look ghostly."

Shane shook her head and some ghostliness drifted on the air. "That is the flour. It may have exploded all over the kitchen." Shane bit her lip and then perked up. "But I made you biscuits!"

Roselyn stretched her dark limbs in a gesture borrowed equal parts from yoga and stripping. She had an easy four inches on her roommate, but her arms and legs

implied it could be even more in the right light. "Did you really stay up all night?"

"Oh, hell no, I woke up at nine. I may be eldritch and spooooooky, but I'm not stupid. I like my dreams way too much to give them up for culinary prowess. Now get up, sleepy head! Brunch awaits."

Roselyn sniffed the air, redolent with baking. "Did you fry bacon too? I love some bacon in the early afternoon," she sang.

Shane slid half the omelet conglomerate onto a plate and handed it to her. "No bacon as such. See, the biscuits were done, and I was taking them out, but then I realized the frying pan was sizzling because I put it on the hot burner, and I panicked because I didn't want to set the fire alarm off and wake you. Again. So, well, ouch."

Roselyn lost her taste for bacon momentarily, which was as long as she was ever capable of losing it. Instead, she shoved a forkful of omelet into her mouth and asked between chews, "You grabbed a frying pan with your bare hands?"

"Yes. I would say it was easily a second-degree burn. Just girl to girl? I can't recommend it." Shane wiggled her unblemished fingers, picked up a biscuit and tossed it to Roselyn. "Third degree is the way to go. It kills all the nerves so it is almost painless until it heals. Of course then..."

"I'm going to be late!" Roselyn exclaimed once she glanced at the clock, choking on her eggs.

"For what? It's the weekend, and classes don't start for another week. Your next class is Monday at ten twenty, 'Art History 203: The Renaissance.'"

"Not to class, to Dryden. We're supposed to have lunch at the diner. His treat."

"It had better be. He's the one with the job. How is the walking undead?" Shane asked, taking the remains of Roselyn's late breakfast for herself.

Roselyn adjusted her bed head in the mirror on the side of the refrigerator. She had put it there because it had the best light in the whole apartment, though it also served as a dietary aid. It was hard to indulge a pint of Ben & Jerry's because your self-described vampire lover was again being a jerk when you had to watch yourself do it. Roselyn turned around and considered her ass in the mirror. She would have to switch to a less caloric comfort food or a less truthful looking glass. Or, possibly, a less bipolar relationship.

"He's...okay, I guess. Bitching about how tedious his tech support gig is and his mom getting on his case. Our relationship isn't on the rocks at the moment..." Roselyn licked her lips thoughtfully. "I suppose that means he will be great then."

Shane whined, "You're going to bring him back here?" Roselyn shrugged her bare shoulders. Shane groaned. "I'll go buy earplugs."

"Oh come on, we aren't that loud!"

Shane rolled her pale-blue eyes. "Oh Dry, you are so good! Oh my gods! Oh Venus! Touch-a, touch-a, touch me, I wanna feel dirty!"

"Bitch," Roselyn said as she walked back to her bedroom to change. "Maybe if you start putting out for *your* boy, you wouldn't have such a fixation with what goes on in my bedroom. Oh, and that 'touch-a' thing? From *Rocky Horror* and it's 'I wanna *be* dirty.'"

"But you *are* dirty, so that works out well," Shane called to Roselyn, dodging the plastic spatula she threw. "And Eliot and I are taking things slow. There is out-putting. I put things in directions!"

"Any slower and you'd both be dead." Roselyn heard Shane's sharp intake of breath but did not register it until she was tying her corset tight to exaggerate her cleavage. Coming back into the kitchen wearing the taut top and her pajama bottoms, she said, "Honey, I didn't mean anything. Just an expression." Shane was still a bit touchy about the whole topic of having been sort of dead.

"Wha?" Shane asked, a burnt finger healing in her mouth.

The colloquium—the first since May—continued well past dawn. The near-noonday sun cast the illusions of darkness and proper chambers back into the clan's minds.

