

Eternal Innocent

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Chapter 1

A hundred and one candles bathed the room in a soft orange glow. Lights and shadows flickered across the polished oak furniture, picking out the reds and browns to compliment the warmth. The red satin sheets on the massive four poster bed did little to cover the two occupants of it, nor did they hide the slow, sensuous movements of passion that rippled gracefully. Nothing could interrupt the fluidity of such sensuality, it was natural and exquisitely artistic. Nothing except some clattering great oak hammering on the bed chamber door. Daniel looked at the oak headboard and heaved a sigh.

"This better be good." He rolled out of bed and dragged on his jeans.

"It probably will be." Daniel's young female companion began to dress. "No rest for the wicked eh."

"Right, yeah." Daniel flattened his long black hair with his hand and opened the door. "Lew you shit." He said casually to his right hand man and most trusted friend. Lew was everything from a lookout, bodyguard and outright thug, to a diplomat, scientist and artist.

"You busy?" Lew nodded as Ruth left the lounge.

"Not any more. Cheers Lew." Daniel sat in front of the huge blazing fire in it's dark marble fireplace.

"Ah she'll be off to Robin as soon as she gets her panties changed." Lew commented, nodding towards the door.

"Good for Robin. And me?" Daniel raised an eyebrow at his friend.

"I didn't think Robin was your type." Lew shrugged.

"Do you want anything? Or do you just not like the idea of me getting my leg over?" Daniel laughed and shook his head. This was twice this week that Lew had done this. The last time had been when one of the bedrooms in the mansion caught fire.

"Actually it's this shit again." Lew tossed the newspaper over to Daniel. "Courting teenagers found in the park with their throats ripped out. It's the same as the three they found a few weeks ago. It is those two, Daniel, like you suspected. Matt saw them coming back here covered in blood just after the time the papers say they were

killed."

"Where are they now?" Daniel asked menacingly.

"Not back yet. They went out about an hour ago." Lew looked at the grandfather clock in Daniel's lounge.

"Get Zach and Rachael to keep an eye out for them returning. Bring them into the front hall." Daniel said. "Pair of bastards."

"Indeed." Lew sighed. "Daniel things are getting a bit scarce out there."

"I don't give a shit!" Daniel shouted. "And I don't expect to hear that from you, of all people."

"Hey, calm down! I wasn't making excuses for Nye and Tone, I was stating a fact. I'm as worried as you are." Lew said defensively. "Shit I should have let you finish your screw." He left Daniel, and his mood, alone with the flickering flames. Another headline caught Daniel's eye and he smiled viciously. A notorious gang-leader by the name of Woody Woods had finished his jail sentence. This arsehole had served a pathetic six months. He and his scummy gang had been selling crack cocaine to kids as young as twelve. Two sixteen year olds had died as a result of it.

"You are mine, arsehole." Daniel put down the paper and left his rooms.

Around two dozen people were waiting in the front hall, which was around three quarters of the residents of Nyx Mansion. The noise levels dropped to murmurs when Daniel wandered down the wide staircase, fastening his smart blue shirt. He got midway down them when Zach and Rachael came in through the double, wooden front doors, two blood spattered men between them.

"Caught red-handed." Daniel's voice carried loudly and clearly across the cavernous hallway. "Or should I say red-faced?" He continued walking down the stairs, then crossed the hall to stand in front of Nye and Tone.

"We finished them Daniel, drained them completely." Nye said quickly. "They won't come back or anything like that."

"They're dead, all of them." Tone backed up his friend. "We checked."

"Three teenage girls, a courting couple aged twenty two and ... who were tonight's obliging customers?" Daniel asked calmly, only the dangerous glint in his eyes betrayed his fury.

"It was no one, honestly, Daniel." Tone grovelled. "Just street hobos, tramps."

"Plural?" Daniel asked.

"Yes! Yes they did look sick, all four of them." Nye said eagerly and Tone cringed.

"So you've killed nine innocent people in total." Daniel stated. "And you still had the fucking nerve to come back here?" He growled quietly.

"Shit man, we have to eat!" Nye protested.

"Your table manners are atrocious." Daniel's hands shot forward and he snapped Nye's neck clean in two. Tone began sobbing pathetically.

"I just did the tramps Daniel, I swear." He babbled. "Homeless tramps, no one will even miss them! I've learned my lesson. I ..." A loud click rang out as Tone's neck snapped too.

"This isn't a bloody schoolhouse." Daniel snarled. "If there's anyone else thinking about feeding off the innocents then you should consider the consequences of those actions. That." He pointed at the dead bodies of Tone and Nye. "Or that." He pointed to the door. "You all chose to feed selectively when you stayed here at Nyx Mansion. Your own choice. Sure you can change your minds and I can't help that, but I can help who stays here." Daniel glowered round the hall and most of the others lowered their eyes, some nodding in agreement. "If you don't like the house rules, there's the door. Haz! Go with Zach please and get rid of those shits." Daniel kicked Tone's lifeless body and strode back upstairs.

Daniel flung himself into his armchair and glared into the fire.

"Daniel?" He looked up to see Rachael's pretty blonde head peeping round the door and he groaned to himself. This couldn't be a good sign if he was groaning at the prospect of pretty, female company. "Need a chat?"

"No. No, I'm fine thanks Rachael." Daniel returned his glare towards the fire and was irritated when Rachael didn't take the hint and sat down on the floor in front of the flames. "Won't Zach be looking for you? It won't take him long to decapitate those two shitballs."

"Oh Zach's OK." Rachael answered vaguely. "He's hardly going to say anything is he?" She laughed and Daniel felt his irritation growing. While it was true that he didn't need much persuasion when it came to the fairer sex, it was because he was in a position to be persuaded. That position being on his own, in that respect, and not just because he was the top dog on the patch.

"Has it ever occurred to you that Zach actually does think a lot of you Rachael?"

Daniel glanced at the girl.

"Oh I like Zach well enough." Rachael nodded. "He knows I'd never cheat on him."

"So why are you here with your shirt undone?" Daniel asked in disbelief.

"Cheat with anyone else." Rachael clarified, rolling her eyes. "You don't count, for shit's sake!"

"Oh?" Daniel looked at Rachael.

"No of course not." Rachael smiled. "There's not a girl in the mansion that wouldn't break her back to get up here, and not a man who'd stop her." She began to get undressed while Daniel watched her. "Bedroom?"

"Here." Daniel nodded towards the floor.

There was a huge difference between love making and sex, in Daniel's book, and even sex came in categories. This category was rather small, probably for the best. He was quite satisfied to see discomfort on Rachael's face and took great pleasure in ignoring it. Quick, to the point, and not a shred of enjoyment involved. The whole 'chat' was over in fifteen minutes. Daniel put his jeans back on and watched the faint bruises appearing on Rachael's shoulders and buttocks as she dressed. It would be a while before she broke her back to get up here again.

"Night Rachael." Rachael nodded and rubbed her upper arms as she winced and left Daniel's rooms.

Daniel looked out of his window into the clear night sky. He could feel the dull pain of hunger weighing on his stomach and couldn't actually remember the last time he'd fed. Six days? Seven? It was common for the people of Nyx Mansion to travel many miles in order to feed selectively. After all, there were only so many scumbags on the streets in a given area. The recent local butcherings of ordinary, innocent people, and Daniel's suspicions that it was someone from his own clan had kept him close to home and hungry. Woods the drug dealer was right at the top of the menu.

Chapter 2

Stephanie hurried down the road, dodging people and puddles on the dull pavements. Her friends would be merrily intoxicated by now, as Stephanie would have been if her hour long nap hadn't turned into a four hour semi-coma. The Montego club was brightly lit and loud music boomed from inside of it.

"Oi!" One of the doormen stood in front of Stephanie. "I don't think so."

"Huh?" Stephanie looked at him in confusion. "My friends are inside."

"Got any ID?" The big man asked.

"You have got to be kidding!" Stephanie began rifling her pockets even though she knew she had no identification on her. "I'm twenty one and my friends are in there. Ask them, they'll tell you."

"I'm sure they will." The doorman rolled his eyes. "No ID then you're not going in there. You only look about twelve. Come on, clear off." He turned his attention to the queue of customers wanting to be admitted into the Montego.

"Well hell." Stephanie muttered miserably and shuffled away. She stood in a doorway and took out her mobile phone to call the people she was meant to be meeting.

"Sally! Sal I can't get in. The ape on the door said I look underage!" Stephanie wailed.

"Ah right. Yes they are a bit strict here." Sally yelled above the din. "Oh well, better luck next time Steph." She laughed.

"Well is that it? What do I do now?"

"Not much you can do really, unless you run home for your ID."

"Which will take ages and the bloody place will be closed!" Stephanie snapped.