It served them right, starting after 5:00 a.m. to accommodate Louise. Dryden sneered and pronounced Louise's fate. "You have betrayed your kind for the last time, fiend, and you die this morn!" He raised his hands over her, preparing to strike the first blow in what was certain to be an epic battle.

The woman looked to the others for intercession, but they did not move. "You can't do this to me! You are not my sire!" the zaftig girl shouted. "There is a protocol!"

You must do battle with he who made me! I am but a messenger."

"Well, Matt can't be a part of this if he isn't here, can he?"

An acne-speckled boy approached Louise and whispered something in her ear, casting a reverent eye to Dryden and his clenched hand.

"What? Since when? Loser," Louise spat. She turned back to Dryden. "My sire sends his regards, I am sure, and would see to your insolence were he here!"

"Ah, but he is not! Clan battles amongst Danseurs cannot be postponed because your sire cares more about his private matters than showing me due loyalty. Arm yourself!"

And with that, she rose to meet his stance, his opponent but equal in this battle.

Ken handed them plastic icosahedrons, each of the twenty sides numbered, Dryden's black and Louise's red. They dropped them both on the table at the same time, watching their stuttering rolls until they stopped.

"Seventeen beats twelve, Dryden," Ken pronounced. "She must be spared owing to the rules of the Danse Macabre. Louise runs into the forest using her charisma powers to charm you."

Dryden sighed and waved her away in pardoning. Then, looking at his watch, he mumbled something vampiric to excuse his leaving and bade his goodbye to the clan. He needed a shower and a change of clothes, though he would have to do without sleep until after work that night. Fortunately, tech support did not require much higher brain functioning. Click that, unplug that, reboot that, repeat.

As he hugged her goodbye, Louise whispered in his ear, "I wish you had sired me. I would love to have felt your teeth on my neck." He looked down at her neck, pale but for the redness of a zit, and told her he could not be late for his date with Roselyn. She pushed him away, her eyes vacillating between the bedroom and torture chamber.

3: Fangs, Fur, and Feathers

Eliot swore he would pick Shane up in his car after some back-to-college shopping for his senior year at Annandale. The operative word for Shane was "car," a device with which one could drive far and fast from a roommate in need of privacy and from Red Hook. Shane had no small fondness for the town, especially being able to walk across the street to one of the few remaining independent coffee shops that had resisted conglomeratization, the White Rabbit. The time would come when a Starbucks moved even into this outpost of civilization, draining the lifeblood from this business and inhabiting its empty husk. When it did, Shane vowed she would drink the erratic coffee in the Red Hook Diner for as long as she could stomach both it and the two-mile walk from her apartment, which would be required. One had to maintain principles.

Eliot arrived within half an hour. He was still moving into an apartment of his own after having been home in Vale Falls for the last few months, working in a library. Between that and some sporadic manual labor that kept him on the fit side of scrawny, he could make enough over the summer to support his collegiate indiscretions.

He had invited Shane to come upstate to see him more than once, but she could not face that town again. In another life, a simpler one years before, Vale Falls had been her hometown as well. In fact, family legend that claimed the "Vale" in the town's name derived from her last name, Valentine. After the events of last year, after pulling both Eliot and her out of oblivion, she did not need family legends or the last name that went with them. She did not have a mother who would acknowledge her, though some liberal web research revealed the woman Shane thought of as "mom" was a well-respected psychotherapist living outside of Vale. That was sufficient for Shane, and she had no need to upset her former mother's equilibrium by trying to explain the tenuous reasoning concerning why she should make Shane tea and call her "Precious Bookworm."

As point of fact, Shane had not told anyone else what had happened, not that reality allowed them to listen should she try. Through some twisted neurochemistry, Roselyn did not lose a concept of Shane when most of the rest of the human world did. Almost every other human who knew Shane for what she used to be was either dead or as good as dead. Shane did not regret this. There was a charm in being reborn into the

world when one was old enough to appreciate it.

So Eliot, as close as he was to the void, had no conception the young woman he kissed in greeting, the one to whom he no longer remembered having admitted love, was anything more than a clever freshman he had found in the stacks of the Annandale Library. He did not know their history. He did not know, in the original perversion of Shane's world, he had supposedly drowned himself in the pond next to which they had shared a handful of summer evenings before she had graduated from high school. She knew secrets of his he felt he confessed to her the first time. It gave her an opportunity to be an even better girlfriend. It also allowed her to feel less guilty if she became distracted in the arms and lips of another for a month. She had thought he was dead, or at least not totally alive, and you could not still be dating someone you believe had an autopsy, so it was not *really* cheating.

All Eliot knew, despite her refusal to come visit him at home, was that he was fond of this pale-eyed woman waiting for him in Red Hook. He had had an on-campus girlfriend once, who had dumped him for not loving Jesus enough. Mentioning he loved Jesus as much as one could love the fictionalization of a historical hodgepodge of leaders and myths was not the right retort, though he fluctuated between the on-again, off-again relationship with Ashlei until he met Shane. It was one thing for her to dump him for a lack of faith, but unfaithfulness was quite another (even given that they had been off again for at least a month before, when he explained he was only into Christmas for the presents). She had even been willing to excuse his one actual act of cheating when he kissed that drug dealer in the Oya dorm, because it was not so obvious he was smitten.

Though he had always valued Ashlei too much as a friend to tell her this, Eliot thought what bothered her was not that he found another girlfriend but that he had found one who made him glow, the same effect that Jesus had on her. It was an inner fire, the knowledge that someone would be there for him in the darkest moments, but who chased all thoughts of dark moments from his mind. Though he thought this often while parted from Shane for the summer break, he was not about to confess the precise depths of his affection to her. Ashlei was free to spout off how much she loved her savior because Jesus was not about to rear back and tell her He did not quite feel the

same way, that He had died for the sins of the world just because it was fun and did not want things to be too serious. He was only thirty-three, after all, and might want to martyr himself for other people. He did not imagine Shane would say anything like this, but there was much about her he did not know.

Shane had more than inklings. It was not in words, exactly. More that people said a few sentences to her, and the subtext and their internal reasoning popped into Shane's head fully formed when she brushed against them. She knew he liked her more than he remembered having ever liked anyone before, that he was milking the infatuation stage for the last five and a half months, that he was insecure around her now because it had been three weeks since he visited her and had to sniff around to make sure nothing had changed between them.

She kissed him back hard and whispered, "Don't be stupid, El. Nothing has changed."

"I didn't think it did," he half lied.

"But you prefer to know immediately. So you stop worrying."

He did not release her from the embrace lasting into the minutes to make up for his absence to ask, "Know what, exactly?"

"That I am your girl still, that I didn't go off to snog some strange boy because my lips noted the lack of yours. Particularly the bottom one. Could you stick it out so it could receive appropriate attention?"

He did as requested, pouting it so Shane could suck on it.

"So you can stop fretting as of...now." She pulled back only slightly to look in his hazel eyes. "I said *now*, Mr. Kaspar. We are fine."

"Oh, I believe it. How about the Princess of Darkness?" he asked with a laugh.

"I wish you wouldn't call her that. Rose is very nice."

"I don't doubt it. It is the pseudonecrophilia that's creepy."

Eliot had been left alone in a room with Dryden once, while both women got ready in their bedrooms for a double date. Neither of the men took anything approaching a liking to one another and formed something like an agreement of mutual tolerance in person and subtle derision to their respective girlfriends in private. "I can't trust a girl that shags someone with fangs."

"Ha! You'd shag me if I had fangs," Shane said, then wished she had not. She suspected he had slept with Ashlei when she had been feeling less than righteous, but he did not like to talk about "the ex," and she tried not to introduce the issue of sex between them until she was ready to do a great deal more than talk.

"Fangs and fur and feathers," he assured her with a kiss. "So, where to?" He opened the door of his car.

"Away from here and the imminent return of Roselyn and Dryden... Why don't you show me your new place?"

He grimaced. "Because I would care to keep you around, and I don't think that will happen if I let you in there the way it is now."

"What is the worst that could happen? I see boys moving into new places are sometimes not totally fastidious and dump your messy ass like a cardboard box full of flan?"

"No, you might get eaten. It is almost biohazardous and my roommate, Clive, is ungodly and...I'm sorry, did you say flan?"