"Cheers Sal, I knew I could count on you." She ended the call and stuffed her phone back into her pocket. "Cow."

Stephanie began to trudge down the road feeling very sorry for herself indeed. She'd cut through the side streets and get herself a takeaway to eat at home. The streets were a lot quieter away from the main road and the lane that lead to the Chinese takeaway was deserted. Stephanie turned the corner and headed up the side lane.

She heard a yell. One short, terrified yell that stopped as suddenly as it started. It came from a turn-off that lead to a warehouse yard on Stephanie's right, so she quickly turned into a street on her left. Not quickly enough. A man turned his head and looked straight at her and Stephanie was frozen to the spot. On the ground behind this man was another man, who looked very lifeless indeed with a four inch slit across his throat. Stephanie's feet refused to move and the scream she was desperate to let go was lodged in her chest and suffocating her. She watched in horror as the lifeless man seemed to be a lot less lifeless than she presumed when he pulled a gun from his boot. He shot the taller man four times. Stephanie saw the bullets ripping through his stomach and spraying the ground and wall with blood.

Police sirens jolted her out of her shock and she looked around in panic for a lane to run down. She heard car doors slamming and running footsteps, and the tall man who'd been shot was nowhere to be seen. Stephanie stumbled blindly towards the takeaway and reeled out into the main street. By now the place was crawling with police officers and crowds of people were starting to flock to see what all the commotion was about. Stephanie pushed her way through the crowds and tried desperately not to vomit.

No one noticed one tiny five foot tall girl among the general chaos and Stephanie eventually found herself out in the open, away from the pushing crowds and the police. She leaned against a bus shelter wall to catch her breath and steady her nerves. What had she just witnessed? Two men had killed each other and there'd been blood everywhere! Movement caught her eye from the bushes behind the shelter and she caught her breath. Stephanie recognised the man she saw, she'd just seen him take four bullets, in the warehouse yard. She saw four uniformed police officers making their way down the road towards her and glanced at the man in the bushes. He made direct eye contact with her and his crystal blue eyes sparkled at her as he shook his head slightly. Stephanie could see that he was clutching his stomach and that he was bleeding quite profusely.

"Evening Miss." The officers were at the shelter. "I'm afraid the number eight buses will be re-routed."

"Er ... that's OK, I'm waiting for the twelve." Stephanie said quickly.

"Due in five minutes." One of the other officers said. "Not seen any dodgy characters around have you?"

"Dodgy how?" Stephanie's voice trembled.

"There was an incident in Weller's Yard about thirty minutes ago, plenty of blood around." The policeman explained. "One of them got away."

"N ... no. No one." Stephanie stammered, shaking her head.

"OK Miss. You make sure you get on that bus and go straight home." The policeman said, ambling up the road after his colleagues.

"Yes. Yes I will." Stephanie muttered, watching them leave.

"Who ... who are you?" She asked without turning round. "Should I call an ambulance?" The police vanished round the corner and Stephanie turned to look at the man in the bushes again. Again he met her eyes. "You've been shot. You're bleeding, let me help you."

"Back!" The man rasped. "I'm fine. Stay back." Stephanie nodded and backed off.

"You can't stay in there. I saw you shot. You need help or you'll die."

"You saw nothing." The man gasped. "Nothing at all. Go." He ducked back into the bushes when the number twelve bus crawled into sight. Stephanie hesitated. "Go!" The man growled and his voice made the hairs on Stephanie's neck bristle. She stumbled away and almost fell onto the bus.

Sleep just wasn't an option, obviously, and Stephanie sat glued to the news channel on the television in her tiny flat. It wasn't until seven in the morning that the ordeal hit the screen. A notorious drug dealer and gang leader had been found dead in Weller's Yard. Woody Woods had had his throat cut in, what the police stated, was a gang killing. Woods had just been released from prison after serving six months for drug related offences. Stephanie recognised the man on the screen. She'd seen him on the news when he'd first been sent to prison for selling drugs to kids. She actually felt quite relieved that this was such a vile person and not some innocent man. There was no mention of a gun being fired at all, nor of anyone else. Just that it was a gang killing.

"Serves you right you shit." Stephanie said, watching the officers lift the body bag into the back of an ambulance. "Probably one of those kids' family getting proper justice." So what had happened to the man in the bushes? Surely they must have found him? He'd been shot four times and he was bleeding to death. Why hadn't she told the police he was there? Why had she felt in no danger? He'd just slit someone's throat and Stephanie had offered to help him! "Oh no! You're not lying dead behind the bus shelter! You can't be." Stephanie grabbed her jacket.

It was pouring down rain outside and Stephanie was soaked with just walking the short journey to the bus stop near her house. Her hands were visibly shaking by the time she'd arrived at the bus shelter, and the bushes. She heaved a sigh of relief when she found no one. He had been there though. The branches of the bush had been snapped and flattened, but the pouring rain had washed away any blood that must

have been there. Stephanie was just about to walk away when a glint caught her eye. Under a twist of leaves and branches she found a ring. It was a heavy man's ring and looked quite old and expensive. It had a huge red stone in it, maybe a ruby, and the letter D was etched into the stone in gold.

"Whoa! I bet you could do with this back." Stephanie whistled. "So come and get it." She pocketed the ring. The owner of the corner newsagents opposite the bus shelter must have thought Stephanie was a total freak. She bought five newspapers, three crossword books, and three magazines during the course of the day. This was as well as a sandwich for her lunch and three bags of crisps as a 5pm snack.

Bus after bus came and left while Stephanie sat in the shelter out of the rain.

"You're off your head Steph." She sighed to herself as yet another bus arrived. She shook her head at the driver as he opened the doors.

"You sure? Next one's not for an hour, at eight, then that's your lot until midnight." The driver shouted.

"No thanks." Stephanie waved as the bus crawled off. It would be dark soon so she decided to wait for the 8pm bus and get on it if no one came for the ring. By five minutes to eight she was cold, stiff, and struggling to believe that she'd spent the entire day in a bus shelter. She stood up and rubbed her numb backside and bent her stiff knees, then her blood ran cold. Stephanie's stomach lurched when she heard twigs snapping in the bushes behind the shelter.

"Give me the ring." A low, quiet voice drifted towards her causing a lump to form in her throat. "Give me the ring." He repeated.

"Are you OK?" Stephanie warbled.

"My ring!" The man snarled.

"Look pal, I've sat here all bloody day waiting for you!" Stephanie snapped suddenly. "I saw you take four bullets in your guts and I left you bleeding to death."

"I'm fine." The man said quickly.

"Yeah? So why are you skulking in a bush?" Stephanie asked bravely. The young man who unfolded himself in front of Stephanie made her catch her breath in sheer astonishment. He was the most startling person she'd ever seen. He stood a few inches over six feet and had hair that was long and straight and so black that it looked blue. He had piercing blue eyes and a complexion that was so pale it was almost white.

"As you can see, I'm fine." Daniel repeated.

"My arse you are!" Stephanie blurted. "I saw four bullets ripping through you!"

"Obviously you didn't." He said calmly. "It looked far worse than it actually was. My ring?"

"Not so fast." Stephanie took a step backwards. "You killed that drug dealer didn't you?"

"I don't have time for this." Daniel said sharply. "Either give me my ring or I'll take it from you."

"Are you in another gang? Hey one dead druggie is one less arsehole on the streets, in my opinion. You're not a druggie though are you?" Stephanie clutched the ring in her hand.

"No, I'm not a druggie. Give ... Lew?" Daniel turned to look behind him. Stephanie couldn't see anyone at first, then a short, stocky, dark haired man walked from behind a row of trees, back from the road. "Shit. When?"

"About twenty minutes ago. The place is in uproar but they're suspecting some weird, whacko body snatching shit." Lew said, then saw Stephanie. "Daniel?"

"Nothing important. Give it over or I'll break your fingers." He held his hand out to Stephanie. She nodded dumbly and dropped it into his hand. "Come on Lew, we have to find him." Daniel set off for the trees, then turned round. "Thank you. Go home." He said to Stephanie, then both men vanished into the darkness.

Stephanie took the main streets through the town, where there were lots of lights and lots of people. Who were these people? She most certainly had seen the one called Daniel shot through the stomach and she most certainly had seen him standing over that blood covered drug dealer. What the hell was that about body snatching?! Maybe the pair of them were on drugs after all. Would they come after her? She had witnessed all of this after all and she knew their first names and what they looked like. Stephanie ran the last few feet to her flat and locked the door behind herself.

Chapter 3

"She saw you?" Lew asked in disbelief.

"She interrupted me, hence this mess." Daniel said angrily. "The bastard shot me and the police heard it." The two men had scoured the area around the hospitals and morgue and found nothing. Daniel booted open the door to Nyx Mansion and marched into the hallway. "I have to find him."