She shrugged. "Flan was the messiest thing I could think of when dropped."

He pondered whether this were enough to justify admitting he loved her.

4: Boy Trouble

"He meant nothing," Roselyn assured Dryden from across the table.

"But you were with him," he sneered, feeling every minute of his sleep deprivation but acting on his irritability nevertheless.

"I was sixteen and I wasn't *with* him. I refused to date him, mostly. He was just my friend."

"But you almost slept with him, you sl—" but he thought better of finishing the word.

"You ass, I did not! Didn't you listen to a *word* of what I was telling you? He asked—offered, really—and I declined. And he got out of the car. You, and only you, have had sex with me ever. I swear to Artemis. *That's* all that should matter to you. When you ravished me after knowing me all of *two weeks*, I was a virgin."

"Why'd you even tell me about him?" he snarled, dissuading the stout, dark waiter from refilling their sodas.

"Because you asked," she said, pushing a black olive off her Greek salad with such force it landed in his lap. "I didn't think you wanted me to keep secrets from you. Noah didn't come that close, and there was another boy I actually dated who swore his virginity would be mine, though he would barely kiss me for fear his father would somehow know, so that wasn't going to happen. I bet Cole was gay, actually... I mean, why else would he say that?"

He huffed, searching his black pants for any evidence of the olive. Fortunately, black faux leather pants do a good job of resisting staining. "I do want you to be honest, but I can't believe you used to be—"

"An average teenager?" she added before he could cut her again. "Doing what teenagers are supposed to. I kissed a few...dozen...boys, dated a lot, fooled around a little bit, and then I found you. Know what happened then? I forgot about stupid high school crap. Plus, it's not like I freak at your sexual history."

As far as Roselyn knew, there had been a handful more sex partners who had, in reality, only kissed Dryden at the goth club he still frequented in Kingston. "I just...I thought you were pure," he said after a long sigh.

Roselyn tensed and untensed her hands before responding to this abuse. "I was pure, before *you* defiled me, and don't you forget it. As though the concept of purity is anything more than the construct of selfish, competitive men stampeding toward the women to call dibs. I'll be damned if I'm not worth stampeding toward, but the prize had better be *me*, hymen or no hymen." She hoped he knew he had blown his chances of getting in her pants for at least a week. She hated having her history thrown in her face, particularly that one stupid moment that nearly ruined her life. Wordlessly, she got up to wash her hands, the only part of her that would have been tainted by her interactions with Noah. Dryden did not bother looking up from his food to watch her move past the Formica counters.

The bathroom was not what one would call commodious—a toilet, sink, and trash bin—but it was enough for Roselyn to cry. Why did she even put up with him? *Because he was older*, she reminded herself. *And sexy as all hell*. Even with black fingernails sharpened to points, he could do things to her she could not have imagined. His attempts to act like a vampire had yet to be grating, which was remarkable in its own right. He was a sweet, caring guy most of the time. She just could not stand all these fights whenever he thought she might have ever been anything but his. She did not arrive at Annandale without taking the chisel to herself more than once, without rubbing up against a few boys to smooth an edge or two. Really, he should be grateful for these flings and lukewarm boyfriends for getting all that out of her system, for giving her technique and taste. She learned a lot via disappointment that directly benefited him.

She left the bathroom after dabbing at her eyes with toilet paper and checking her make-up. As she walked by the counter, previously empty, a phlegmatic cough requested her attention.

"Excuse me?" she asked, sniffing slightly.

"You seemed...distressed. Boy trouble?" a craggy man seated at the counter asked her. She knew she had seen him in the diner before, and her brain tried to place a further context but failed.

Roselyn was usually not the type to share her problems with anyone not already involved if she could help it. She did not know why, but she wanted to tell him everything. A sideways glance at her table, at Dryden concertedly not looking at her

talking to this man, pushed her hand. She sat on a stool next to him. "Not troubles with boys, exactly. Trouble with *boy* is more like it. My boyfriend—"

"That young fellow sitting over there, shooting daggers at me?" he interrupted, smiling without parting his lips.