"Well not now you won't. It's getting light out there." Lew followed Daniel upstairs. "Daniel ... shit!" Daniel had barged into his rooms, then threw Ruth out into the hallway.

"Why does everyone think I need sex after a shitty night?!" He roared. "Get out!" Ruth tutted loudly and scurried off downstairs. "Don't look at me like that Lew. I've had enough of tarts on demand." He threw himself into his armchair.

"About that girl Daniel. Don't you think she might want a few answers? What if she goes to the police?" Lew asked.

"She won't." Daniel answered flatly. "They wouldn't believe her anyway, and she knows it. She isn't important."

"OK so she sees you hack Woods' throat out, right? So what happens when she sees reported sightings of him in the media? I'm sure the bureaucrats will bullshit the population as a whole, but she saw you standing over him covered in blood. Not only that but the fucker shoots you four times before her eyes and the night after, you wander up and have a conversation with her!" Lew threw up his arms.

"I stuffed up! OK?" Daniel bellowed. "She interrupted me so I didn't finish what I'd started. What the hell do you want me to do about her?" Lew just shrugged. "Yes you do well to keep that thought to yourself." Daniel said darkly. "She's not important Lew, Woods is. He'll be resting up somewhere. He won't have a clue what's going on and he'll feel like shit."

"You think? He was only laid out on a mortuary slab with a mortician looming over him, skull saw in hand." Lew sighed.

"Like I said, he'll be resting up somewhere." Daniel continued. "He'll be confused and irrational until he feeds. I have to get to him before he kills someone."

"Once he realises what's happened to him, he'll be as functional as we are." Lew rubbed his eyes. "Only difference is, he's a nasty piece of shit. Damn it he'll wreak havoc."

"I know! I damned well know!" Daniel kicked the coal bucket and sent it flying. "We don't know where the arsehole is until he makes a move. I need every pair of eyes in the Mansion on lookout, Lew. No one is to approach him, that is absolutely vital. He'll be strong because I'm strong and I don't want my clan in danger. Damn the bastard."

"I'll sort it. Get in there and get some sleep." Lew ordered. Daniel nodded and trailed off to his room.

Stephanie just stared at the television in a dazed shock. The police were investigating the theft of Woody Woods' body from the hospital morgue! It had been stolen between the time it had been cleaned up and the time the doctors went to do the post mortem examination. Stephanie could pinpoint it a bit more accurately than that. The body had gone missing twenty minutes before the eight pm bus, Lew had said so. Her phone began ringing and Stephanie jumped in fright. It was Sally.

"Steph are you in trouble?" Sally said quickly.

"Huh? No. Why?" Stephanie felt the panic setting in but didn't know why, yet.

"Steph please don't fuck about! Are you in trouble? I can call our Mike and the lads in." Sally hissed.

"Your Mike?" Mike was a renowned thug and petty thief in the area, Sally's cousin. "Sal I'm not in any trouble. What's happened?" Stephanie held her breath.

"Two of the Woods gang are asking about you!" Sally said in terror. "Tommo and McShae! What the hell do that load of shit want with you?"

"I ... I ... I don't know!" Stephanie gulped. "Sal it can't be me! What the hell would a drip like me be doing involved with a drugs gang? Lemsips make me giddy!" She said hysterically.

"They described you right down to your split ends." Sally said. "The bouncer at Montego's only refused three people and one of them was a boy."

"Shit." Stephanie sobbed. "Sal don't tell ... Sal?" Sally's phone went dead. "Sal? Sally!" She re-dialed Sally's number, her hands shaking. "Sally!" Stephanie screamed down the phone. "Sal are you there? Oh Jesus."

"Bang bang." A voice laughed down the phone, then it went dead. Stephanie screamed and dropped her phone.

"Sally." She sobbed. "Shit what's happening?" She grabbed her phone off the floor and ran, terrified, from her flat.

Lew sprinted up the stairs towards Daniel's rooms and Daniel was awake and at the door before Lew reached it.

"Not Woods but one of his goons. Twenty year old girl with a bullet through her brain." Lew panted.

"Shit!" Daniel dragged on his shirt. "Is it her?"

"I don't know, but apparently the Woods gang has been asking about her." Lew hurried along beside Daniel.

"Damn it to hell!" Daniel shouted. "Of course they bloody have! She saw Woods shoot me, he'll want her out of the way."

"He might have got her out of the way." Lew said. "She should never have been left in the way." Daniel whirled round on Lew.

"I should have killed her? Is that what you're saying?"

"I'm saying it should have been contained." Lew said diplomatically.

"Ah right." Daniel nodded. "Pardon my stupidity, but I can only think of two ways of containing that. Killing her or bringing her over. Woods is the arsehole, Lew, not me." He barged out of Nyx Mansion.

It didn't take long to find the scene of the murder. The whole Montego Club had been sealed off and there were police everywhere, obviously. Daniel stood in the yard behind the club and looked up towards the roof, three stories above. He needed inside that building and he needed to see that body. Lew watched as Daniel scaled the drainpipes like a cat and vaulted himself over the guttering and on to the roof. He was very surprised when he was only up there for five minutes, before he leapt back down, landing on his feet back in the yard.

"It's not her."

"That was quick. Are you sure?" Lew asked.

"Very sure. She's behind you." Daniel said and Lew spun round. Stephanie was curled up behind a row of dustbins and she was shaking uncontrollably.

"Don't touch me!" She sobbed as the two men walked towards her. "I'll scream the whole fucking town down if you come any closer!"

"You'll shut the hell up." Daniel tossed the bins aside and dragged Stephanie to her feet. "Shh!" He pointed in her face and looked into her eyes. "No screaming. OK?" Stephanie sobbed and nodded. "Did you know her?"

"She was my friend." Stephanie snivelled. "She phoned me to tell me the Woods gang were after me. This is all your fault, you shit-head!"

"Yes, I know." Daniel sighed. "Woods must be here somewhere, Lew."

"Why would they bring a dead body here?" Stephanie shrieked. "Why do they want me? It was you who cut his bloody throat, not me!"

"I said Shh!" Daniel turned to look at her again. "You're howling. Be quiet. Yes?"

"Yes." Stephanie gulped.

"We can't stay here." Lew stated the obvious. "Daniel you're doing to give yourself a headache if you don't stop with the suggestion. Leave her alone."

"Eh?" Stephanie blurted. "I don't think so! I'm coming with you."

"You can't come with us." Daniel snapped in annoyance.

"Oh? This is all your shit remember. Thanks to you I have a bloody drugs gang on my case! They've just shot my friend! I don't think they're playing, you know?" Stephanie ranted.

"You can't come with us!" Daniel repeated with a growl.

"OK I'll go to the coppers. Even if they think I'm soft in the head at least they'll lock me up safely out of the way." Stephanie set off towards the side of the building.

"For shit's sake!" Daniel grabbed her arm. "You can't go to the police."

"So I can't go to the police and I can't go with you? Anything else I can't do?" Stephanie snapped. Daniel swept her to the floor with his arm and she sprawled across the yard. By the time she'd got her breath back, and turned round, Daniel was retrieving a slim, shiny dagger from between a man's eyes. "C ... can I scream?"

"Come on." Lew dragged her to her feet. "No screaming, you'll give Daniel a migraine."

"He's killed and fed." Daniel kicked Tommo's body. "Luckily this shit is his own and not an innocent. Take her in through the back way Lew. Don't let the others see her and tell her nothing." Daniel scaled the wall of the Montego again and disappeared into the shadows.

"You live here?" Stephanie gaped in awe as Nyx Mansion loomed into view. "I don't understand, Lew. I've lived in this area all my life and I've never seen this place before. It's huge!"

"You wouldn't have seen it now if I wasn't with you. Come on, round the back." Lew pushed open the iron gates and lead Stephanie to the side of the mansion. "Please tell me that you've no family that are going to turn the place inside out looking for you."

"No there's just me." Stephanie was still staring at the old building in a daze. "Will Daniel tell me what's going on?"

"I doubt it. In here." Lew opened a narrow door that lead to a narrow wooden staircase. "You'll be OK here. No one can get to you here." She was shown into a beautiful bedroom with a lovely brass head-boarded bed. There were candles everywhere and Lew began to light them. "I've no time to light the fire but these should throw off a bit of heat. Stay in here. Do you hear?" Stephanie nodded and noticed that Lew had bright blue eyes too.

"Lew? Sally was my friend. She wasn't into drugs and all that. Neither am I. I can't believe she's dead."

"No, it's a shame. I'm sorry kid." Lew said awkwardly.

"Stephanie."

"Stephanie it is." Lew left the room, locking the door behind himself.

Lew ran into Zach and Rachael as he raced round to the front of the house.

"Why are you two here? You know what's happened, you should be out on the streets." Lew said.

"Where is she Lew?" Rachael stepped forward.

"Where's who?" Lew snapped in irritation.

"Daniel's human. Don't play dense Lew. Zach saw you bringing her here."

"Rachael maybe we should leave it." Zach said quickly. "Daniel knows what he's doing."

"By bringing a human girl here?" Rachael spat. "Are you mad?"

"Zach's right Rachael." Lew said calmly. "Leave it. It's Daniel's responsibility, not yours."

"It's my responsibility not to have myself hunted and persecuted by a mob of ignorant humans!" Rachael shouted. "We don't deserve to be put in danger like this, Lew! We've worked too hard for this place and for the clan."

"Enough!" Lew shouted back. "There is no danger. Daniel would never bring danger on us."

"So why is she here?" Rachael snapped.

"You know why she's here. Woods is after her." Zach said awkwardly.

"So? At least she'd be out of the way! She can't be just left to expose us." Rachael snarled.

"It's not her fault she's in the way Rachael." Lew said darkly. "Leave it, I'm warning you. Daniel has never risked the clan before and he won't start now. His first priority is to kill Woods before he kills innocents, and brings over the not so innocent."

"My first priority is my own skin." Rachael marched into the mansion.

"Zach I don't have time for this, none of us do." Lew sighed heavily. "If she causes shit, Daniel will kill her. Keep her away from the girl and tell her to keep her big mouth shut." Zach nodded and Lew ran off into the night.

Daniel crept along the corridor on the attic floor of the Montego Club. If Woods had brought one scumbag over, then he'd bring another over, and another. It was like a power-fed addiction. The creation of a new life, of a powerful life, and of a life that was completely different to anything these people could comprehend. These goons of Woods' wouldn't be able to control the rush, the hunger, or the temptation to exercise their strength. They would have no need to. Woods himself would have no control and very little free will, for now, and he'd have no understanding of any of this. His goons would follow his example.

Daniel heard the rush of air before he felt it, and rolled forward reflexively. The mottle-skinned figure of a man loomed in front of him when he turned round, but it

wasn't Woods. He had a gaping four inch wound in the front of his throat where Woods had fed off him, then let him live. Woods' own wound, caused by Daniel, would have all but healed by now. What was more disturbing to Daniel about this creature was its blood-smeared jaws and face. This one had also fed and most likely had let his victim live too. The grisly body lunged forward and grabbed for Daniel with one hand, while drawing a knife with the other.

"Stephanie." The hulking figure gurgled.

"What?" Daniel pulled the figure's knife arm off completely.

"Stephanie."

"St ... Ah right." The penny dropped. This idiot didn't know where he was, let alone who Daniel was. He'd been ordered to kill the girl and his present, rather revolting state, would only allow one thought at a time, for now. So she was called Stephanie. Daniel plunged the knife, still clutched in the hand of the detached arm, straight into the brain of the creature, straight between its eyes.

Daniel spun round when he heard a noise on the stairs.

"Matt!" One of his own clan.

"Four dead downstairs. They're bringing each other over in droves Daniel, and every one of them is after the girl." Matt said, wiping the blood from his own knife.

"The girl's safe. Come on." Daniel hurried down the stairs.

"Daniel it's getting light." Matt said, following him.

"Yes I know. Shit there's no one left." Daniel looked desperately at the floor beneath them. Every person, thug, staff or police, was either unconscious, waking up, or lurching around. Every one of them was horrible maimed with throat wounds.

"Daniel!" Lew appeared on the opposite side of the bloodbath, but on the same floor as Daniel. "Woods isn't here. We've been all over the place."

"Damn!" Daniel cursed. "Out Lew! We have to get out!" He waved towards the roof.

"We could burn the place." Matt said, climbing through the skylight. "The ones that do get out will be caught in the daylight."

"We can't Matt. The neighbouring buildings will catch too. The people out there will take any flee-ers to a hospital. We don't want the fuckers taking over another building. There's Lew." Lew was just pulling himself out of another roof window.

"Why aren't they following us?" Lew came over to Daniel and Matt.

"They don't know how to yet." Daniel walked over to the edge of the roof. "All they know is how to feed and how to look for Stephanie. Bastards." He jumped from the roof, noislessly.

Chapter 4

Daniel sat in the front hall of Nyx Mansion with his clan. Forty or so men and women all tired and weary and suffering from the day's rising temperature, despite the heavily shuttered windows.

"Around fifty in all." Lew referred to the new, and much more dangerous clan of Woody Woods. "They're confined to the Club just now, mainly because they aren't strong enough or developed enough to get out of it. Vegetables." He told the clan. "They'll be a lot more organised by nightfall, and obviously they'll be able to leave the place then."

"Woods himself will have worked out what's happened to him." Daniel stood up. "And he'll also know that it was me who made it happen. Once he discovers I've killed half a dozen of his clan, he'll know I'm not very impressed with the situation. He'll want me before I get him."

"And the rest of them?" A man called Nicholas asked.

"Woods will have his select shitbags with him, just like he did before." Daniel frowned. "The bloody idiot doesn't know what he's done. Those poor bastards in that club have been abandoned to live on their own. They have no clan, and no guidance simply because Woods is incapable of giving it. If they aren't killed they'll instinctively start butchering the population just to feed. Because of their weak and reflexive state, their victims will live too. What the fuck have I done." Daniel sat down and held his head in his hands.

"Woods won't just be after you, will he Daniel?" Daniel turned round when he heard Rachael's voice. She was standing on the upstairs balcony with Stephanie. The rest of the clan murmured in surprise and confusion.

"If it wasn't for the fact that I need every clan member in full force, I'd snap your neck before you got down those stairs." Daniel glowered dangerously at Rachael.

"And if you've touched her, even that won't stop me."

He walked up the stairs and Rachael backed off a few feet from Stephanie. Stephanie was just blinking at Daniel in numb shock. "You know what I am, don't you?" He said quietly and Stephanie nodded. Daniel let out a roar and backhanded Rachael across the face.

"I should kill you for this!" He snarled. Rachel scurried back into the wall under the flashing rage in Daniel's eyes. "Go to Zach and stay there." He glowered at the stunned woman.

"Stephanie." Daniel held out his hand and turned away from Rachael. Stephanie took Daniel's hand as though she was in a trance. "You all know who this is." He addressed the clan from the balcony. "She's an innocent caught up in all this. It's my fault she's in danger and she's under my protection." He looked round the others below him. They were shocked at the sight of Stephanie and more than a little unnerved at the potential risk she represented. "I know it's added to the unease you all feel, I didn't want that." Daniel cast a swift glance at Rachael, who was now at the foot of the stairs with Zach. "It was a worry I could have dealt with alone, until this mess is cleared up."

"She's staying here?" Nicholas blurted.

"If she doesn't, Woods will kill her." Daniel replied.

"But she's human!" A woman called Rosemary shouted. "Not only will we have the Woods clan here but we'll have a mob of humans too!" Daniel noticed Rachael nodding in agreement too.

"They can't get here." Lew said loudly. "No humans can get here unless they're brought here by one of us."

"Yes and that's due to Daniel's strength. How the hell can his strength maintain our safety as well as all the other distractions?"

"He's managed pretty bloody well up to now Enos! Shut up, you old fool." Ruth shouted.

"He's never had a rival, mindless clan and a mob of humans up to now, bitch!" Enos shouted back. "He'll have to take her somewhere else."

"Is that all the support you give him?" The hall fell silent in a split second at the sound of Stephanie's voice. "He's protecting forty adult people, he's keeping this place fortified, he's protecting the innocent population out there, and he's protecting me. How about bloody well helping him instead of bitching?" She shouted. "You! Anus or whatever it is you're called! Take me somewhere else eh? So you'd see him leave the safety of this place, on his own, to face a clan of mindless monsters? After all he's done for you?"

"You go girl!" Ruth whooped. "Anus! Ha!"

"She's right." Lew interrupted. "Where would any of us be if it wasn't for Daniel, and Nyx Mansion? Wandering around aimlessly in twos and threes, killing and feeding without structure! This clan has lasted two hundred years because of the way we run ourselves. None of that would be possible without Daniel. Of course there's a chance that humans would try and look for the girl but the chances of them finding Nyx

Mansion are very, very low. On the other hand, the chances of Woods killing her out there are certain. We aren't the arseholes, Woods is."

"Would she be able to bring anyone here after she leaves?" Nicholas asked.

"I doubt it. Daniel?" Lew looked up at the balcony.

"A human has never been able to locate Nyx Mansion so I doubt one could relocate it." Daniel turned to Stephanie. "Would you even try?"

"No. Not now I know the risks involved." Stephanie answered. "I'd miss you though."

"What?" Daniel said in surprise. "Stephanie I don't think you're thinking straight now that the suggestion's worn off. We aren't just another gang remember?"