"Yeah, Dryden. I'm getting damn tired of him always thinking I'm being unfaithful, and that stuff I did before I even knew him shouldn't be held against me now."

The man shook his head slowly, clucking his tongue. "Now that is a shame, a man who cannot appreciate what he has. Until you're dead, the book has not been written. Not even then, for some. He should be grateful you sowed some wild oats." The man grinned a yellow, incomplete smile, but a kind enough one. "It means you won't be so keen on sowing more now."

"Right, I'm not interested in anyone else," Roselyn confided, though she almost wished she were for the mental luxury of escape.

"He doesn't...hit you or anything, right?" the man asked, raising his bushy gray eyebrows. "Make you bleed?"

"If he tried it, I would fucking kill him," she assured, then bit her lip. "Excuse my language."

"Eh, there are worse things in this world than the occasional misused curse. Run along to your beau before he works himself up even more because you talked to someone who could have fathered your granddad. We don't need his blood boiling," he said, motioning back to Dryden, who clenched and unclenched his jaw as he looked at the spot where Roselyn should be sitting.

Roselyn walked back, taking pains not to increase her pace. She would be damned if she let herself become some abused spouse, jumping because her partner was in a bad mood.

"Who the hell was that you were talking to?" he growled as she took her seat again.

She looked back to the now-empty stool. "A friend."

5: To Make Much of Time

Though the walls could have used a coat or two of fresh paint since the seventies (no place looked nice in avocado and mauve), at least there were four of them, spaced far enough apart that Shane felt a pang of jealousy. Living in the center of town on top of a used bookstore had its perks, but it also meant Roselyn and she were constrained to the limited dimensions of the building. Eliot's apartment had the potential to turn into a home with a woman's touch and an industrial sander. The backyard was overgrown with produce that would otherwise have ended up on someone's plate rather than, as Eliot assured Shane would happen, thrown off the roof by Clive in a fit of pique.

"He does seem like a wild one," Shane agreed, looking for evidence of another human being among the debris of Eliot's move. "When will I have the pleasure of meeting him?"

"Sarcasm noted. He'll be here next week, not that I recommend being in his presence a second more than is necessary."

"He'll be here after school starts?"

"As you said, he's a wild one."

Shane tripped over a box with Clive's name on it, half filled with scalpels and what she guessed were fake body parts. "Art major?"

"Or a serial killer of mannequins. I figured we both needed one to keep our lives interesting. Art major, I mean...unless there is something more about Roselyn I should know?"

She kissed him, leaning over a soft latex foot. "Not that I know of, though she is not fond of dolls. Anyway, I can do with an ordinary life from here on out."

He squinted. "What is that supposed to mean?"

She tossed the foot up at him, and to her slight disappointment, he caught it before it could hit him. Still, the distraction proved enough.

"It means I want to spend the rest of my boring life with you."

He smirked, holding the rubber foot out to her. "That sounds like a proposal. You got a ring to put on my dainty toes?"

"One step at a time, sole mate."

He grimaced and pulled the foot back. "Ouch, puns. I take back every nice thing I ever said about you."

She draped her arms against the clothing-covered futon in a way she hoped to be alluring. "And I was about to point out we are alone here, in the middle of cow country. But if you are taking back nice things, maybe I should as well..."

He crawled next to her and, despite a metal hanger seeking to make intimate contact with him, managed to begin kissing her neck in earnest. "I'm sure I can think of a slew of nicer things to replace those I was going to take back," he said into her neck so it came out as "M'm mhrmm ah thfh v smm a nmm," but she got the gist.

This session reached nowhere near fruition before Shane grew flustered. It was not that she did not want to lose her virginity to Eliot or that she could even imagine it happening with someone else. It simply was that she was not ready. Last year, holding his ghostly form against her, she still could not give that part of herself. Then, it had been that she had so little of herself to spare, but the feeling lingered. To trust someone with the anomaly of her body seemed to her equal to divulging all the complicated, painful secrets that had crowded her last year. Also, she had the pragmatic concern her condition meant she would lose her physical virginity after every sex act, and she was far from keen to have to explain this to Eliot. She hated that even in this most intimate of ways, her body betrayed her as something other than wholly human.