"Yes I know." Stephanie nodded. "Would it be possible for me to stay here with you?"

"No." Daniel sighed. "And you wouldn't want to." He turned round to face his clan. "Please trust me." He said clearly. "I made a mistake with Woods, I'm not perfect. I am aware of my strengths and my abilities though. Even if you don't agree with the girl being here, at least trust me and tolerate her. You have no reasons to mistrust me, I've never given you any cause to. Lew!" Daniel grabbed Stephanie's hand and strode off to his rooms, Stephanie trotting behind him.

"You should throw that baggage out on her arse." Lew closed the door behind them. "Rachael I mean, not you kid." He nodded to where Stephanie was gaping round the luxurious room trying to look at everything at once.

"She's scared Lew, that's all." Daniel sat down and frowned into the fire. "I can't afford rabble-rousing though. Not by her and not by Enos. She's a minimal risk to us here, very minimal." He nodded at Stephanie who nodded back. "I should thank you too Stephanie. That was a very supportive speech you gave out there."

"Well they were being a bunch of wet-nosed fannies, not to mention ungrateful. Do you wipe their arses for them all the time?" Lew sniggered and Daniel looked from Stephanie, to him, in bewilderment.

"Stephanie you're taking this all rather calmly." Daniel said. "I asked you earlier if you knew what I was, but you were under suggestion, mine and Rachael's. I'll ask you again. Do you know what I am? What we all are here?" Daniel glanced at Lew.

"Yes. Yes I do." Stephanie sat opposite Daniel. "It's not so hard for me to take in, Daniel. In fact it makes everything else make sense. I did see you get shot, no doubt about it. I also saw Woods with his throat slit. I see you later and you're fine and I see on the news that Woods' body is missing. I saw the state of Tommo with his throat

torn out before you knifed him in the head and he was walking. I don't really care what you are because I know you're a good man." She said quietly. "No one's ever cared for me in my entire, shitty life. Yes I know how selfish that sounds under the circumstances and I know you're only caring now because you feel obliged to. It's a start though."

"Stephanie listen to me." Daniel knelt on the floor in front of Stephanie. "No it isn't a start. There can be no start. You can't stay here with us."

"I'm human. I know." Stephanie looked at Daniel. "So were you at one time."

"You don't want this. No one wants this." Daniel shook his head. "I didn't have a choice, nor did Lew, or the others here. The loneliness, the isolation, the repulsion we cause, the fighting of the hunger just so we can feed as we do here. How can you say you want that?"

"My own world is too big for me." Stephanie watched the flames dance in the fireplace. "It's too cold and full of neglect. The loneliness and isolation you mentioned are one race from another, but at least you have your race. It's the individual loneliness out there that's unbearable. I'm probably the only one in existence who's ever seen your world while still being a part of my own. You can't tell me what I want Daniel, no one's ever been where I am."

"I envy your humanity Stephanie." Daniel said quietly. "In time, you'll be grateful you still have it. You need rest." He turned Stephanie's face so he could look at her. "Sleep." Daniel nodded towards the bedroom door and Stephanie yawned and headed for it.

"You'll have to stop zoning her out Daniel." Lew laughed. "I have to admit you're good at ..."

"Ooo! A four poster! Yay!"

"Umm ... well you're not bad at it." Lew shrugged. "She's in shock Daniel, don't look so worried. She'll realise that this life is a curse and not a blessing." He rested his hand on his friend's shoulder for a while, then left the room.

Daniel watched Stephanie as she slept. It had been a long time since he'd watched the glow of life, asleep. Her skin, although naturally pale, was still alive. It still shone with a healthy pink tinge that Daniel had forgot existed in any race. He lay fully dressed, on top of the sheets, and looked up at the red chiffon and satin canopy that overhung his bed. They'd be forced to open that Club soon. Would the humans be capable of understanding what they'd meet in there? Of course they wouldn't. Stephanie had been made to comprehend it by the evidence of her own eyes, and she'd wanted to comprehend it. Daniel turned his head to look at her again. Had

anyone actually asked for this before? Never, that he could remember. Not that it mattered. Daniel knew it for the painful curse that it was, the prolonged nothingness. Even if Stephanie, as a human, couldn't grasp that, Daniel certainly could. He knew that there was no way he could willingly condemn her to that.

Daniel gave up on sleep and wandered into the front hall just before dusk. How many of the poor bastards could they pick off before they escaped into the streets?

"Lew." Daniel glanced up as the other man approached. "How many can we take to the Club?"

"Couple of dozen. We still need this place occupied." Lew said. "Woods will be expecting you, you do know that?"

"Makes him easier to find." Daniel stood up. "Come on, we'll move out."

Twenty of Daniel's clan, Daniel and Lew included, scaled the outside walls of the Montego Club like shadows. Noislessly and swiftly. They seeped in through windows and back doors, making full use of the dusk's shadow flecked light. They had the intelligence that the condemned souls inside the building had not.

"We'll need the doors barricaded from the inside, Lew." Daniel whispered as they stood on an upstairs landing. "We don't want any innocents getting in here. None."

"There are only the front doors to secure. We fastened the rest as we came through them." Lew whispered back. "Shit. Look at them." Daniel and Lew peered through a runged bannister to the floor below. A few of them were now developed enough to push the others into stumbling groups. The stench and the stale, fly ridden air didn't bother the two men, but the bizarre and grotesque sight of these mutilated corpses lurching around on a multicoloured lit floor disturbed them a great deal. The gashes, rips, and shattered bones were highlighted and illuminated in the flashing grid lights under the floor and the tube strobe lights around the bar and walls accentuated their disjointed movements into a sick danse macabre. Daniel tore his eyes away from the dance floor.

"Woods is the only one who knows what I look like. I don't see him. Do you?" Lew shook his head. "Right. I'll go and block those doors." Daniel made his way through the shadows, down the staircase that lead to the ground level floor. He tried not to look at the mangled figures in the room.

To think, he'd behaved like that at one time. He'd been as vegetative as these creatures until he'd developed. Daniel had had guidance though, someone to sit and watch him while he got through this stage. He hadn't fed on his own until he was sensible and controlled, as it should be. The one who had created Daniel was long gone now, slain by Daniel's own hand. He was a cruel man who had forced this

existence on Daniel when he was only eighteen years old. That had been over two hundred years ago.

Daniel gave himself a shake and realised he was just standing there staring at the steel doors of the nightclub. Four sets of double doors with bar-locks and dead bolts. He grabbed the bar across one of the doors and bent it inwards with his enormous strength. This jammed the door lock very effectively. After repeating this on the other doors, Daniel then bent the ends of any visible bolts, thus preventing them from sliding. He lifted the gambling machines in the foyer quite easily and pushed them in front of the doors too. Daniel finished off by closing and locking the set of glass panelled double doors that lead to the dance floor itself.

"Steph ..."

"No." Daniel disposed of an obstacle using a slim dagger. A group of shambling corpses turned around slowly and Daniel wasn't sure if they were actually looking at him, or just reacting to a different movement, the swift movement of a thrown dagger. Six bodies began lumbering towards him and Daniel knew he'd be swamped if he stood and fought.

"You." One of the organisers pointed at Daniel. He was dressed in the ragged, blood-filthy remains of a policeman's uniform, ironically enough. "Ah! Ah!" It smiled and drool spilled from its mouth. This one knew Daniel was different. It knew Daniel wasn't 'food' but it also knew that Daniel was independent. Daniel threw his dagger from a distance of thirty feet. The ex policeman's eyes crossed as it tried to look at the hilt of the dagger, protruding from its forehead, then it keeled over. The shambling mob were slightly distracted by the activity and that was all Daniel needed. He vaulted over one body before its sluggish movements got anywhere near him, then he kicked out at the corpse, sending it reeling into its comrades. Three of them toppled like skittles and one of them fell heavily onto a table, breaking it in two and sending a dozen half empty beer glasses smashing to the floor. The creature tried to stumble to its feet, dragging one of the strobe tube lights out of its socket in the process. It fried! Daniel watched as the grisly corpse began to smoulder and stink. Its whole mangled body jerked fiercely like a demented marionette and bloodied slime spilled from its eye sockets. Finally, it crumpled to the floor, empty and dead.

"Lew!" Daniel ran for the stairs. "Lew! Get everyone out!"

"Get ... eh?" Lew finished off his mindless corpse with a dart through its head. "Get them out?"

"Not this lot! Our lot! Get them up here. Hurry up Lew! They're developing intelligence." Daniel ran off to round up the others, Lew did the same.

"We're leaving?" Ruth wiped blood from her forehead and re-sheathed two daggers

into her waist-belt. "We can't just leave them Daniel!"

"We can't fight them like this Ruth, there are too many of them and they're developing recognition." Daniel said. "Up! Get the others to the roof." Ruth nodded and also ran off to collect the rest of the clan.

"All twenty accounted for." Lew said in relief.

"Brilliant." Daniel lifted a heavy, metal filing cabinet and hurled it over the bannister.

"Umm ... so we chuck things at them. I see." Lew shook his head and grabbed a desk.

"No not at them, at the floor. Crack the floor Lew." Daniel threw another cabinet as hard as he could over the balcony. When Daniel and Lew used their full strength, it really was hard too.

"Ah. I think I'm with you now." Lew hurled a chair and a few hefty plant pots. Soon sparks and crackles began to flash among the walking corpses. "Smash as much floor as you can!" Lew looked like he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"That'll have to do, Lew." Daniel kicked out at a bloated, mottled woman who was lurching up the stairs, sending her tumbling back down them. "Come on, they're sensing us." He wedged a bookcase and a desk across the stairs, then ran after Lew. "You ready?" Lew nodded and Daniel rammed his fist into the emergency fire alarm. Loud, deafening bells started ringing and a few minutes later, the sprinkler system kicked in. Daniel and Lew ran for the attic floor and pops, cracks, flashes and the stench of melting flesh drifted up after them.

"Jump!" Lew shouted from the skylight to the others. "Go on! Clear it! The whole building's going to be live. Jump!" He and Daniel jumped and ran with the clan into the dark night. Shadows blending with shadows, noiseless and seamless.

Chapter 5

"Is anyone hurt?" Daniel gasped for breath as he pushed the doors of Nyx Mansion closed.

"Scratches and bruises." Lew said and Ruth nodded in agreement. "You think we got them all?"

"I've no idea." Daniel flopped onto a couch. "Poor bastards. Two days ago they were ordinary people with ordinary lives."

"Yes but they weren't tonight. Stop it Daniel." Lew said. "Shit, if ever there was a reason to believe in miracles, then that was it."

"Daniel!" Enos came charging down the stairs. "Daniel it's Zach. He's Dying."

"What?" Daniel sprang to his feet and ran for the stairs, Lew close behind him.

"That fucking bitch Daniel! You should have ripped her throat out!" Enos said angrily.

"S ... Stephanie?" Daniel blinked in astonishment.

"Rachael! The slut just let Woods kill him. The bitch!"

"Shit! Woods got here? How? Damn and blast it!" Daniel pushed Enos out of the way and barged into Zach's room. "Oh fuck." Zach was lying on a couch with the left side of his throat torn out.

"Dan ..."

"Shh. It's ok Zach." Daniel knelt on the floor beside Zach.

"No. no it's not." Zach gurgled.

"Bastard! Yes it is!" Daniel tore at his shirt sleeve with his teeth, then at his own wrist with his teeth.

"We've tried, Daniel" Enos said. "Those who were here have tried that." Daniel ignored him and pushed his bleeding wrist against Zach's mouth.

"Drink damn you!" He shouted. "Zach, please!"

"I'm sorry." Zach's body went limp and his eyes glassed over.

"No!" Daniel roared. "How the fuck did that happen? How did that bastard get here? How, Enos?" His eyes burned with sheer rage.

"Rachael brought him." Enos backed away a few steps. "She brought him to the girl, Daniel. Rachael wanted her out and Woods wanted her as bait for you."

"I'll kill her." Daniel snarled. "And him. And anyone else who gets in my way."

"Zach almost slapped her head off Daniel, he was furious." Enos told him. "He ran straight to Stephanie to get her out of Woods' way. He had no chance, there was six of them. We didn't know a thing until Zach reeled out of here and toppled down the stairs. Woods, Rachael, and Stephanie had gone by then."

"How did she know where to find Woods?" Daniel demanded. "I didn't know where to find the shitbag, let alone a bitch like Rachael!"

"Matter of common sense." Enos said. "Woods didn't know Stephanie had come to you. He's made his base in Stephanie's flat, where he went looking for her."

"For fuck's sake!" Daniel screamed. "And that bitch reasoned that out before any of us?! Was anyone else involved in this Enos?" Daniel glowered at Enos and took a step towards him. "Believe me, I'll find out anyway. If you know anything, cough up and save your own life."

"No. I swear it, Daniel." Enos said seriously. "If anyone else was involved they'd have gone with Woods rather than wait here to be snapped in two by you." Daniel marched towards the door and Enos looked at Lew.

"Hey! Don't even think it." Lew caught Daniel's arm. "You'll fry in this heat, you bloody psycho." Daniel whirled round and glared at Lew. "Nah! Won't work. Don't force it Daniel. Trust me, I'll fight you if you try to leave the house."

"That fucker has Stephanie!" Daniel bellowed.

"And he'll be as restricted as you are right now." Lew argued. "He won't harm her Daniel, that's the whole point of this shit. Calm the hell down or I'll put my foot up your arse." Lew snapped. Daniel stood and seethed. "Enos, cover Zach's body please. We'll tend to him later. You, in there." He prodded Daniel towards his rooms and Daniel stormed off. "Enos? For shit's sake don't disturb him unless it's absolutely vital. OK? He's liable to lash out at anyone who pisses him off right now."

"Lew?" Enos called Lew back. "Look don't take this the wrong way, but is going after the girl a wise move? Woods is forcing Daniel out of his own territory, away from us. Wouldn't it be better to ... to ..."

"Let Woods have her then wait for him to come storming in here?" Lew finished. "You'd be rather foolish to suggest that to Daniel."

"Yes I know, that's why I didn't. I just don't understand how she's reached a position where she can be used as leverage like this. A human, for shit's sake Lew!"

"It makes me so very sad to hear that, Enos." Lew sighed. "Not from you in particular. It makes me sad that we all forget. We've forgotten the good along with the shit of humanity. We've forgotten so effectively that we don't recognise it when we see it, especially in one of our own."

"Recognise what?" Enos asked in confusion.

"He loves her, Enos." Lew shrugged and followed on towards Daniel's rooms, leaving Enos rooted to the spot.

"Dusk and not a moment later." Woody Woods smiled at Stephanie. She'd been tied with tape at the wrists and gagged with one of Daniel's handkerchiefs and a belt. She was now sitting in her own tiny flat, on her own battered couch, in the company of a dead drug dealer, who looked remarkable healthy apart from a red scar on his neck, and a prize bitch. "I know he can tolerate more heat than most, Stephie, I've done my homework." Woods grabbed the belt, along with a handful of hair, and tore it away from Stephanie's mouth. "Say wha'?" He put his hand to his ear and laughed.

"Seriously, I don't know why he's so hostile! I want to thank the man for giving me such an awesome fucking gift! I'm invincible Stephie! Do you know what that feels like? Oh no of course you don't, you little pissant." Rachael sat down on a chair and laughed too.

"Zach will be dead by now Rachael." Stephanie turned and looked straight at the bitch.

"He'd have ended up dead sooner or later anyway." Rachael shrugged. "Never had the balls to do anything monumental."

"How can you say that? You complete bastard Rachael! He was crazy about you!" Stephanie shouted.

"Oh ladies, ladies!" Woods yawned and sprawled out on a chair opposite Rachael. "Look Stephie, the girl didn't want the limp-dick, OK? The only other one with an ounce of spunk is Daniel, and he fobbed her off."

"He did not!" Rachael said hotly. "Why the hell would I want Daniel? He's a sadistic asshole."

"Oh shut your face, you tart!" Stephanie snarled. "I get it now. Daniel tells you to go and jump and you did, straight to this nut-job here." She nodded towards Woods, who was smiling in amusement. "Do you honestly think he'll risk his clan of two hundred years for someone he's only known for a few days? A human at that? I don't know what rent-a-slag here has told you but whatever it was, it was only to get one over on Daniel. Daniel who booted her skanky arse out of bed."

"You do have a point Stephe." Woods mused. "So you're pretty useless to me. Yes? How about a little love bite and I'll find a hundred uses for you."

"Sounds about right for you Woods. They had to be pretty brainless to screw you even when you were alive." Stephanie sniped and earned herself a fist to the cheek from Woods. "Oh look Rachael! Another sadistic asshole!" She sobbed, spitting out a mouthful of blood. "It must have been the psychotic streak that decided it for you eh? You warped fucking bitch!" Rachael sprang to her feet and stuffed the handkerchief back into Stephanie's mouth.

"You know he'll come for you, slag." Rachael growled, fastening the belt far too tightly round Stephanie's head. "So do we. That's why you're still here with your throat intact." Rachael leaned forward and kissed Stephanie's neck. "I've reserved you, bitch." Stephanie glared holes through Rachael. Woods guffawed a laugh and got to his feet.