She needed to distract him from her unfastened bra, her unbuttoned pants. "Hey, did you hear that the county is going to spray for mosquitoes?" she said apropos of a truck driving past.

He continued nuzzling her for a moment more before saying, "What? Did you get bitten?"

"A little," she smiled, then realized what he meant. "No, I just thought it was interesting."

"You are thinking about insects when I am fondling you?"

"Not actively thinking, no," she said, but could see this conversation was cooling Eliot down. She buttoned and zipped up her pants.

"I won't exactly miss the bloodsuckers. Malaria never seemed fun."

She fixed her bra, saying, "I think it's probably a bad idea. Not for the mosquitoes

themselves. But, if you take one thing out of the food web, something else is going to move up to fill the vacancy, and they could end up being even more annoying. Plus, the pesticides are likely going to kill off a lot of the beneficial bugs we want around to keep nature in balance."

He nodded his head thoughtfully and then stopped himself. "Why are we talking about this?"

Shane, standing and adjusting her clothing, asked, "Would you mind driving me home?"

He sighed at her successful gambit, dressed himself sufficiently, and drove her back. While a very male part of him thought of her as a tease, he did his best to remain understanding. She was amazing in every other room but the bedroom—and despite her chastity, was no slouch there—and he felt honored to call this mysterious creature his girlfriend. He would make do.

She got out of his car after a lingering kiss goodbye. He turned the engine as she unbuckled her seatbelt.

"Where are you going?" she asked before he could release the brakes.

"Home?" He stared at her, confused.

"Why?" she asked, her eyes huge and curious.

He waited for the punch line. "Because I drove you home, so now you are home..."

"Do you want to come up?"

He blinked. "Shane, don't get me wrong, but what was the point in driving you home when we had been in the middle of taking advantage of a rare moment of privacy without roommates if you were only going to ask me upstairs? Couldn't we have stayed at my apartment?"

"We could have done a lot of things we didn't do," she pointed out simply. "And I am still without a roommate." She motioned up to the darkened windows on the second floor.

"No, Shane, you are without *lights*. I've met Roselyn, don't forget. I doubt she needs lighting to make full use of a bed."

Shane blinked slowly, mentally scanning the apartment for her roommate and

coming up empty. The only thinking being within was about the size of a rat terrier, though the wrong shape. She could feel his thoughts pulsing, though mentioned none of this. "Just come up."

He was already swayed by this lack of logic, since the only other activity he had planned for the evening entailed finishing a report comparing *The Bell Jar* to *Girl, Interrupted* for the first day of classes. If he had to spend the evening with madwomen, he would prefer at least one of them be willing to let him grope her. He could do worse than Shane, and eventually, Roselyn. Still, he would not give into her easily, much as he wanted. "Convince me," he said.

"I'll let you grope me."

He laughed, taking his key out of the ignition and turning off his headlights. "You read my mind."

After she had made good on groping for the better part of forty-five minutes without turning the lights on, the other occupant of the apartment made his annoyance known in a cawed complaint.

"Other girls have cats," Eliot reminded her from under her checkered bed sheets.

Shane trilled her tongue, and the black bird alighted on her dresser. "Other girls are too dull for you, El. Huginn could beat up their kittens." As though he understood, Huginn warbled deep in his throat and jutted out his black beak.

Eliot was uneasy around the raven. In first encountering the bird on the windowsill of Shane's dorm room during spring semester, Eliot had tried to shoo him away and called him a "big stupid crow." This was the sole time Huginn had tried to nip him, but Eliot only needed one attempt like that to remain apprehensive. Sure, he looked cuddly as he lay upon his wings so Shane could scratch his belly, but Eliot could not help imagining the chunk that beak could take out of a hand. But he had not so much as seen a scrape on Shane from playing with the bird, and he had done exhaustive searches more than once. He regarded Huginn as only slightly more dangerous than most pets, in that he understood why people had pets but harbored the paranoia they would one day eat their owners. True, it kept Eliot from even having a pet larger than his fist, but it also kept him from being kibble. As far as Eliot knew, Huginn

was even big for a raven. Shane said she had found him as a nestling and nursed him back to health, but Eliot had noted even the bird seemed skeptical of this explanation.

"He would be a better pet for Roselyn, don't you think?" Eliot asked, hoping to pull her back into several more kisses before company returned.

"How so?"

"He's black."

Shane scoffed, affecting offense. "So it's a racial thing?"

"I meant the wardrobe, not the skin tone. He'd be a perfect accessory."

Huginn held Shane's finger in his beak, licking the tip. "I think he is a better accessory for me. Classic black does go with everything."

But Eliot's biggest complaint was that this bird occupied her hands so no part of Eliot could, despite his fondest wishes.

Roselyn returned, though without Dryden on her arm or any other appendage. She cast a suspicious glance at Eliot, welcomed him back to Red Hook, and launched into her latest tirade as to her feckless and invidious lover. These were nothing Eliot had not heard before, almost in as many words, but he bore them patiently. Roselyn was no one with whom he could ever imagine anything sexual, though he was aware she was technically attractive. Aside from his pallid Shane, his tastes had always ranged more for the cerebral and bookish sorts. His romantic history at Annandale may have suggested differently, particularly his sporadic dalliances with bubbly and pious Ashlei, but it was an ideal he kept in mind.

Despite his disinclination to share a bed with Roselyn (though, technically, both couples having made surreptitious use of the other's space meant he had), he respected her. She was confident and intelligent. She was spiritual in a way that did not invite anxiety, which was appealing for a Wiccan who was not shy about her ritual weaponry. Best of all, she seemed devoted to Shane in a way bordering on familial. Anyone he could count on to keep Shane safe and happy was his friend. That Roselyn approved of him even knowing what Eliot thought of Dryden spoke even better of her. The only fault he took in her was that she kept returning to a man who was blatantly wrong for her. Eliot seemed to be the only male in Roselyn's social strata that did not

provoke Dryden's outright jealousy. This, he was sure, was only because Eliot had made it clear his attention began and ended with Shane.

Once she had spent the immediate topic of Dryden's behavior, Roselyn pulled Shane into the other room. He could not hear Roselyn's whispered questions, but he had no trouble extrapolating from Shane's answers.

"No!" (Eliot and I didn't do what you are thinking, despite his presence in my bed.)

"No thanks." (I appreciate your sexual advice, but I will demur at this juncture.)

"Really?" (Your boyfriend commits acts upon you that border on illegality.)

"Roselyn, no." Eliot wasn't sure what this meant. The tone of response was all wrong for something sexual or romantic, yet Shane was insistent. "Because I don't know how and wouldn't if I did." Still Eliot was baffled and strained to listen more closely. Huginn, too, walked to the edge of the desk.

"I can't. I won't. You of all people should know better than to even ask. Find another way." This had an air of finality Eliot had not heard from her before. Shane was definite about so little. It was one of the many things he found charming about her.

Both girls returned, behaving as though no conversation had occurred outside of his earshot. "Girl talk," Shane excused. Sliding her hand from atop the dresser and into her pocket, Roselyn echoed the phrase.

"So, where is your immortal beloved?" Eliot asked.

"Wandering, I'm sure. Probably to the cemetery. Maybe he figured he would have better luck with a girl who can't look at anyone else."

"I could go for a tall, cold one myself," Eliot added, to Shane's giggles.

Roselyn looked disgusted, not at the necrophilia jokes—she liked those—but the cutesiness of a happy couple. "Eros, you two were made for one another!" she proclaimed, slamming Shane's bedroom door behind her so the contagion of happiness could not spread.

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When one dresses largely in black and belongs to a Wiccan coven on campus, having an older boyfriend who thinks he is a vampire almost makes sense. However, when Roselyn's lover Dryden becomes an actual vampire—albeit a reticent one—and her preternatural roommate Shane is mistakenly taken hostage in her place, it is up to Roselyn to take on the cockroaches of the daemoniac world without ending up on the wrong side of a pair of fangs.

Audio sample: [Chapter 2](#), [Chapter 4](#), [Chapter 5](#), [Chapter 6](#)