"Tie her feet together and come to bed." He kissed Rachael's shoulder. "I can stand heat too, thanks to Danny boy, but not this much." Woods squinted at the drawn curtains. "If we're still sitting here at this time tomorrow, I rip out your throat and leave you in front of this window. The sunlight will do the rest." He smiled at Stephanie, then lead Rachael to Stephanie's bedroom.

Stephanie screwed her eyes shut and tried to organise her head. All she had to do was get free, into the bedroom, past Rachael and Woods and get to the window. She realised that neither of them would simply poof into ashes and that she'd end up rather dead. Out of the flat? To where? She couldn't get back to Nyx Mansion on her own. She couldn't do anything while she was tied up like a parcel! Stephanie heard the door to her flat being unlocked and her heart started racing even faster. She let out a muffled sob when she saw Mike, the thug, Sally's cousin, walking into the room. She began bouncing on the sofa and turned round to let Mike at her hands. He removed the gag first.

"Mike! Oh god Mike I love you." Stephanie sobbed. "The shit who killed Sally is asleep in there with his tart. All you have to do is go and open the curtains! Mike? Well untie me then you spazcock!"

"I'm sorry Steph, I can't." Mike sat down.

"Eh? Mike! Woody Woods is in there and he shot Sally through the head! What's wrong with you?!" Stephanie hissed.

"Absolutely nothing." Mike shrugged. "All I have to do is sit here with you while the sun's up. After that I'll have all of eternity to do exactly as I please."

"Mike no!" Stephanie sobbed. "You can't join him! Please Mike listen to me. He's an asshole. He was an asshole when he was alive and he's a bigger one now. He can't look out for you Mike, he isn't capable. You'll turn into a brainless monster who kills people just to survive."

"Like your boyfriend? Give it up Steph, I know all about it." Mike said, lighting a cigarette.

"No! He's nothing like Daniel. Daniel had a clan, and guidance. He was looked after and protected while he was developing. You won't be! Don't you understand?" Stephanie said desperately. "Mike you could end up attacking and mutilating your own family because you'd be incapable of recognising them. All they'll be is food."

"Woody said you'd try and mouth your way out of it." Mike blew smoke all over the place.

"I never took you for a brown nosing hypocrite Mike." Stephanie cried. "You never were on the right side of the law, but drugs? Have you forgot about those kids he killed? That's the man who you're trusting your life with. A fucking drug dealer."

"You have no idea what it's like Steph ..."

"I don't want to know. Just shut up, you loser." Stephanie snivelled. "Maybe you're a shitbag, but I'm not. It's only fair to warn you that the reason I'm here is as bait for Daniel." Mike just shrugged. "No, you don't understand, Mike. He's over two hundred years old and he's a shitload more controlled and stronger than that pile of rotting crap in there. He'll kill him, and he'll kill you."

"Well you do flatter yourself Steph." Mike laughed. "A man who'd kill for you?"

"A man who'll kill shit like Woods to protect people like me, and you, and to protect his own clan. He's not a knight in shining armor coming to sweep me off my feet, it's far more than that. I can't be with him, he's told me that. He's a man desperate to save this race as well as his own race from shit like Woods."

"You're no different to me Steph." Mike said casually. "You want the life. You just

told me Daniel refused, but you want it."

"I want it for love, Mike, not for power." Stephanie rested her head back on the sofa. "I have no one here, you have."

"And I'll still have them, only I'll be able to take care of them big style." Mike said stubbornly.

"You haven't listened to a damned word I've said." Stephanie sighed. "Your life, do what the hell you want with it. It looks like mine's pretty well mapped out for me either way."

"I shouldn't have taken that gag off you." Mike muttered, lighting another cigarette. "I don't want to hear you Steph. Just another few hours, that's all. Don't make me gag you again."

Stephanie fell into a fitful sleep but even that wasn't long lived. Woods put in his appearance and dragged her to her feet by her wrist tapes, almost dislocating her arms in the process. Mike got to his feet and Woods looked at him as though he'd forgotten he was there.

"You stay here." Woods ordered Mike.

"Huh? Where are you going?" Mike asked in confusion.

"None of your fucking business, you little shit!" Woods snarled. "Ah, McShae." The rapidly developing henchman had entered the flat. "Everyone where they should be?"

"Yep." McShae answered. "Er Woody? You know this bloke's ... legendary?" He said uncertainly. "Even the pissants out there have turned him into some sort of fairytale."

"Shitting out?" Woods said nastily. "Bad idea."

"No not shitting out." McShae shook his head quickly. "Just pointing out that if he's ultra pissed then he's going to make an ultra dent. He'll rip this place to shreds."

"And you said I'd to stay here?" Mike said in alarm. "Woody we had a deal man! I stay here with her until sundown, then I join you. He'll kill me!"

"Pfft! You think you're important enough to kill?" Woods sneered. "You tell him I've taken the slut to the scrap yard. If he has Lew, his bumchum with him, tell him I'll rip her neck open if I catch sight of him. Do you hear me?" Woods snarled. Mike was livid. "If I have to waste my time tracking you down, you won't like it." Woods threatened. "McShae!" He pushed Stephanie through the door, McShae and Rachael followed on.

Daniel paced the floor in sheer agitation while he waited for the temperature to drop low enough for the others to tolerate. He needed them all active and he needed them all guarding the mansion. Rachael could quite easily bring Woods back at any time, and his goons.

"I couldn't give two shites Daniel!" Lew was shouting. "I'm going with you, so get over it. You don't honestly expect Woods to be alone do you? He has Rachael on side for one."

"It's too dangerous Lew." Daniel snapped.

"And I don't bloody well care!" Lew snapped back. "I want the kid safe too ..."

"Shut up!" Daniel shouted. "Just ... shut up Lew. Woods. We want Woods. OK?"

"But Stephanie ..."

"Will be safe once he's out of the way." Daniel sat down and held his head in his hands. "This isn't a rescue attempt Lew, you know that can't happen." Lew sat down opposite his friend. "Don't." Daniel said.

"Or else?" Lew sniffed. "Daniel, it can happen, you know it can."

"No Lew, I can't do that. She'll never understand the impact of all this until she's out of her own lifespan. You didn't, nor did I. That's when the thrill wears off and the reality kicks in. We know this. I know this. How could I inflict that on her? I love her." Daniel said quietly.

"I know." Lew sighed. "You'll never see her again Daniel. You'll lose her to a world that doesn't want her, and one that she doesn't want. Could you inflict that on her instead? Could you inflict it on yourself?" Lew stood up and walked off to organise the clan.

Daniel simply walked up to Stephanie's front door and kicked it clean off its hinges.

"What the hell?" He stood and blinked at the dozen men, human men, crammed into the tiny sitting room. "Umm ... excuse me." Daniel walked backwards and took another look at the nameplate on the shattered door frame. He hadn't made a mistake.

"You must be Daniel." A tall, thin man of around twenty five stood up.

"And you must be pretty dense if you know who I am and you're still here." Daniel

said darkly. "Where's that bastard of a boss of yours? I'm not interested in you or your gang, and if you've any sense you won't be interested in me either."

"I am the boss." Mike said, taking a very deep breath. "I'm not one of Woods' lot, neither are these lot. I'm ... I was Sally's cousin, Mike. Stephanie's friend?"

"You're pissing me off." Daniel growled. "Where are they and why are you here?"

"Woods double crossed me." Mike took a good few steps backwards. "I sat here with your girl all day, then Woods left me here for you to come and kill in a frenzy. I called in a few mates."

"More to have a frenzy with." Daniel snapped, lashing out at one of the other men. He was flung back so forcefully that the plaster cracked on the wall behind him.

"Shit!" Mike squeaked. "We're here to help you, for shit's sake!" He ran over to his mate. "Get up Baz, you skirt. Woods is going to kill me, yes? Well I want to be on the side that's going to kill him first!"

"I'll kill Woods. Where is he?" Daniel said flatly.

"It's a trap. He's at the scrap yard and he has McShae with him and that scrubber he's bedding. He asked McShae if everyone was in place. It's a trap. We'll help you." Mike and his gang nodded. Daniel grit his teeth.

"Mike you can't help me. Ok? I suppose I do appreciate the offer." He sighed. "You don't want in this. You might think you know what you're dealing with, but you don't. I'll kill Woods, I have to. Do yourselves a favour and keep well away from it all, for good." Daniel spun round and vanished from the flat.

"Fuck me, the whole human race is in on the job!" Daniel growled at Lew as they hurried down the street. "You keep them away Lew, as well as yourself. I mean it. I don't want her in any more shit than she's already in."

"I'll keep out of sight." Lew grumbled.

Stephanie sat bound and gagged in a rubbish skip. She'd shuffled among the sharp scraps of metal and the old screws and bolts so she could see through a small crack in the corner joint of the skip. Woods, McShae, and four other men all had guns, and they were all loading them. Stephanie sobbed into her gag as she watched McShae and the others wander off into the darkness to lay in wait for Daniel.

"So babes!" Woods put his arm round Rachael. "You want the bitch eh? Good girl."

"Let's see how far Daniel gets when I rear his girlfriend to go and take Nyx Mansion

from him." Rachael laughed. Woods laughed too, although he didn't quite grasp the gravity of what Rachael had just said. Rachael actually could rear people she brought over. She was as old and as experienced as Daniel was, Woods was just a short sighted psychopath. Rachael was planning to start her own clan, with Stephanie as her right hand gooness! "Oh speak of the devil." Stephanie bit her gag and gulped a sob when she saw Daniel walking through between two rows of scrapped cars. Surely he hadn't come alone?

"Steph." A voice whispered behind her and if she hadn't been gagged she'd have screamed the place down. It was Mike! Stephanie growled in her throat and backed away from him. "Stephanie it's OK. I'm with Daniel." Stephanie stopped growling and eyed Mike warily. "I've got the lads with me, I called them after you'd left. I'll untie you but you have to keep quiet, girl. There's at least six of them with shooters." Mike whispered. Stephanie nodded and Mike began to cut the tapes from her wrists.

"Stay where you are." Woods pointed his gun at Daniel, who stood still.

"You miss my brain with that and you're dead." Daniel said factually. "Where's the girl?"

"Safe." Woods drawled.

"I'm here now, like you wanted. Send her out." Daniel said.

"So she can run straight for the other weirdos?" Woods laughed.

"She can't do that. Ask Rachael. She can't get to the Mansion."

"Rachael?" Woods looked at Rachael who nodded her confirmation. "OK bring her out. Right, Danny Boy! Come and get her." Woods tossed his gun to one side and laughed. "Come on you little weed! You're a kid Daniel, face it. You're a teenage kid. Sure, you've been around a while but you're still only a boy."

"Shit! Woody she's gone!" Rachael shouted from the skip.

"What?!" Woods roared, spinning round. Daniel leapt at him from a distance of around forty feet. He felt a bullet whistling over his right shoulder and another one ricocheted off the skip. Woods dived for the gun and Daniel booted him under the chin as he landed close to the weapon. A bullet tore through Daniel's leg and he stumbled heavily onto one knee. Woods lunged for the gun once more and Mike stood on his hand, cracking the bones in his fingers.

"I told you to ..." Daniel took another bullet through the arm. He cursed and fumbled for his dagger.

"A-ha!" Rachael grabbed Daniel's hair and tugged back his head. She held a glinting razor knife under his chin. "Back up there Mike." Mike released Woods and backed against the skip. "You too Lew! I know you're out there by the way the shooting's stopped. Woody I think your gang is five men lighter."

"Like I give a shit!" Woods screamed, getting to his feet. "You are fucking dead, pal!" He jammed the gun between Daniel's eyes. Rachael lurched sideways as the razor sharp edge of a buckled hub-cap sliced into her side. Woods' gun went off, but the bullet whizzed off over Daniel's left shoulder, only burning his skin.

"Stephanie! No!" Daniel screamed as Stephanie charged at Rachael with a shard of scrap metal clutched so tightly in her hands that it was cutting her flesh. "Steph ..." Daniel was knocked to the floor by Woods' revolver butt to the back of his head. He saw Mike advancing on Woods. "Stephanie! Go and get her out ..." Woods hit Daniel in the face with the gun.

Mike ran towards Stephanie just as Rachael was staggering to her feet.

"Steph! No, she'll ... shite!" Stephanie charged straight past him and launched herself at the other, very much stronger woman.

"You slag! You pox ridden slut!" Stephanie screamed, tearing her makeshift blade across Rachael's chest. Rachael howled in pain then lifted Stephanie off her feet, before slamming her down hard into the ground.

"I told you, bitch, I reserved you." Rachael grabbed Stephanie by the hair with both hands. Stephanie rammed her blade upwards towards the flesh under Rachael's chin. The blade erupted in a shower of blood from the top of Rachael's blonde head.

"You're on your own Woods!" Mike shouted, helping Stephanie to her feet. Woods stopped in mid gun swing and looked at the blood-smearred body of Rachael.

"Shit!" Daniel staggered to his feet and lurched over to Stephanie. "Mike! She's hit!" Stephanie's jacket had a rapidly expanding red stain at the shoulder. "Lew!" Lew was on his way over, cleaning his knife.

"Daniel! Woods!" Lew yelled and Daniel spun round to see Woods making a run for it. He let out an ear-splitting roar and leapt the distance between them. Daniel heard the bones breaking in Woods' arm as he spun him round. "Job completed." Daniel snarled before sinking his teeth into Woods' neck and tearing at the soft tissue.

"Hang in there kid." Lew had Stephanie's head in his lap and Mike fought to stem the blood from her shoulder.

"We'll have to get her to hospital." Mike said in panic. "She's going to die."

"She'll never make it to the hospital." Lew said quietly. "Hold on Stephanie, stay with me kid. Daniel's here. Daniel! Hurry up!"

"S ... Stephanie?" Daniel stood and blinked at Stephanie's bleeding body.

"Daniel she's dying." Lew said urgently.

"N ... no!" Daniel dropped to his knees and wiped his blood smeared mouth on his sleeve. "Stephanie don't die! Damn it!"

"Daniel!" Lew said sharply. "She will die! Are you listening to me? She made her choice back at the Mansion, that bullet has made your choice for you."

"Shit no." Daniel sobbed. "No, not like this!"

"You have no choice." Lew said gently. "For shit's sake Daniel, let her love you." Daniel pierced his wrist with his teeth and Mike sank to the blood soaked ground in absolute shock.

"Wh ... what's he doing?" He asked Lew. "Shit man! Doesn't that hurt? Eww!" Mike yelped as a jet of blood spurted from Daniel's wrist. Daniel pushed his wrist against Stephanie's lips.

"Come on Stephanie." Daniel pulled her chin down, then pushed her forehead back. "Please Stephanie! Don't leave me." The blood trickled out of Stephanie's mouth and pooled on the ground beneath her neck. "No! Damn it! Knife Lew!" He grabbed the knife from Lew and put the tip of it in his own mouth, under his tongue.

"Shit! Be careful Daniel!" Lew said in alarm. "Shit man!"

"What the hell's he doing?" Mike said hysterically.

"Feeding her." Lew explained, looking into Mike's eyes. "She's not swallowing so he'll have to make her." Daniel covered Stephanie's mouth with his own.

"O ... oh, I see." Mike didn't see at all. "Is she going to be OK?"

"He'll make it OK. He always has done and he always will." Lew said quietly.

Stephanie convulsed once, very violently. Daniel sat up and looked at her face. Under the blood, and the bruises, and the grime, he watched the beautiful pink glow fade from her cheeks.

"H ... he did it!" Mike said in awe.

"Yes, I did." Daniel wiped the tears from his eyes. "I'm so sorry Stephanie."

"Eh?" Mike said in confusion. "Sorry?"

"You wouldn't understand lad." Lew steered Mike away from Daniel and Stephanie.
"So what do you make of all this then?"

"Bugger all!" Mike said firmly. "I don't intend even trying to make anything of any of it, not at all. No fucking way!" Lew smiled in satisfaction. It was surprising a good old fashioned terrorising could do to reform a character.

Daniel sat in his rooms in Nyx Mansion and watched Stephanie. She hadn't woke up yet and he was dreading it. Images of the lurching monsters that Woods had created kept flashing across his mind and it was driving him mad.

"Daniel you have to sleep." Ruth said from the doorway. "You've been sitting there for five days."

"Five days." Daniel said quietly. "Why is it taking so long?"

"She's resting." Ruth smiled "She knows she has what she wants, you. She knows she's your Lady and she knows she's safe." She closed the door quietly.

"Daniel?" Stephanie opened her eyes and smiled. Smiled? Manic, mindless creatures did not smile.

"Stephanie!" Daniel darted over and sat on the bed. "Are you OK? Can you understand me?"

"Yes so no zoning me out. OK?" Stephanie sat up against the pillows and Daniel shuffled away in shock.

"Er ... you shouldn't be like this. You're beautiful." He said in confusion.

"I wanted to be here, remember?" Stephanie shrugged. "I wasn't forced and there was no trauma."

"No trauma? You were shot!"

"Yes and it stung like hell. I wanted this, Daniel, more than anything." Stephanie said seriously.

"Yes, I believe you do." Daniel sighed. "We'll be OK Stephanie, I'll make sure of it. You'll feed off me until I find a local lout for you." Stephanie snorted a laugh and Daniel looked sideways at her. "You're going to be hard work aren't you?"

"Me?" Stephanie feigned outrage. "Not guilty."

"And never will be." Daniel smiled. "Innocent for eternity."

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